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From Outsiders to Partners: Reimagining School Social Workers as School Leaders

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Abstract

School social workers possess a unique perspective and skill set for school leadership. However, common conceptualizations of the role have unnecessarily limited this capacity, and as a result, school social workers have struggled to carve out an identity in education. By reframing the role of school social workers as school leaders, schools will have an opportunity to leverage their best qualities. Social workers who are willing to work closely with school administrators, build strong partnerships with schools, and advocate for themselves as school leaders stand to gain a great deal from added legitimacy to their role.

School social workers (SSWs) show a unique capacity for school leadership. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, social workers have been marginalized from the larger operations of the school system, and have struggled to assert themselves as stakeholders (Callahan Sherman, 2016). Common conceptions of school social work typically fall on the spectrum between direct and systemic practice, or social work *in* or *for* schools (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). This limited view of SSWs, coupled with general misunderstanding of their role, can lead schools to underappreciate and underinvest in social work service (Bye et al., 2009). Reframing the role of SSWs as school leaders in partnership with schools makes it possible for schools to leverage the assets unique to school social work. Schools can share leadership with social workers in order to develop policy, supervise intervention programs, and ensure that the social emotional needs of all students are addressed through broad, ecologically informed programming. School systems, and SSWs, will be best served by partnering with each other, and redefining SSWs as school leaders.

The Marginalization of School Social Workers

School divisions stand to gain a great deal from the inclusion of social workers on their student support teams. Officially, SSWs in Manitoba exist to facilitate learning for students who struggle to access the curriculum, collaborate with schools and outside agencies to further student success, and stress prevention and early intervention to support the social-emotional needs of all students (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). In nearly all contexts, the role of an SSW involves wearing many hats: often playing the role of truancy officer, case manager, student and parent advocates, mediator, and counsellor, all in a single day (Dworak-Peck, 2019). Historically, social workers in schools have struggled to navigate value differences with other school staff and the resulting marginalization of their roles (Sugrue, 2017). More recently, Altshuler and Webb (2009) found that role confusion, coupled with broad misunderstanding of social work expertise, makes it difficult for SSWs to legitimize their presence on school and division support teams. While generally seen as valuable, SSWs suffer from poorly defined roles and misunderstood expectations within the school system, leaving the future efficacy and sustainability of the position open to criticism.

Misunderstanding the Role of School Social Workers

Role clarity among SSWs suffers from broad misunderstanding, making social workers responsible for outlining their role, and putting them at risk of being seen as redundant. Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2018) identified two common conceptualizations of school social work practice: (1) social work *for* schools, and (2) social work *in* schools. Understanding SSWs as working in schools presents them as guests, or outsiders, hosted by schools to provide services to specific students. Within this understanding, SSWs are often accessed to provide clinical services. As clinicians, SSWs are expected to provide frontline mental health services to students, craft behaviour intervention plans, and provide family support and liaison services. For many school administrators, as well as SSWs, this approach to school social work is seen as the most effective, efficient use of school social work resources (Bye et al., 2009). However, while these clinical services are valued and well within the realm of social work practice, it limits social work involvement in system-level change. Social work knowledge and lens could be used at the system level by involving SSWs in the development of policies, presentation of mental health data, and enhanced consultation to inform school and division decision making (Berzin et al., 2011). When SSWs are seen primarily as clinicians, their clinical skills bring great value to the individual students and families they serve, but their ecological, big picture lens remains underused (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). In doing so, schools and school divisions miss out on the unique expertise and ecological perspective that social workers bring to system level problems. This perspective is unique to social workers and, if capitalized on, could help social workers to ensure that their role remains valuable in the school system.

Another common conceptualization of school social work is to use social workers in their "for schools" role, as employees of the school, purely to address non-academic concerns that contribute to school and divisional mandates. This model is complicated when SSWs are supervised by individuals with educational and philosophical perspectives that differ significantly (Callahan Sherman, 2016). When conceptualized as working "for schools," SSWs often take primary responsibility for attendance issues, discipline planning, and special education coordination (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). This conceptualization is less popular in Canada, but fairly common in other countries, such as the United Kingdom where social workers may exist primarily to enforce school attendance (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013). Under this model, an SSW's primary role would be to support the tier one social-emotional interventions delivered by the classroom teacher, effectively meeting the needs of 85% of the student population (Allen-Meares et al., 2013). In reality, this does not always happen. Many SSWs already have extremely limited engagement with teachers (O'Brien et al., 2011), because many SSWs are mandated not to only consult at the classroom level, but to provide services individually, in small groups, and to families (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2013). Naturally, this dual-expectation spreads the efforts of social workers thin, creating tension as school they try to meet the social-emotional needs of students and families directly, leaving little time to work toward the other mandates of the schools they work for. Perceived differences between the mandates of schools and the assumed goals of SSWs can lead schools to underinvest in social work services (Bye et al., 2009). Overall, role ambiguity and competing demands placed on SSWs ultimately delegitimatize the position, and make SSWs vulnerable to being underappreciated.

