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Case Management and Social Work Practice in Public Schools

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Grace E. Charriez Rivera

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2018

Abstract

Case Management and Social Work Practice in Public Schools

by

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MSW, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015

BS, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

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Abstract

In the United States, 66% of elementary and secondary school students experience academic difficulties. Evidence-based implementation and data-driven practices in the field of school social work to address these academic difficulties are lacking. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of school social workers in a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States regarding the use and effectiveness of case management strategies with at-risk students. Ecological theory and social constructionism theory provided the framework for the study. Qualitative focus group discussion involving 8 social workers in the division was used to collect data. Data were transcribed and analyzed to identify three themes: At-risk students were positively influenced by case management intervention, student outcomes were positively influenced by the availability of supports and ability to connect families to needed resources, and collaboration and effective communication were important for successful case management. Results indicated that disciplinary, academic, and attendance outcomes for at-risk youths are positively impacted by case management interventions. Findings may be used to promote standards of professional conduct for phone and e-mail communication between social workers and their academic colleagues to improve students' behavioral and educational outcomes.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

In the United States, 66% of elementary students experience educational and behavioral difficulties (Diplomas Count, 2013). At-risk youths are often distracted from learning by risk factors that contribute to unsatisfactory academic performance, disruptive behavior, and low school attendance (Smith & Stowitschek, 1998). According to Kelly et al. (2016), there is a gap in evidence-based implementation and data-driven practices in the field of school social work. I conducted qualitative action research with a focus group of school social workers to evaluate perceptions regarding the effectiveness of case management strategies with at-risk students. Findings may inform school social workers regarding the use of effective case management strategies to improve educational and behavioral outcomes in this population.

Section 1 includes the problem statement, purpose statement, research question, and a review of the theoretical and ethical considerations of the study. I also describe the nature and significance of the study and present a review of the relevant literature.

Problem Statement

School social workers support student learning in academic settings by providing direct service, case management, and advocacy (Traube & McKay, 2006). School-based social workers support the psychological, social, behavioral, and mental health needs of students and their families. Huffman (2013) reported that studies have indicated a correlation between positive educational and behavioral outcomes and addressing the social and behavioral outcomes of youths within schools. Public schools are accessible within communities and are typically located near housing, which can create the

opportunity to develop programs and interventions to service children's mental health needs (Traube & McKay, 2006). Mental health concerns involve additional resources and referrals for counseling and other services to support students who lack social interconnectedness (Traube & McKay, 2006). At-risk youths are often unaware of mental and behavioral health resources in their communities, and it is vital that resources, referrals, and case management be available at public schools (Huffman, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to examine case management practices in public schools and to explore how social work practices can be used to improve educational and behavioral outcomes for at-risk students in need of these services. The study focused on school social workers employed at a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. According to Jouvenal, Morse, and Miller (2014), politicians and law enforcement officials have reported that services and tracking of at-risk youths are inadequate in districts near Washington, DC, and there has been an increase in gang recruitment and violence. Gaps in local efforts to reach and follow-up with at-risk children and teens are cited as one of the causes of successful gang recruitment (Jouvenal et al., 2014). Jouvenal et al. (2014) noted that local services that connect children and teens to financial resources, after-school clubs, educational opportunities, sports, and other services reduce negative educational and behavioral outcomes for youths.

Research supported the need for social workers to work with students in case management situations to mitigate negative educational and behavioral outcomes that can affect school performance (Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2009). The current study was relevant to social work practice because gaps in practice affect a large portion of the

juvenile population, and results may improve the understanding of when and how case management models may enhance academic performance and behavioral outcomes.

According to Dinecola, Ball, and Maberry (2015), minority school status and percentage of students with disabilities predicted students' educational and behavioral outcomes after high school. Additionally, the size of the school and the percentage of students living in poverty moderated these outcomes (Dinecola et al., 2015). School social workers play an integral role in addressing these issues in the public school system, and postsecondary outcomes have a significant impact on future outcomes for students as adults (Dinecola et al., 2015).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Huffman (2013) reported that although addressing social and behavioral issues through comprehensive follow-up in schools leads to more positive educational and behavioral outcomes, these services are often unavailable or insufficient. Case management is used by individual social workers at their own discretion, and results of intervention and successes are not shared with the rest of the social work team within the school division. The purpose of this study was to use a focus group of school social workers to evaluate case management interventions for at-risk public school students. Discipline, grades, and attendance were included as variables of educational and behavioral outcomes at the school division. Discipline was defined as the number of suspensions and behavior referrals that a student received. Grades were defined as the letter grades (A, B, C, D, and F) that students received at the end of each academic quarter. Attendance was defined as the number of excused and unexcused absences each

student acquired throughout the school year. The study addressed school social workers' perspectives on the success of case management interventions regarding the educational and behavioral outcomes of students. Case management was defined as the community referrals and partnerships and continued follow-up of students facilitated by school social workers and the professionals with whom they collaborate. The study was guided by the following research question: What are the perceptions of school social workers in a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States regarding the use and effectiveness of case management strategies with at-risk students to improve educational and behavioral outcomes? Study findings may be used to advance professional social work practice through the identification of effective case management strategies and best practice with at-risk public school students.

Nature of the Study

I conducted a qualitative study in a collaborative focus group setting. Research participants were asked to answer questions related to case management strategies and interventions with at-risk students. The participants consisted of school social workers employed by a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. According to Wilson (2014), collaborative partnerships in the field of social work remain underresearched. This study contributed to social work knowledge by addressing the experiences of social workers regarding case management, a collaborative intervention built on partnerships. The data obtained from the focus group discussion were transcribed, coded, and categorized into relevant units. The data were analyzed for

themes, which were used to inform effective case management strategies to improve educational and behavioral outcomes and school-based interventions for at-risk students.

Significance of the Study

I evaluated case management interventions pertaining to educational and behavioral performance of students. Students, staff, and schools are evaluated based on student performance (Wolf et al., 2013). The study's findings contributed to social work knowledge by informing social workers of effective and ineffective case management strategies for youths. The results have implications for school employees and social workers working in other youth-related agencies (see Rith-Najarian, Daleiden, & Chorpita, 2016). Evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence are vital to the foundation of social work practice. According to Valenzuela, Pulgaron, Salamon, and Patino-Fernandez (2016), there is a growing need for social workers to develop evidence-based practices that are culturally competent and based on current research of at-risk populations. The current study was conducted to identify case management strategies that support at-risk students enrolled in public schools. The research also has implications for building-level and district-level school policy.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Ecological theory posits that environmental influences affect an individual's cultural factors and community perspectives (Suarez-Balcazar, Balcazar, Garcia-Ramirez, & Taylor-Ritzler, 2014). Ecological theory suggests that early school problems can be attributed to truant behavior caused by family issues, school issues, or a combination of both (Thomas, Lemieux, Rhodes, & Vlosky, 2011). Further research is needed to

examine pathways to school problems and delinquency, and how case management can address these issues. Ecological theory can be used to examine interventions or strategies in public schools that support at-risk children as soon as academic, social, psychological, or behavioral problems present (Thomas et al., 2011). Ecological theory suggests that it may be possible to decrease truancy and its related psychological and social risk factors, like behavioral problems, by addressing risk and protective factors in the environment through interventions and strategies related to case management (Thomas et al., 2011). Ecological theory is used to address community, family, educational, and other factors that influence educational and behavioral outcomes (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2014). The current study focused on identifying effective case management strategies that address environmental factors affecting at-risk students.

