

School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education

Hester van Sittert

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6492-1832>
North-West University, South Africa
hvansittert@gmail.com

Lizane Wilson

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8106-2817>
North-West University, South Africa
Lizane.Wilson@nwu.ac.za

ABSTRACT

School social work has played an important role within schools from early on. Within the South African context, school social workers render services within the framework of inclusive education. The study explored school social workers' perceptions of their role within this framework. Purposive sampling was used to select 10 participants based on specific inclusion criteria. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted and data were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that school social workers do contribute in schools within the framework of inclusive education by being part of a multidisciplinary team and by using various theoretical models and skills.

Keywords: school social work; inclusive education; ecological approach

Introduction and Problem Statement

The importance of social workers in schools has been internationally acknowledged for many years. School social work started in New York in 1906 and was an established field of practice in at least twenty countries by 1977 (Huxtable and Blyth 2002; Kelly 2008). In South Africa, the need to establish school social work in the education system was already recognised by government in 1973, but was only in 2009 identified as a specialisation area by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) (Kemp 2013). The first school social worker was appointed in KwaZulu-Natal in 1983 and thereafter the other provinces followed (Swart 1997). By employing school social workers, the Department of Basic Education (2010a) acknowledged that all children need care and support to learn. In 2015, a formal application for school



social work, to be regulated as a specialisation area in social work, was submitted to the SACSSP (Kemp et al. 2015).

The Encyclopaedia of Social work (NASW 1995, 2089–2090) defines school social work as “an application of social work principles and methods to the advantage of the goals of the school”. Within the South African context school social work is described as a practice-based profession within the school setting which aims to deal with social, emotional and behavioural barriers to learning experienced by learners at an educational institution from an ecological systems theory and strengths-based perspective (Kemp et al. 2015).

Jonson-Reid et al. (2004) state that school social workers render services within schools that include crisis intervention, case management and counselling, grief support and violence prevention. Jonson-Reid et al. (2005) add that school social work interventions can play a vital role in supporting the learner academically. These social workers can also deal with problems like drug abuse, delinquency, poverty, and emotional and physical illnesses (Allen-Meares 1977).

Since 2006, school social work services in South Africa have been based on inclusive education principles (Kemp 2013). Inclusive education aims to promote an atmosphere of care and guidance, enhancement of the learner’s full potential and expectations and to support and to guide teachers on how to deal with learners who experience social problems. Inclusive education is described by Swart (2004) as a practice where the diverse needs of learners, regardless of age, ability, socio-economic background, talent, gender, language, HIV status and cultural origin, are met in the classroom and schools. Rheeders (2010) furthermore posits that it provides learners who experience barriers to learning, access to mainstream education. Barriers to learning can be seen as the problems and difficulties that learners experience that affect their performance at school (Department of Basic Education, 2014) and that arise within the education system as a whole (Department of Basic Education 2010a).

Within South African schools, there are several categories of barriers to learning, including pedagogical barriers such as insufficient support from teachers who are inadequately trained, language barriers and insufficient classroom management (Department of Basic Education 2010a). It can furthermore include intrinsic barriers within the learner, for example medical conditions or systemic barriers such as insufficient learning support, for instance learning material or facilities. Lastly, there can be extrinsic barriers that may be specific circumstances that the learner has no control over, such as transport issues (Nel, Nel, and Hugo 2013). Not only do the barriers to learning influence the child’s academic performance, but there is supposedly also an increase in psychosocial problems in schools that should be solved. Intervention is needed to improve the child’s academic performance within the school environment. The aim is to understand the barriers to learning that learners encounter in an effort to deal with them in the best possible way (Department of Education 2001).

Although the principle of inclusivity acknowledges the fact that children with barriers to learning can be guided to experience success in mainstream schools, the Department of Basic Education (2010b) admits that there are still challenges that pose a threat to its policy on care and support. The school social worker, as part of the multidisciplinary support team, has a specialist role as social worker, in terms of the Social Service Professions Act, 1978 (Act No. 110 of 1978), to render psychosocial support services within the framework of inclusive education (Kemp 2013). The multidisciplinary team within the Department of Basic Education can consist of a social worker, teacher, educational specialist and an educational psychologist (Department of Basic Education 2010b). Each school or province, however, decides who the role players will be.