Being conscious of the misunderstanding surrounding their role, SSWs would benefit from collective reframing of their role and increased visibility within the school system. In reviewing current research, Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2008) found that the role of the SSW remains unclear to other school-based professionals, leading to questions of their efficacy. However, the task of creating a collective identity is hindered by the reality that many SSWs work alone in one or multiple schools, with few opportunities for collaboration (Sugrue, 2017). Efforts at identity formation could be bolstered through the implementation of consistent certification requirements, and clear organizational mandates that account for the wide range of

expertise that social workers possess (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). If viewed as working in schools, largely as clinicians, social workers may be able to maintain their value in the eyes of other school professionals, but schools and divisions will not benefit from their system level expertise. When the SSW is seen as working for the school, the position runs the risk of being delegitimized when mandates are not reached. If SSWs are to maintain their legitimacy in the school system, they should look for opportunities for leadership and partnership with schools. If school social work is to remain a valuable part of school support teams in the future, differences in expectations must be rectified, and SSWs must consider how to evaluate their work effectively (Bye et al., 2009). In doing so, they will identify a clear path forward for the profession, and limit the risk of role redundancy on student support teams.

Redefining School Social Workers as Educational Leaders

In contrast to the common conceptions of social work as *in* or *for*, reimagining SSWs as educational leaders, partnering *with* schools to meet the needs of all students, leverages the best qualities SSWs can offer. Social workers possess policy and practice expertise that most other school professionals do not. For this reason, along with social workers' ecological lens of practice, efforts to redefine the role of the SSW should attend to enhancing social work's role in school and division leadership (Callahan Sherman, 2016). SSWs are situated to assume leadership roles in resource coordination projects, such as high-fidelity wraparound, which is intended to meet the needs of children in Manitoba with profound emotional and behavioural disorders (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2013). With the current push to establish evidence-based social-emotional and mental health promotion programs in schools, social workers should play a supervisory role in ensuring intervention fidelity (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). In order to legitimize their role as leaders and partners with schools, social workers need to engage in self-promotion, cultivate relationships with school and divisional leadership, and seek out additional training and specialization. These actions are the next step in redefining the role of SSWs as educational leaders in partnership with schools.

Opportunities for School Leadership

For SSWs to work effectively with schools, a change in perception and practice perspective is needed. Historically, SSWs have been recruited to work with the outliers in the school system, and their capacity for leadership is a recent realization (Callahan Sherman, 2016). With schools looking to build stronger community, teacher, and family linkages, the ecological perspective of SSWs is a valuable contribution (Berzin et al., 2011). Ecological theory considers the nature of a person in the context of social, physical, and cultural environment, in order to create a multi-level understanding of the factors influencing that person, which will inform a multi-system intervention plan (Teater, 2014). Ecological practice guides social work intervention in schools at the environmental level, while keeping the individual at the center of the focus. While prevalent models of school social work tend to focus on direct, clinical service to students and families in need, current research seems to indicate that broader engagement on the environmental level is more effective (O'Brien et al., 2011). For SSWs to be effective at multi-level intervention from an ecological perspective, they will need to have a presence at the administrative level in the school system, which will require a shift to viewing SSWs as school leaders.

School leaders would benefit from social work perspective in the development of practices and policies that guide the work of staff and shape the learning experience of students. Despite having significant experience working with policy, schools have not capitalized on SSWs' capacity as policymakers (Callahan Sherman, 2016). SSWs operate in a system that is, and will remain, primarily concerned with academics. However, policy makers are increasingly aware of the social-emotional factors that contribute to academic success. Administrators and other

school professionals meet students every day who are dealing with issues such as poverty, mental illness, and rising parental pressure, and they are beginning to understand how these challenges impact academic performance. Social workers are primed to analyze these complex issues, engage stakeholders, and bridge the gap between well-being and academic success (Callahan Sherman, 2016). Social workers are also capable of informing policy development in an educational context. Integrating social work knowledge and values in policies and practices will help schools to meet the needs of all students as schools strive for academic success (Gherardi & Whittlesey Jerome, 2018). SSWs and school leaders should work together to create policies and practices that meet the social-emotional needs of all students, and further academic achievement.