Social constructionism theory posits that shared understandings about the world are the foundation of jointly constructed assumptions that define or explain reality (Thibodeaux, 2014). According to Thibodeaux (2014), considering how social conditions create social problems is important in research that addresses social issues. Social constructionism research is more empirically grounded when social conditions are considered as foundations of social problems (Thibodeaux, 2014). The current study addressed social conditions that create obstacles for at-risk youths, and how case management may mediate these factors. According to Shotter (2014), socially negotiated understandings of the environment form an individual's understanding of his or her reality. Shotter (2014) suggested considering social norms and culture when studying a

population. The current study addressed social workers' understanding of social norms and students' culture when implementing case management interventions.

Values and Ethics

The social work ethical values of service, social justice, and competence formed the foundation of this research project. One of the primary goals of the social work field is to address social problems (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). By addressing environmental, community, and family needs through case management in schools, social workers can better address social problems that negatively affect educational and behavioral performance. Challenging social injustice is an ethical principle in the field of social work (NASW, 2008). By addressing income, racial/ethnic inequality, and educational inequality in schools through case management, social workers can help combat social injustices affecting at-risk, low-income, and minority students attending the division. An additional ethical principle that was relevant to this study was practicing in areas of competence and developing professional expertise (NASW, 2008). I practiced in an area (agency/field) that I had experience in, and I enhanced my professional expertise through focus group discussion, peer consult, data gathering and analysis, and addressing issues affecting the population with whom I work.

The NASW code of ethics guides clinical practice through its ethical principles and the requirements of professionalism and ethical practice (NASW, 2008). The division strives to provide a safe and equitable learning environment through academic instruction and by supporting the emotional and behavioral well-being of students. The division's

values supported this study's identification of effective case management strategies that support at-risk students and mediate risk factors for negative life outcomes.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

When conducting the following review, I used the PsychINFO, SocINDEX, and Education Source databases to identify relevant literature. Articles from peer-reviewed journals published between 2011 and 2017 were selected. Relevant literature from peer-reviewed journals cited as sources for these research articles was also selected. The key words used for database searches were *case management* and *schools*, *case management* and *youth*, *case management* and *at-risk youth*, *at-risk youth* and *schools*, *case management* and *educational and behavioral outcomes*, *case management* and *attendance*, *case management* and *discipline*, *case management* and *youth outcomes*, *social workers* and *case management*, *social workers* and *schools*, and *social workers* and *at-risk youth*. These key words were chosen due to their relevance to the research question and participant population. As I was investigating case management in schools with a focus group of school social workers, narrowing results to peer-reviewed articles that addressed case management programs and techniques with youths was vital. Additionally, articles that addressed educational and behavioral outcomes and considered implications and limitations of youth case management programs were considered important.

Efficacy of Practice

In the United States, almost 25% of the population displays symptoms of behavioral or emotional issues (Browne, Cashin, & Graham, 2012). For children with

emotional and behavioral disorders, about 50% will drop out of school, and almost 75% will experience some level of exclusion from school (Browne et al., 2012). Early detection and intervention are vital to the prevention of negative outcomes for at-risk youths (Browne et al., 2012).

Community-based case management programs have established efficacy guidelines (Thomas et al., 2011). The Truancy Assessment and Service Center (TASC) provides case management for elementary-age children and their families in a multistage approach (Thomas et al., 2011). TASC aims to reduce truancy and related psychosocial and behavioral factors by focusing on protective and risk factors linked to different pathways or outcomes throughout adolescence and early adulthood. By considering attendance as a risk of negative outcomes, case managers are able to mediate some of the risks of truancy (Thomas et al., 2011).

Wells and Gifford (2013) suggested that continuous evaluation of case management programs is critical for the success of the program. This model is used to evaluate comprehensive services for individuals requiring health and human services support (Wells & Gifford, 2013). Longitudinal research results suggested that case management programs improve sustainable outcomes for at-risk youths (Wells & Gifford, 2013). State and agency-wide accountability was the most recurring mediating factor inhibiting involvement of community agencies (Wells & Gifford, 2013). Additionally, a family's hesitancy to share personal information with case management partners also impacted the success of programs (Wells & Gifford, 2013). Limited administrative support and school-wide implementation delays negatively affected the

sustainability of school-community partnerships (Wells & Gifford, 2013). Support for program integration in school-wide administrative practices improved outcomes for students (Wells & Gifford, 2013). Overall, case management programs were found to be sustainable and effective (Wells & Gifford, 2013).

Researchers have looked at the goals of intervention and help-seeking behaviors required for effective case management. Researchers identified significant predictors of outcome success in the CONNECT program's model of case management intervention (Ferguson, Ziemer, Oviedo, & Ansbro, 2016). Increased household income, increased financial distress, larger formal support networks, and smaller informal support networks were identified as precursors to help-seeking behaviors that facilitated more positive case management experiences (Ferguson et al., 2016). Further research is needed to understand how informal support networks in case management complement more intensive agency-based services (Ferguson et al., 2016). Karatekin, Hong, Piescher, Uecker, and McDonald (2014) found that the explicit focus of intervention programs is predictive of outcome success in case management. Karatekin et al. looked at academic, child maltreatment, truancy, and special education outcomes for students in a case management program with the focus of reducing child maltreatment. Results indicated a decrease in the number of child maltreatment reports and a decrease in truancy, but no significant gains in educational and behavioral outcomes like grades and standardized test results (Karatekin et al., 2014). An identified focus of increasing educational and behavioral outcomes increased the success of case management intervention outcomes for at-risk students (Karatekin et al., 2014). This research has implications for the current

study because an identified focus of increasing educational and behavioral outcomes was important in the success of case management interventions.

There is limited research on the effectiveness of case management for at-risk youths when compared to more intensive case management models (Bruns, Pullman, Sather, Brinson, & Ramey, 2015). Intensive case management models include programs like Wraparound in which the student receives multiple agencies and service coordinators who work as a team simultaneously, rather than the more common model of one case manager as a point of contact who provides referrals to and coordination with outside agencies (Bruns et al., 2015). According to the division, Wraparound services are provided to multiple students throughout the county by using a third-party service. Although Wraparound data are available, no data on the more common case management interventions within the schools, primarily facilitated by school social workers, are available. According to Bruns et al., students enrolled in Wraparound services received more hours of case management, but student outcomes regarding residential placement, emotional symptoms, functioning, and behavioral symptoms were not improved when compared to less intensive case management models. Implementation fidelity and staff perceptions were poorer than those of more common case management models (Bruns et al., 2015). Bruns et al. noted that at-risk youths with less intensive needs are better served by the equally effective, less-intensive case management interventions that school social workers in the division can provide. The current study included focus groups to gather data on effective case management strategies used by school social workers.

The C-STAR model of youth case management includes assessments of needs, service plan development, community referrals, service coordination, advocacy at school, and mentoring (Smith & Stowitschek, 1998). The goal is to provide prevention services that mediate some of the risk factors of negative outcomes for at-risk youth (Smith & Stowitschek, 1998). One research study that addressed the C-STAR model indicated that the model attempted to maximize the opportunities for students at risk of failing elementary school. Partnerships between the school, family, and community agencies were found to be vital in the model's success (Browne et al., 2012). Brown et al. (2012) found that the model improved student attendance and partnerships with universities that prepare school-based and community-based professionals. Brown et al. noted that a limitation affecting their study was the limited availability of formal evaluation models for case management programs.