In order to understand and deal with barriers to learning, the Department of Basic Education (2010b) adopted the ecological systems theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The ecological systems theory provides a framework to understand the interactions, influences and interrelationships between the learner and other systems as the different systems influence one another. Bronfenbrenner's theory focuses on how the client interacts with the environment, as well as positive and negative factors that affect families like poverty or discrimination, and their different support systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Frey and George-Nichols (2003) argue that the fact that school social workers have knowledge on several theoretical frameworks, specifically the ecological systems theory, offers them an advantage in service delivery to the child.

Studies have been conducted on school social work (Kemp 2014) and social work in the context of inclusive education (Clark 2007), but none of these studies focused on the role of the school social worker within the framework of inclusive education and the value added through this role. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the role the school social worker plays in inclusive education.

Research Question and Aim of the Study

The research question that provided a framework and boundaries for this study was: "How do school social workers perceive their role within the framework of inclusive education?" The aim of this qualitative study was to explore and describe the perceptions school social workers have of their role within the framework of inclusive education.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was followed during this study as the researcher was interested in capturing the individuals' perspectives (Howitt 2010), but also in understanding the meaning or impressions that the participants constructed to make

sense of their worlds (Merriam 1998). By using this approach, the researcher wanted to explore a social phenomenon to elicit data that reflect the participants' own views, beliefs and values regarding the issue in their own words (Delpont and De Vos 2011). Creswell (2009) emphasises that, within qualitative research, the researchers are the key instrument as they collect data themselves. Within this study the first author collected the data herself by conducting semi-structured telephonic interviews.

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design (Sandelowski 2000) was used to explore and describe the perceptions school social workers have of their role within the framework of inclusive education. The qualitative descriptive design requires of the researcher to gain insight into a specific phenomenon (Magilvy and Thomas 2009).

Research Population and Sampling

The population for this study included all social workers who are employed as school social workers in South Africa. The participants were selected by means of purposive sampling, as participants were selected according to inclusion criteria (Daniel and Sam 2012). The inclusion criteria for this study specified that the participants had to be employed as a school social worker in South Africa. These social workers did not necessarily have to be employed by the Department of Basic Education, but could include social workers who have at least three years' experience as a school social worker. They had to be registered with the SACSSP and had to be available to participate in a semi-structured telephone interview which lasted not longer than an hour. Participation was voluntary and the participants had to be Afrikaans- or English-speaking. Participants who spoke languages other than Afrikaans and English were excluded from the study as the interviews were conducted via telephone, which made the use of interpreters difficult.

In order to recruit participants for the study, the details of all the school social workers employed in all five provinces were obtained from the social work managers or coordinators at the Department of Basic Education of the different provinces. The managers or coordinators also acted as mediators between the researcher and the participants. The mediators were provided with an information letter that contained the aim of the study. More than forty school social workers who met the inclusion criteria were identified across the five provinces. The potential participants were contacted, but only 10 school social workers agreed to participate in the study. The researcher kept contacting social workers whose names were provided by the managers until no more individuals who met the inclusion criteria and who were willing to participate, could be found.

Data Collection

Semi-structured telephone interviews were used to collect the data (Nieuwenhuis 2007). Telephone interviews seemed appropriate for the study seeing that the participants were from different provinces and thereby dealing with the distance between the researcher and the participants. A semi-structured interview schedule containing non-leading questions was used during the semi-structured telephone interviews to guide the researcher (Delpont and Roestenburg 2011; Greeff 2011; Rubin and Babbie 2011). The interview schedule was developed before the study with experts in the field and adjusted after a pilot study. The questions were aimed at motivating the participants to share their experiences (Howitt 2010). The interviews lasted no longer than an hour and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a transcription service. The data were collected until data saturation occurred and no new themes occurred during analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse all the collected data. During the thematic analysis the researcher went through a process of searching for tendencies and recording them (Braun and Clark 2013). The steps described by Braun and Clark (2013) were followed during the data analysis. The first author familiarised herself with the transcribed data by reading and rereading the transcripts. Initial codes across all the data sets were then generated by hand. Thereafter the researcher searched for initial themes by collecting codes into initial themes and finally the themes were reviewed and each theme given an informative name.