As efforts toward establishing evidence-based behaviour interventions have grown, SSWs have increasingly been identified as an important part of intervention plans. SSWs have historically been largely involved in supporting student behaviour at school, and playing the role of resource coordinator for families and students (Sugrue, 2017). With their specific education and expertise in behavioural assessment, SSWs could serve schools as consultants to ensure the fidelity of behaviour interventions (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). As schools have become aware of the multiple systemic factors contributing to student behaviour, they have found it necessary to use a strengths-based approach to cultivate strong family-school relationships. Born out of a recognition that individuals are more likely to change when their strengths are supported (Helton & Smith, 2014), strengths-based approaches provide a framework for schools to appreciate and leverage the strengths and resources that students and families hold (Leyba, 2010). SSWs have extensive experience with strengths-based practice, and are equipped to provide oversight to strengths-based programs in schools. Programs such as High-Fidelity Wraparound have become best practice models for schools trying to support students with significantly high emotional and behavioural needs (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2013), and SSWs already play a large role in coordinating these efforts. Operating in this model requires that SSWs be seen as school leaders, coordinating student support resources and ensuring that behaviour interventions will support the social-emotional needs of students.

Next Steps for School Social Workers

While SSWs possess skills and knowledge that make them capable of educational leadership, the process of redefining the role requires work and flexibility on all sides. SSWs must become comfortable with marketing themselves as school leaders, and determine appropriate ways to communicate their capacities. They also need to pursue additional training and certification relevant to school leadership. Schools and division leaders should work closer with SSWs to meet common goals. Taking these steps will help to shift the understanding of SSWs away from guests or employees of a school, toward being school leaders.

Social work education programs do not commonly encourage their students to promote their skills and abilities beyond the degree to which it is necessary for their clients. If SSWs want to establish themselves as school leaders and legitimize their role, they will need to be more comfortable with advocating for themselves in the school system (Callahan Sherman, 2016). However, SSWs need to be careful to articulate their role in terms that other school professionals will understand (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). They will need to learn about the unique challenges of other school professionals, and recognize their role in helping to resolve these challenges. As trained listeners, SSWs will likely find it challenging to self-promote, but it is the necessary first step in establishing themselves as school leaders.

SSWs who wish to become school leaders will need to establish strong working relationships with school and divisional administrators. SSWs are accustomed to working with student support staff and teachers, but school administrators have demonstrated better understanding of school social work (Tower, 2000), and this relationship should be reinforced. Ideally, SSWs could work in tandem with school administrators on a common vision (Callahan

Sherman, 2016), in recognition that social-emotional outcomes must be considered along with academic outcomes. Forging this partnership can be facilitated through combined meetings to address common goals and concerns, joint involvement in larger divisional policy development, and combined professional development opportunities.

Social workers are typically trained to be general practitioners, and should consider pursuing additional training and specialization in an effort to establish themselves as school leaders. For SSWs to be taken serious as school leaders, it is evident that they must complete enhanced certification (Callahan Sherman, 2016). Consistent certification and specialized education would enhance the image of SSWs as leaders, and better equip them for the complicated nature of social work in schools (Althsuler & Webb, 2009). While commonly the case, enhanced education does not necessarily imply mandating that SSWs have graduate degrees. Establishing SSWs as educational leaders will require them to gain education-orientated training, focused on educational issues and policy (Gherardi & Whittlesey Jerome, 2018). A simple alternative for SSWs to gain the skills and knowledge needed to be considered school leaders is for them to gain access to post-baccalaureate courses in education. These courses would provide social workers with the basic understanding of school organizational, leadership, and student services approaches and policies to make them competent as school leaders.

Conclusion

SSWs possess the skills, knowledge, and perspective necessary to be effective school leaders. Social workers hold down a multi-dimensional role, with the ability to intervene across a variety of domains and on many issues facing students and schools. However, the multi-dimensional nature of their work makes it difficult for other school professionals, and sometimes social workers, to evaluate and understand their role (Callahan Sherman, 2016, p. 4). Role ambiguity and misunderstanding of social workers' capacities present a risk to the future legitimacy of school social work. Common conceptions of school social have struggled with the tension between clinical and systemic service delivery (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018), with social workers operating as guests *in*, or employees *for*, the school system. These common conceptions do not make good use of the skills and knowledge unique to SSWs, and unnecessarily limit their scope.

As an alternative to seeing SSWs as either guests or employees, reframing their role as school leaders, in partnership with schools, provides an opportunity for schools to leverage the best qualities of social workers, and offers a promising future for school social work. SSWs' capacity to contribute to the administrative functioning of schools has, until recently, largely been unrecognized (Callahan Sherman, 2016). As experts in ecological perspective, policy and practice development, and behaviour intervention, SSWs already have several natural entry points into school leadership. Recognizing these entry points and partnering with SSWs to take on leadership roles in these areas will make the best use of social workers' role in the school system, and prompt them to become active advocates for educational practices and policies that were previously outside their scope (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). SSWs who are interested in redefining themselves as leaders will need to be comfortable advocating for their role, cultivate strong relationships with school administrators, and seek further education relevant to school leadership. In doing so, social workers will succeed in both legitimizing their role in the school system and redefining themselves in a way that will best fit the needs of social workers, and the needs of the schools they have partnered with.

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