Dropout rates in the United States have been decreasing since 1972 (Maynard, Kjellstrand, & Thompson, 2014). According to Maynard et al. (2014), negative outcomes for individuals and society are correlated with negative educational and behavioral outcomes and dropout rates. One of the most widely used dropout prevention programs is Communities In Schools (CIS). Public schools with a CIS partnership allow for case management services to be provided to individual students by CIS employees while visiting the students in the school building (Maynard et al., 2014). The case management intervention is tailored to the individual student and addresses discipline, grades, and attendance (Maynard et al., 2014). The 2014 national CIS report indicated that students enrolled in case management services were dropping out of school at lower rates, were

more likely to complete their current grade level, and were more likely to complete requirements for high school graduation (Maynard et al., 2014).

School-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) is another effective case management model (Nocera, Whitbread, & Nocera, 2014). SWPBS provides preventive measures before a student is identified as at-risk for academic failure (Nocera et al., 2014). SWPBS aims to provide healthy coping strategies and case management for students with risk factors for negative educational and behavioral outcomes before their grades, discipline, or attendance are negatively affected (Nocera et al., 2014). The program's objective is to create a positive environment within the school and support students before comprehensive services are needed (Nocera et al., 2014). Although some success was noted using these preventative measures, Nocera et al. (2014) reported that the limited availability of research on preventive case management programs in schools suggests the need for future research.

There is limited research on the implementation of risk assessments and case management interventions with youths and their subsequent outcomes (Vincent, Guy, Perrault, & Gershenson, 2016). According to Vincent et al. (2016), the key benefits of case management interventions and risk assessments are improved allocation of resources and a decrease in unnecessary interference in youths' lives, like law enforcement involvement. More research is needed on the implications of case management in decreasing negative outcomes for youths (Vincent et al., 2016). Additionally, limited research on gender-responsive risk assessment with case management interventions is available (Anderson et al., 2016). Researchers found that although female participants

scored higher on risk assessment scales, male participants recidivated at a higher rate (Anderson et al., 2016). Gender differences were impacted by family and personality influences (Anderson et al., 2016). Future research is needed on the impact of gender-responsive risk assessments in case management interventions (Anderson et al., 2016).

Research on the impact of race on risk assessments is also limited (Perrault, Vincent & Guy, 2017). Perrault et al. (2017) reported that the validity of screening and assessment tools used with minority groups is often debated. Perrault et al. found differences by race in the history of maltreatment and community organizations. Race, socioeconomic status, gender, educational disabilities, and language differences may have implications for future research (Anderson et al., 2016; (Perrault et al., 2017).

According to the division district profile, 50% of enrolled students identify as belonging to a racial or ethnic minority group. About 19% of students are economically disadvantaged, around 16% are English language learners, and 11% have an identified educational disability. It is important to incorporate cultural competence into research, public health programs, case management programs, program evaluations, and ethics (Cuellar, 2016). Increasing cultural knowledge in research promotes awareness of inclusivity and engagement of diverse views (Cuellar, 2016). Increasing cultural competence improves inclusivity in the continuously changing demographics of the United States (Cuellar, 2016).

Teasley, Archuleta, and Miller (2014) found that school social workers with large populations of at-risk youths in urban settings felt moderately culturally competent. The results differed depending on the race of the social worker (African American social

workers felt more culturally competent in this setting), the amount of professional development, and geographical location of the schools (Teasley et al., 2014). Teasley et al. highlighted the importance of cultural competence within school systems. With at least 16% of the population considered at-risk due to economic disadvantages, and 50% of the population identifying as a racial or ethnic minority, cultural competence was an important consideration in the current study.

Collaborative Approach

The efficacy of case management programs increases as the collaboration between multiple agencies, service providers, the community, and the student's family increase. Porowski and Passa (2011) evaluated the differences in on-time graduation and dropout rates between CIS case-managed students and those not receiving services at a high school level. Students enrolled in CIS case management had greater on-time graduation and lower dropout rates than at-risk students not receiving case management services (Porowski & Passa, 2011). Additionally, Porowski and Passa noted that students had greater educational and behavioral outcomes when collaboration between school and families, collaboration with outside resources, and student engagement increased. Porowski and Passa noted that comprehensive services were correlated with positive educational and behavioral outcomes in all students. Programs that incorporated childhood development theories reported a greater reduction in negative behaviors, risky behaviors, and mental health problems while reporting an increase in prosocial behaviors (Porowski & Passa, 2011). A limitation of the study was the efficacy of implementation

of the case management model. Results were affected by whether the case management services were provided reliably and consistently (Porowski & Passa, 2011).

A similar model to the CIS model is the Check and Connect case management model. The Check and Connect model utilized a referral framework where continuous student follow-up and professional collaboration allowed for the early identification of needs and referrals to community resources by case managers (Maynard et al., 2014). While Check and Connect increased student engagement and reduced dropout rates, limited research has yet to confirm the efficacy of continuous referral processes within schools (Maynard et al., 2014). Maynard et al. reported a need for additional research on case management models with a strong referral component.

According to Strand and Lovrich (2014), using school-based case management of students in collaboration with court-engaged case management within the Check and Connect model decreased dropout rates and increased graduation rates. This positive effect on school completion outcomes was linked to collaborative case management and partnerships between the school and community (Strand & Lovrich, 2014). Utilizing a restorative and social support framework within case management received positive responses from at-risk youth with a history of truancy and low educational and behavioral outcomes (Strand & Lovrich, 2014). This collaborative approach to case management increased GED attainment along with high school graduation rates (Strand & Lovrich, 2014).

The Crossover Youth Practice Model of case management attempted to utilize a multisystem collaboration approach to improve outcomes for youth in regards to

structural and psychosocial processes (Haight, Bidwell, Narshall, and Khatiwoda, 2014). A two-year study looked at the perceptions of case managers in regards to their practice, and collaboration with child welfare and juvenile justice systems (Haight, et al., 2014). The case managers discussed structural changes, professional support, professional collaboration, engaging families and community organizations, and other practices and strategies that increased the success of case management interventions (Haight, et al., 2014). The researchers concluded that at-risk youth are at a higher risk of problematic developmental outcomes (Haight, et al., 2014). The completed research looked at effective case management practices within public schools that could mediate some of this risk, and the perceptions of the case managers who utilize these practices (Haight, et al., 2014).

According to Wells and Gifford (2013), a team approach to case management in schools increases family and agency engagement for at-risk students. While the school-based administration and evaluation guidelines, and family hesitancy to share private information with multiple agencies, seemed to slightly constrain local agencies' participation, it increased program sustainability and accountability to the state (Wells & Gifford, 2013). Additionally, case management in high-need schools increased parent and caregiver involvement and increased integration into organization structures (Wells & Gifford, 2013). An increase in parent involvement and collaboration is correlated with positive outcomes in at-risk students (Wells & Gifford, 2013).

Role of Case Managers

Case managers play an integral role in the success of case management for at-risk youths. According to Blackmon and Cain (2013), the TASC program's use of case managers allowed for the rapid assessment of at-risk students, and the ability to address the underlying causes of school problems and truancy. The authors conducted a study on case managers' perspectives and identified case managers as the primary change agents within the program (Blackmon & Cain, 2013). Positive outcomes for at-risk students increased if case managers engaged their families, coordinated a collaborative support system for the individual, and aided them in overcoming obstacles that inhibited access to intervention and supports (Blackmon & Cain, 2013). Limitations to positive outcomes included large caseloads and insufficient staff (Blackmon & Cain, 2013).

Project EFECT (Project Education for Effective Collaborative Training) provided case management for at-risk children, and like the TASC model, considered low attendance as a risk factor (Shepard-Tew & Creamer, 1998). Each child received case management services, while their caretakers received follow-up consultation and communication (Shepard-Tew & Creamer, 1998). This follow-up model had implications for my completed research, as it could be utilized for managing and coordinating interventions for at-risk students and their families during case management within schools. Shepard-Tew and Creamer (1998) note that project EFECT created a comprehensive services model by integrating administrative tasks, like outside referrals, into their program. One implication and benefit of project EFECT identified by researchers was its use of teaching structures for collaboration with multidisciplinary

teams and school staff. The teaching structures were utilized by an integrated services team for accountability purposes. For increased efficacy of case management programs, Shepard-Tew and Creamer (1998) suggest increasing field supervision of case managers and improving training availability. Minimal training in case management practices and a lack of commitment to case management as an effective practice technique by counselors were cited by the authors as possible limitations affecting their study (Shepard-Tew & Creamer, 1998).

Youth in the child welfare system are at risk of higher rates of mental health issues but rarely receive evidence-based practices with the goal of mediating this risk (Fitzgerald, Torres, Shipman, Gorrone, Kerns, and Dorsey, 2015). Case managers are the “service brokers” with the ability to refer youth to community agencies that can support these individuals and help them overcome various obstacles (Fitzgerald et al., 2015). Often, case managers are the only professional in contact with the student that can coordinate a community system that supports them (Fitzgerald et al., 2015). The vast majority of child welfare recipients attend public schools (Huffman, 2013). School social workers have a unique opportunity to provide case management interventions and coordination between the student, family, and the community. Fitzgerald et al. (2015) reported that case managers with knowledge of child mental health problems and evidence-based intervention components improved caseworkers’ ability to screen at-risk students for potential issues and increase their access to evidence-based practices. The division’s school social workers are mental health professionals with the ability to provide case management services to students. The completed study allowed me to

identify social worker's perceptions of case management, and the efficacy and limitations of evidence-based practices.

McClanahan and Weismuller (2015) suggest that students with complex needs are at risk of inefficient and disjointed service delivery. Regular and continuous absences from school result in missed academic instruction and a decrease in academic success (McClanahan & Weismuller, 2015). As the needs of a student increase, the need for case management and care coordination between the school and providing agencies increase as well (McClanahan & Weismuller, 2015). According to the authors, best practice methods of case management for students in a school setting include collaboration, continuous coordination, and communication (McClanahan & Weismuller, 2015). Case manager perceptions also impact outcomes of intervention (McClanahan & Weismuller, 2015). Further research is needed on continuity of care and perceptions towards the effectiveness of case management (Naert, Roose, Rapp, & Vanderplasschen, 2017). Naert et al. (2017) reviewed twenty-eight studies on youth care interventions. Continuity of care was rarely the focus of case management interventions, and only a limited review of individual perceptions of intervention was available (Naert et al., 2017). My completed research gathered and analyzed detailed information on the perceptions of school social workers toward case management interventions.

Inadequate resources and staff shortages are common in school social work departments within public school districts, despite the significant responsibilities and services that they provide to schools and the wider community (Sherman, 2016). Limited research on perceived needs and evidence-based practices among school social workers

stress the need for further research to support social workers aiding at-risk students (Castillo, Rivers, Randall, Gaughan, Ojanen, Massey & Burton, 2016). In one study, school social workers reported that the majority use evidence-based practices on a daily basis, but spend one to four hours a week searching for relevant evidence-based practices suitable for individuals on their caseload due to limited resources (Castillo et al., 2016). Traditionally, social workers within schools are the primary facilitators of case management services and coordination between students, families, and the community (Sherman, 2016). Nonetheless, school social workers often remain discounted and marginalized by school leaders (Sherman, 2016). Another study highlighted the need for research on the effectiveness of school social work services to better advocate for their role within the school system (Sherman, 2016) Researchers reported a need for further research on effective case management strategies and practices with at-risk youths (Castillo et al., 2016).

The role of school social workers in regards to incorporating intervention strategies within schools is still in the developmental stages, with limited research available (Avant, 2014). According to Avant (2014), the literature fails to identify the role of social workers within schools and how they implement intervention strategies. The study reported that increased collaboration with school social workers is required to improve intervention implementation (Avant, 2014). Additionally, school social workers play important roles in intervention programs that other professionals, like teachers, may not be qualified for or have the resources available to address (Fram, Frongillo, Fishbein & Burke, 2014). According to a study on food insecurity within public schools, school

social workers played an important role in implementing prevention strategies and case management practices to mediate some of the risks of food insecurity (Fram, et al., 2014). These risks included behavioral, emotional, and developmental consequences of food insecurity that negatively impact educational and behavioral outcomes (Fram, et al., 2014). School social workers also play an important role in interventions with grieving students (Quinn-Lee, 2014). Quinn-Lee (2014) reported that school social workers helped address barriers for helping grieving children, aided in preparing school staff dealing with loss and grief issues of their students, and provided case management and referrals for community resources for grieving students. These studies and others referenced above highlight some of the many services that social workers provide for students, and the importance of continued research on the effectiveness of school social work practice.

School social workers have had a historically inconsistent and contextual role within the school system (Richard & Sosa, 2014). With limited literature on the effectiveness of school social work practice and related case management practices, along with role ambiguity, it is essential that future research attempt to identify a consistent role definition and practice model for school social workers (Richard & Sosa, 2014). Richard and Sosa (2014) examined the perceptions of school social workers in regards to their practice. Through their research, they were able to identify a role definition and conceptual practice model for school social workers in Louisiana (Richard & Sosa, 2014). My completed research identified role perceptions and case management practices for school social workers to help advocate for their positions, increase accountability, and guide training for future social workers (see Richard & Sosa, 2014).

There are varying models of case management implementation and variable definitions of practices within youth care (Grube & Mendenhall, 2016). These inconsistencies support further research into the perceptions of social workers providing case management for at-risk youths (Grube & Mendenhall, 2016). Grube and Mendenhall (2016) conducted focus groups that explored the perceptions and experiences of professionals providing case management interventions for adolescents with mental health issues. The participants reported current case management strategies and practices, discussed challenges, and provided suggestions (Grube & Mendenhall, 2016). Implications for case management at a local and national level were discussed, and researchers identified communication, collaboration, support, and coordination of services as key practices within youth case management in the mental health field. My completed research utilized focus groups to identify case management strategies and practices that are effective within school social work and discuss implications for local schools and across the country.

There remains a gap in research on how evidence-based and/or practice-based case management within schools inhibits school problems and delinquency. A bulk of the research with children involves case management from individuals and agencies outside of the school system (Thomas, Lemieux, Rhodes, & Vlosky, 2011). Currently, there is also limited research on the perspectives of case managers toward best practice and areas of need within child welfare systems (Thompson, Wojciak & Cooley, 2017). Exploring the perspectives of current case managers would allow researchers to expand their understanding of issues that affect the management and coordination of care, services,

and interventions (Thompson, et al., 2017). Additionally, case manager's perspectives will help the researcher identify the roles and responsibilities of school-based social workers providing case management, along with an understanding of the support and collaboration needed for an effective case management intervention (Thompson, et al., 2017). To handle the limited research on case management facilitated by school social workers, the researcher considered case management with children in other settings, and at-risk youths and related outcomes in other programs and interventions. My completed research provided data on the success of case management within schools, by school social workers employed by the division to work directly with students.

Summary

In summary, the research literature points to a need for case management services for at-risk youth within schools. About two-thirds of children and adolescents will experience educational and behavioral difficulties (Diplomas Count, 2013). Educational and behavioral difficulties are related to school dropout and negative outcomes in youth. Following a review of the literature, the researcher also noted a gap in research on school-based case management programs. The next section will detail how a focus group of school social workers allowed for the gathering of data on effective case management strategies within schools. This data allowed for analysis of how effective case management practices support at-risk youth and affect educational and behavioral outcomes for students enrolled at the division.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

The current study addressed effective case management strategies that support at-risk students in a public school setting. There is a gap in research regarding the efficacy of case management strategies in school settings, despite an estimated 66% of students experiencing educational and behavioral difficulties in school (Diplomas Count, 2013). This section includes the research design, methodology, data analysis, and ethical procedures of a focus group with school social workers.

Research Design

There is a correlation between positive social and behavioral health of students and educational and behavioral outcomes (Huffman, 2013). School-based social workers support the mental, social, and psychological well-being of students and can provide case management for additional needs of the students and their families. School social workers are a resource for students with educational and behavioral difficulties and other needs. I used action research with a focus group of school social workers at a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States to gather qualitative data. I explored the perceptions of school social workers regarding the use and effectiveness of case management strategies with at-risk students to improve educational and behavioral outcomes. Case management was defined as the community referrals and partnerships and continued follow-up of students facilitated by school social workers. The eight participants had an opportunity to discuss in a group of peers their perceptions of case management and how they have affected the outcomes of at-risk students.

Methodology

Data

Qualitative focus group discussion was used to collect data. According to Moretti et al. (2011), focus group discussion can be a scientifically rigorous, systematic, and a data-rich qualitative research method. According to Mkandawire-Valhmu and Stevens (2010), focus group discussions can benefit participants and researchers, can be a critical research methodology for marginalized groups, can be an educational opportunity for participants, and can provide dialogue and support for participants. The current study addressed case management interventions and educational and behavioral outcomes, including discipline, grades, and attendance as performance outcomes. Discipline referred to the number of suspensions and behavior referrals that a student received. Grades referred to the letter grades (A, B, C, D, and F) that students received at the end of each academic quarter. Attendance referred to the number of excused and unexcused absences each student acquired throughout the school year. Case management was considered the practice of continued follow-up of students and community referrals for resources facilitated by school social workers.

Participants

The focus group met in a town within the school division boundaries and consisted of eight public school social workers. School social workers in this division are professionals with graduate degrees in social work, typically with a concentration in clinical social work. Additionally, school social workers are required to obtain a Department of Education Pupil Personnel Services license. This sample size was used to

ensure sufficient data from participants to identify effective case management strategies in a focus group setting (Gentrick, Bennett, Sussman, Solares, & Helitzer, 2016). I used convenience sampling because the project was specific to the agency where the participants work (see Gentrick et al., 2016). The participants were also directly involved in the case management of students enrolled in the division.

The Pupil Services Directory was used to obtain contact information for all school social workers in the county. This directory is free and contains publicly available information. Each of the 37 social workers is assigned to different schools across the division. E-mails, text messages, phone calls, and networking were used to connect with possible focus group participants. I met with anyone who was interested and agreed to participate voluntarily. According to Rothwell, Anderson, and Botkin (2016), providing information on the topic of interest before a focus group discussion encourages more quality data as a result of more informed participant opinions. After focus group participants were chosen, informed consent documentation was obtained from all participants.

Instrumentation

The focus group participants were asked a series of questions. I formulated the questions, which were relevant to the research topic and question (see Caro-Bruce, 2000). With consent from all participants, the focus group discussion was then transcribed into a written transcript by a transcriber present during the discussion, to have a record of any answers to the questions and discussions that followed (see Caro-Bruce, 2000). This transcript helped uphold the authenticity of the discussion (see Caro-Bruce, 2000). The

transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement before the start of the focus group. After the completion of the focus group, I met with participants as a group again to review the written transcript and facilitate member checking.

I asked the following questions as I facilitated the focus group discussion with participants:

1. In what way(s) do you work with at-risk youth in your practice?
2. How do you utilize case management in your practice?
3. What case management strategies do you find effective with at-risk youth?
4. What case management strategies do you find ineffective with at-risk youth?
5. What interventions or strategies improved educational and behavioral outcomes for at-risk youth?
6. How were discipline, grades, and behavior affected following case management intervention?
7. What social and cultural factors do you consider when deciding on case management interventions for students?
8. Have you noticed significant differences in responsiveness to case management between males and females? If so, how?
9. Have you noticed significant differences in responsiveness to case management for different minority groups? If so, how?
10. How are students referred to you, or how do you come in contact with students you identify as in need of case management intervention?

11. How do you collaborate with other professionals, agencies, the student's family, or other individuals or groups during the case management process?
12. How do you assess student risk?
13. What is your focus of intervention?
14. What help-seeking behaviors are common for at-risk youth?
15. In your opinion, what is needed to improve social work case management services within schools?
16. What, if any, are roadblocks that inhibit your work with case management?
17. Any additional thoughts?

Data Analysis

The transcribed discussion data were coded and analyzed. To code the data, I went through the transcribed data and identified themes and patterns (see Berkowitz, 2010; Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). Key words and ideas mentioned during the group discussions helped me identify possible themes. I conducted initial coding to identify codes used to label related data (see Berkowitz, 2010). Focused coding followed, in which I removed, combined, and organized codes into coding categories. Four of the most prominent themes, or connected repeating ideas, were then selected from these categories (see Berkowitz, 2010). I then went back through the data and categorized coded information related to these selected themes. I then reviewed the coded data and identified the main points, the frequency of ideas, and outcomes addressed by the participants regarding these themes (see Berkowitz, 2010). Evidence that supported the

relevant themes was then identified. Themes that answered the research question were confirmed from this evidence (see Berkowitz, 2010).

Case management in schools is supported by other evidence-based case management programs and intervention strategies. The data obtained from this research project and the review of the literature with supporting results from various researchers regarding case management helped to support the validity of the research. Because there is a gap in research on case management in schools, using the widely established research methodology of a focus group was a strength of the research project (see Berkowitz, 2010). Although the concept of case management and research methodology is supported by research, there are limitations to this project. The research is not generalizable to all public school systems in the United States without further research (see Berkowitz, 2010). The purpose of the study was to evaluate social workers' perceptions, so the convenience sample of division participants was appropriate for this study. Data analysis depended on the participants' ability to be honest and to participate in the group discussion. This may have inhibited some of the project's internal validity. To mediate the factors affecting the internal validity, I provided information on the importance of focus groups and adhering to researchers' directions before the focus group discussion. This encouraged more quality data from participants (see Rothwell et al., 2016).

Ethical Procedures

An introductory discussion with information on the research topic and methodology was provided to all school social workers interested in participating in the focus group. I then met individually with participants to answer possible questions and

explain that their names would remain confidential outside of the focus group (see Gentrick et al., 2016). The risks of participants sharing information outside of the focus group were discussed with potential participants. Participants were asked not to share identifying information of any students with the group. All potential participants were informed that I would go over confidentiality before beginning the focus group discussion and would ask participants not to share any information from the discussion outside of the group (see Rothwell et al., 2016). To provide ethical protection for the school social workers, I addressed all confidentiality guidelines before beginning the focus group, and I informed participants that I would not report any identifying information to any other individuals or groups. The exception would be if a participant reported harming others, especially students, or was considering harming himself or herself (see Gentrick et al., 2016). I went over confidentiality with the transcriber before beginning the focus group discussion and asked the transcriber not to share any information from the discussion outside of the group (see Rothwell et al., 2016). The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement before the start of the study.

All participant information and data, including written transcripts, were kept confidential. The data were stored in a locked cabinet at the administration building in the division. Data were only disseminated in coded form for the purposes of writing a research report at the conclusion of the project (see Gentrick et al., 2016). All participant information and data will be destroyed 5 years after the project has been approved and accepted by my dissertation committee at Walden University. Only I will have access to data and all other relevant information (see Rothwell et al., 2016).

Summary

I facilitated a focus group with school social workers at a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The participants answered questions and discussed topics related to case management in schools. The discussion data were transcribed into written format. The transcription was then coded, data were analyzed, and themes were identified relative to the project research question. Section 3 includes the data analysis techniques and findings of the focus group discussion.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of the study was to evaluate effective case management techniques through a focus group of public school social workers. The research question was the following: What are the perceptions of school social workers in a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States regarding the use and effectiveness of case management strategies with at-risk students to improve educational and behavioral outcomes? The focus group discussion was transcribed into a written format and then coded and analyzed to draw conclusions. Section 3 includes a discussion of the data analysis techniques, validation procedures, limitations, and findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

I used e-mails and phone calls to recruit potential participants. Fifteen school social workers expressed interest in participating in the focus group. Thirteen school social workers agreed to meet individually with me to learn more about the focus group process. A focus group was scheduled, and eight participants attended the discussion with me, while the transcriber was present in the room. The data were collected over a 54 minute discussion period. The transcriber then created a written document of the focus group discussion to aid in data analysis.

The transcribed discussion was thoroughly coded and analyzed. First, themes and patterns in the transcribed data were identified (see Berkowitz, 2010; Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). Key words and ideas mentioned throughout the participants' discussions helped me identify possible themes. Next, initial coding was conducted, and codes used to label related data were identified (see Berkowitz, 2010). Focused coding was then conducted in

which I organized codes into coding categories. Four of the most prominent themes were then selected from these categories (see Berkowitz, 2010). The data were then reviewed and further categorized into information related to these four themes. I then identified the main points, the frequency of ideas, and the outcomes addressed by the focus group participants regarding these themes (see Berkowitz, 2010). Evidence that supported the relevant themes in the discussion data was then identified. The research findings were drawn from this data evidence, including how the themes helped answer the research question (see Berkowitz, 2010).

A member checking focus group session was conducted as a validation procedure (see Berkowitz, 2010). Once the written transcript was completed, I scheduled a member checking session with participants to review the transcript as a group and summarize findings. The participants were asked questions that restated the data to facilitate the dissemination of findings and determine accuracy. The member checking session allowed participants to analyze the findings and comment on the data to affirm that the results reflected their experiences (see Berkowitz, 2010). All eight participants affirmed the accuracy of the data, supporting the credibility of the data and its subsequent interpretation of findings (see Berkowitz, 2010).

One limitation of member checking as a validation procedure is its comprehensive data gathering approach, which limits the generalizability of data (Key, 1997). Member checking limits the scope of the research due to the specificity required when validating the data from one focus group transcript (Key, 1997). An issue encountered while conducting the study was related to seasonal weather. A winter storm arrived in the area

the night before the scheduled focus group. Only eight of the eleven participants who had agreed to attend the focus group were able to attend due to school and road closures.

According to Moretti et al. (2011), eight focus group participants still allows for sufficient and accurate data in a scientifically rigorous methodology.

Findings

I wanted to examine the perceptions of school social workers in a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States regarding the use and effectiveness of case management strategies with at-risk students to improve educational and behavioral outcomes. I investigated school social workers' perspectives on educational and behavioral outcomes following case management as defined by academics, discipline, and attendance. I identified evidence that helped answer the research question through relevant themes and outcomes expressed in the data gathered through a focus group. A subsequent member checking session helped validate the data.

There were recurring themes in social workers' perceptions regarding case management intervention to improve students' behavioral and educational outcomes. Discipline, academics, and attendance outcomes were positively impacted overall following case management, according to school social workers. The findings indicated that at-risk youths who are provided case management interventions may experience a decrease in discipline and attendance issues and an increase in academic outcomes. The findings also suggested that case management helps improve students' overall behavioral and educational outcomes at school.

Themes

I examined the main points, the frequency of ideas, and outcomes addressed by the focus group participants to identify themes from the data (see Berkowitz, 2010).

Theme 1. School social worker participants reported a positive impact on at-risk students following case management intervention.

Theme 2. Social worker participants reported that student outcomes were influenced by the availability of supports and ability to connect families to needed resources. This included inadequate staffing and limited resources in the community.

Theme 3. Social worker participants reported that collaboration and effective communication were important for successful case management.

Focus Group Questions: Data Results

A summary of the outcomes for every discussion question follows.

Question 1: In what way(s) do you work with at-risk youth in your practice?

Participants shared that they provided for “students who have little to no support at home.” They intervened “through group and individual work...with students in a school setting.” They provided “support through case management, support groups, individual counseling, and referring to community resources.” In summary, participants provided intervention through case management, individual and group counseling, referral to outside resources, and support during crisis for at-risk youths.

Question 2: How do you utilize case management in your practice?

Participants shared that they “build rapport with students, families, and school personnel and connect them to resources they may need, and implement individual counseling and

group counseling with the youth.” Participants link “students to outside treatment, and coordinate with those providers whenever possible” as well as “provide resources and support to both students and families.” In summary, participants provided resources and support, and connected students and their families to needed services and resources.

Question 3: What case management strategies do you find effective with at-risk youth? Participants noted “reflective listening, empathy, cultural sensitivity, and awareness of socioeconomic status challenges” as an effective strategy. Additionally, “discussing options and using motivational interviewing techniques” was noted. Participants reported that “meeting with the students on a regular basis and establishing an open line of communication can be effective in allowing them to feel a sense of support and connectedness. Checking in on them, asking them what they need, and showing that they are invested in their well-being is powerful in showing students that someone cares and is looking out for them.”

Participant 2 shared the following:

There was a child raised by a single parent with older siblings. Everyone in the household worked when the child was home from school. This child lived in an area that was notoriously gang affiliated. Resources were put in place to have the child attend an afterschool program with included boxing, that was a sport the child liked, and field trips. Also, the child was linked to a mentor that they were able to be with on the weekends. The child was also linked with a therapist to address unresolved trauma. With multiple supports in place to shield the child

from the lure of gang activity, they were able to gain exposure of the possibility of a different path in life.

In summary, participants identified building rapport/connections, follow-through, listening and adequate communication, and collaboration as important practices for effective case management with at-risk youths.

Question 4: What case management strategies do you find ineffective with at-risk youth? Participants listed “barriers with communication and not following up” multiple times as ineffective strategies. Furthermore, participants considered “trying to tell students and parents what to do versus working with them to find out what best works for them” as common actions to avoid. It was important for participants to “not necessarily do the tasks for students and families, but give them encouragement, support, and follow-up so that they gain the independence while being nurtured to empower themselves.” In summary, participants identified ineffective communication, a lack of follow-through, and a lack of collaboration as ineffective case management strategies with at-risk youths.

Question 5: What interventions or strategies improved educational and behavioral outcomes for at-risk youth? Participants noted that “making sure students have an adequate support system at school that includes ensuring basic needs are met and safety practices are put into place” was vital. Additionally, “building connections with students with similar backgrounds, providing a safe space to discuss concerns or hardships, and ongoing support students can count on” was noted as important. Participants noted that “regular meetings to follow up and guide youth, advocating on a

youth's behalf with third parties, and connecting them to adults in the building" were effective intervention strategies.

Participant 5 shared the following:

Before working in a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, I worked in an extremely poor, highly at-risk city in alternative education programs. Those children continued at-risk behaviors when they didn't feel supported. Showing them compassion and listening to their stories made them want something better because they felt someone actually cared about them that was genuine.

Building a system of support, meeting basic needs, communication, and collaboration were identified by participants as strategies that improved at-risk student outcomes.

Question 6: How were discipline, grades, and behavior affected following case management intervention? One participant shared that they "noticed changes in self-esteem before seeing social and academic changes, as it usually would take three months before seeing a positive impact on grades and a decrease in discipline referrals." This participant also reported that "sometimes getting all providers on the same page can help to impact grades and behavior for a student. Discipline decreased while grades increased." Another participant noted that "discipline, grades, behavior, and attendance all seem to improve when supports are in place through case management interventions because now there are more accountability procedures in place to ensure this person is receiving needed services." Overall, participants noted an increase in grades and attendance and a decrease in discipline and negative behavior.

Question 7: What social and cultural factors do you consider when deciding on case management interventions for students? “Background of family and social support systems available at home” was listed as an important factor to consider by participants. Several participants also mentioned “access to resources, provider of resources, socioeconomic status, and awareness of resources.” Participant responses also included “language, race, religion, sexuality, and self-identification as large facets with smaller subsets that need to be taken in consideration when providing case management to not offend your client as well as provide what is ethically appropriate in terms of service.” Ethnic/racial background, socioeconomic status, and available support systems and resources were identified as important factors to consider during case management intervention.

Question 8: Have you noticed significant differences in responsiveness to case management between males and females? If so, how? Most participants shared that no significant differences in student responsiveness were noted between male and female students. Several participants discussed “how some other professionals in the field may respond more punitively or are less likely to refer males, especially those of color and special education students, for more mental health or educational related approaches” as opposed to more punitive approaches like suspension. Overall, participants felt that there were no differences regarding responsiveness to intervention between male and female students.

Question 9: Have you noticed significant differences in responsiveness to case management for different minority groups? If so, how? Many participants disagreed

on whether there were significant differences in student responsiveness between minority groups. Some participants reported that they “wouldn’t say significant differences, but there is definitely a difference in responsiveness with some of the families and it was most likely related to cultural diversity and the stigma associated with mental health.” Other participants reported that there were “no consistent differences, and differences are based on more than just ethnic group identity.” Overall, participants were split regarding responsiveness to intervention between students of different minority groups. This was a surprising finding that requires more research to clarify.

Question 10: How are students referred to you, or how do you come in contact with students you identify as in need of case management intervention? Most participants shared that “students can be referred by school counselors or other educators” in the school building. One participant shared that they are “made aware of students or families who are in need of case management through administrators, school counselors, school nurse, parent liaison, teachers, deans, etc. Occasionally, parents will contact the social worker or school staff directly.” Overall, other school personnel referred students to the social work participants.

Question 11: How do you collaborate with other professionals, agencies, the student’s family, or other individuals or groups during the case management process? Participants shared that “e-mail, phone calls, regularly scheduled meetings, and staffings” were common collaboration methods. The participants “collaborated with the individual’s family and other professionals and agencies regularly to establish a relationship and build a rapport, or facilitate referrals as necessary.” Case management

involves “constant communication and information sharing with the permission of the youth and family.” In summary, participants reported that inter-disciplinary meetings, and contact over the phone and by e-mail were ways in which they collaborated with other parties involved in a student’s case during the case management process.

Question 12: How do you assess student risk? Participants utilized “previous incidents of CPS intervention, lack of family structure, and lack of support and difficulty in school” as indicators of student risk. Participants noted that “looking at risk factors and protective factors” was important. One participant shared that “in the school setting, they assess the risk based on factors such as attendance, grades, behavior, and concerns of others.” Another participant shared that they assess risk by “considering their family background, their history, their involvement with family, school, and community, their behavior patterns, and their involvement in substance use.” In summary, participants assessed student risk through individual interviews with the student and collaboration with referral sources, as well as reviewing data related to risk factors, including attendance, behavior, grades, and mental health concerns.

Question 13: What is your focus of intervention? Participants stated that their focus of intervention was that “students are safe at home and have the basic necessities.” Participants shared that “meeting any needs that the student may have but also increasing the quality of life, if possible,” was important. One participant shared that their “focus is to help the client regain a comfortable level of functioning. It varies on need, but typically involves skills development.” In summary, participants identified meeting

students' needs, including mental health, level of functioning, and basic needs, as well as a solution-focused intervention as the focus of their case management intervention.

Question 14: What help-seeking behaviors are common for at-risk youth?

Participants noted “acting out, to include using substances, getting into fights, mood changes, isolation, not talking, and any drastic change from their baseline” as common help-seeking strategies. Other attention-seeking behaviors like “experiencing a crisis, asking to go to the school counseling office when they feel they might be receiving disciplinary punishment, or asking to go to the school counseling office when they are being held accountable for behavior” was also reported as common. In summary, participants identified attention-seeking behaviors as the most common help-seeking behavior in at-risk youth.

Question 15: In your opinion, what is needed to improve social work case management services within schools? Participants reported that “more direct communication between school social workers and policymakers on a county level, like in the administration building and the school board” was needed. Additionally, an increase in “trauma-informed trainings and cultural competency training for staff” was listed as important “so that school personnel is able to understand where the social worker is coming from.” Participants shared that “more time for social workers to spend on case management but, more importantly, more community resources” was vital, as well as “lower caseloads” and “more social work staff.” Additional resources, increase in staffing, and explicit practice (colleagues understanding their roles and duties) were the

most common identified needs that would improve social work case management services in schools.

Question 16: What, if any, are roadblocks that inhibit your work with case management? Participants reported that “not getting permission through releases of information through students or parents, and not having a business phone that can be utilized when traveling from school to school” was inhibiting their case management intervention. Additionally, “not getting responses from other treatment providers” and a lack of “student and family communication” was listed as a roadblock. Several participants reported “increasing caseloads, limited resources, and poor follow through by parents and students” as their primary roadblocks. Participant 4 shared that “when you provide [parents] contact information to an agency, sometimes they are so overwhelmed they do not follow through in contacting the agency.” In summary, participants identified a lack of resources, inadequate communication with families, and time/staffing limitations as roadblocks to effective case management.

These findings answered the research question in regards to identifying the perception of school social workers toward case management intervention. Overall, participants noted a positive impact in the educational and behavioral outcomes of at-risk students following case management intervention. These positive impacts were influenced by the support provided by school social workers to students and their families, and their ability to connect families to needed resources and services. Collaborative approaches and open lines of communication were also crucial in effective

case management with at-risk youth. Staffing limitations and limited resources were cited as the largest obstacles to effective case management intervention.

Summary

The research evaluated school social workers' perspective toward case management intervention in a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The findings identified a positive impact on the educational and behavioral outcomes of at-risk youths following case management intervention, especially in regards to academics, discipline, and attendance outcomes. The following section will apply the research findings to professional social work practice and discuss implications for social change.

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

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of school social workers in a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States regarding the use and effectiveness of case management strategies with at-risk students to improve educational and behavioral outcomes. I used qualitative methodology in a collaborative focus group setting with eight school social worker participants. Participants reported a positive impact in the educational and behavioral outcomes of at-risk students following case management intervention. Connecting families to resources and services, a collaborative approach, adequate communication, and providing support were identified as mediating factors for positive case management intervention. Staffing limitations and limited resources were identified as limitations to effective case management intervention. The findings inform social workers about effective school social work practice and effective case management intervention for at-risk students in the public school system. Section 4 provides a discussion of applications for social work practice, recommendations for practice, and implications for social change.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

School social workers experience obstacles in their professional work, and individuals perceive their situation and that of their students' differently. All of the participating school social workers are assigned to different schools in different neighborhoods in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Social workers may be using different intervention styles, and the timing of intervention services may affect student outcomes differently. Each school's response to a student's educational and

behavioral obstacles may be different, and may affect the school social worker's ability to intervene in different ways. It is critical that social workers work within their scope of practice (NASW, 2008). Practicing within areas of competence and developing professional expertise are ethical principles related to this study (NASW, 2008). Developing further knowledge about effective practice within the agency impacts the individual social worker and expands his or her knowledge base. The research findings also impact the practice of social workers in other agencies that collaborate with school social workers. Social workers can more effectively collaborate with colleagues and share effective strategies and interventions with those they work with. The results benefit community partners who use case management interventions with at-risk youths. The findings may help social workers choose effective case management intervention strategies.

The current study addressed social problems, another ethical guideline in the field of social work (see NASW, 2008). By addressing environmental, community, and family needs through case management in schools, this study helped inform effective case management strategies using a holistic approach to identify concerns and needs of at-risk students (see NASW, 2008). The findings may help school social workers more effectively address social problems that inhibit positive educational and behavioral outcomes. The findings supported the need for social workers to identify obstacles to educational and behavioral performance that are not only present in the school but also in the home or community.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

I identified two action steps for clinical social work practitioners. Participants reported that most of the students they come in contact with are referred to them by other school personnel. This has implications for professional practice in how social workers seek connections and build rapport with colleagues and how they verbalize and explain their job responsibilities to colleagues from other professional backgrounds. I recommend that school social workers explain their responsibilities to colleagues and build positive working relationships with colleagues of different professional backgrounds. Participants also reported that interdisciplinary meetings and contact over the phone and by e-mail were ways in which they collaborated with other parties involved in a student's case management process. I recommend having standards of professional conduct not only for face-to-face meetings but also for phone and e-mail communication in all school systems. For these actions steps to be implemented with fidelity, social workers need to advocate for policy or guideline changes and consider the feasibility of the changes with their superiors (see Bruns et al., 2015).

Evaluation of school social workers' perspectives on the use and effectiveness of case management interventions increased my understanding of effective case management strategies and environmental factors that negatively impact at-risk students. The findings indicated case management strategies that improve the educational and behavioral performance of students. The findings also suggested that early intervention of case management strategies while at-risk youths are still enrolled in school increase the likelihood of positive behavioral and educational outcomes. Findings supported the need

for policy changes related to professional conduct and building better professional relationships with colleagues in the school system.

Environmental influences have implications for at-risk students in the public school system. Environmental influences often increase risk factors for depression, behavioral concerns, low attendance, poor grades, and self-esteem concerns (Kim & Streeter, 2006). Case management intervention is an effective way to mediate risk factors for negative behavioral and educational performance, and increase the chance that at-risk students have positive school outcomes. The findings are transferable to the field of clinical social work practice because 66% of youths in the United States attend a public educational institutions (Diplomas Count, 2013). Mental health, physical health, and relationships are impacted by stress and other environmental factors resulting from a lack of resources or basic needs (Kim & Streeter, 2006). High school graduation correlates with an increase in resources and availability of basic necessities (Kim & Streeter, 2006). The findings are useful for the broader field of social work because job insecurity and negative impacts on lifetime monetary earnings are correlated with high school dropout (Kim & Streeter, 2006). Knowledge of preventive case management intervention for at-risk students attending public schools is vital if social workers aim to improve educational and behavioral outcomes for at-risk youths.

Because the focus group involved school social workers from a public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States only, generalizability is limited. Public school systems across the country have varying student demographics and financial resources. Public school systems with similar demographics may use these

findings to inform their case management practice. The validation procedure of member checking helped affirm the findings, which may be used by public school systems with differing demographics with some reservations. Further research is needed on the use and effectiveness of case management strategies with at-risk youths in urban, suburban, and rural public school systems. Further research is also recommended on the differences in responsiveness between ethnic and racial groups because findings from the current study were inconclusive.

I plan to disseminate the findings from this study to expand the knowledge base in the field of social work and help school social workers improve their practice and case management interventions. I will reach out to participants via e-mail and phone to inquire about individual meetings for disseminating the study's results. I will also inform the Pupil Services department of the division of study findings and ask if a representative would like to meet to review the findings. In addition, I will recommend that the Pupil Services department allow a presentation of the findings at a staff meeting or professional development session. I will recommend that possible professional development sessions be open to the public and shared with social workers in various community agencies.

Implications for Social Change

School social work best practice includes holistic strategies for prevention and intervention, and targets at-risk students efficiently and rapidly (Thomas et al., 2011). Effective case management intervention involves collaboration with students and their families (Thomas et al., 2011). Successful interventions with at-risk youths identified in the literature included case management that addressed behavioral and educational

concerns in a holistic fashion (Thomas et al., 2011). Results of this study affirmed the effectiveness of case management with at-risk youths in a public school setting. The findings indicated that case management intervention positively impacted the educational and behavioral outcomes of at-risk students and improved outcomes for youths following the intervention.

Richard and Sosa (2014) suggested that case management strategies like those described by the division school social workers improve early intervention and prevention activities. On a micro level, effective case management strategies include individualized services to help students meet basic needs and thrive in educational settings despite environmental challenges. A macro implication of this study is to incorporate effective case management intervention in other public school systems and advocate for policies that add case management to required academic and administrative practices throughout state education boards. The current study findings suggested that school social workers have a positive perception of case management interventions with at-risk students, and that case management positively impacts educational and behavioral outcomes. Findings also indicated that case management positively impacts academics, discipline, and attendance, the three factors of educational and behavioral outcomes addressed in the study. Findings from this study have implications for widespread social change not only within the school system but also across agencies that serve at-risk youths. Case management interventions positively impact postsecondary outcomes and overall life outcomes (Thomas et al., 2011). Educational and behavioral accomplishments empower at-risk students and provide additional opportunities for future adult growth and

development (Thomas et al., 2011). Further study of the use and effectiveness of case management interventions may inform macrolevel changes in school systems throughout the United States that may impact at-risk students on an individual level.

Summary

Findings from the current study suggested a need for case management interventions in schools across the United States, and further research is needed to support this intervention strategy for at-risk youths. The findings of this research are encouraging but are not generalizable across the United States. The findings from this study were obtained within a population of fewer than 80,000 students. Although the public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States has a diverse population, the demographics of each of the county's 90 schools are different. At-risk students in the public school division in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States face similar obstacles as at-risk students across the United States, and further research is needed to generalize the findings to suburban, urban, and rural areas. Students struggle with behavioral and educational outcomes across the United States in part because of a lack of early intervention and case management practices in public schools. Social workers should advocate for additional school funding to increase community resources and develop policies that support case management to improve educational and behavioral outcomes for at-risk students.

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