Ethics

Written permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Department of Basic Education and ethical clearance was received from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the North-West University. The risks for this study were low as the study was not expected to cause significant discomfort for the participants. The first author was constantly aware of the fact that the participants may have uncertainties regarding the purpose of the study and therefore kept them informed about the research process. No participants were forced to take part in the study and informed consent and voluntary participation were discussed before starting with the interviews. Informed written consent (Neuman 2012, 12) was obtained from each participant. Confidentiality was also explained to the participants and maintained by keeping the data confidential through restricting access to the data to only the researcher, her supervisor and the transcription company. The transcription company signed a confidentiality form. Privacy (Strydom 2011, 119, 120) was ensured by making sure that no names or identities can be linked to the information received.

Interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient for the participants as some participants preferred to do the telephone interview from home and not from their offices. Anonymity was ensured by not revealing any identifiable information about the participants in any shape, by neither written nor verbal communication (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 54). All the data have been stored in a safe place (Mouton 2001, 240) on a password-protected laptop. Once the research has been published, the digital recordings and transcriptions will be safely kept for five years at the university, after which it will be destroyed according to policy.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is important to ensure the credibility and reliability of the research findings (Nieuwenhuis 2007). The model of Lincoln and Guba (1985) was followed to ensure the trustworthiness of the research study. This model describes in detail the four criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) necessary to sustain trustworthiness.

Credibility was ensured through member checking, which implies that the researcher verified the interpretation of what has been said (Nieuwenhuis 2007) after the semi-structured telephone interviews with the participants. This was done by emailing the transcribed interviews to the participants and giving them a reasonable timeframe to react and to make the necessary changes if needed. The researcher clearly described the context of the study and provided a description of the setting in which the study was conducted to assure transferability (Nieuwenhuis 2007; Scott and Morrison 2006). Dependability was ascertained by making sure that all the participants were committed to participating in the study and by getting informed consent from each participant. Dependability was furthermore established through an audit trail that provided a description of the research steps that were followed during the research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Denscombe (2010) states that confirmability attends to the issue of objectivity and focuses on the extent of how far the researcher could stay objective. The researcher achieved confirmability through audio recording the interviews and transcribing the audio recordings verbatim to ensure accurate reflection of the participants' views.

Research Findings and Discussion

Five major themes with subthemes emerged from the data analysis and are presented in Table 1. Appropriate verbatim quotations are provided as validation.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes portraying the school social workers' perceptions of their role within inclusive education

Theme	Subtheme
Theme 1: The school social workers' role within the framework of inclusive education	1.1 Support to learners on an individual level and through group work 1.2 Support to learners with regard to emotional barriers to learning 1.3 Social workers' understanding of inclusive education
Theme 2: The responsibilities of the school social worker	2.1 Networking and collaboration with other professionals 2.2 Development of prevention programmes in schools 2.3 Empowerment and training of educators
Theme 3: School social workers' challenges in being part of inclusive education	3.1 Lack of support from the Department of Basic Education 3.2 No guidelines regarding school social workers' roles and responsibilities 3.3 No supervision in certain provinces
Theme 4: The school social worker's role as part of a multidisciplinary team	4.1 The multidisciplinary team at provincial and district level 4.2 The multidisciplinary team at school level
Theme 5: The contribution of school social workers towards inclusive education and in schools	5.1 School social workers as first point of initial assessment 5.2 Skills of social workers and knowledge of different models to assist the children according to their specific needs and problems

Theme 1: The School Social Workers' Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education

Inclusion within the context of education means that all learners with their different diversities should be accommodated within the classroom and that all learners have the right to education, no matter what their circumstances are (Nel, Nel, and Hugo 2013). School social workers also form part of inclusive education and render services accordingly. The following subtheme relays the participants' understanding of their role within the framework of inclusive education.

Subtheme 1.1: Support to Learners on an Individual Level and through Group Work

It is evident from the data that the majority of the participants feel that they have a supportive role to play within the school system, which includes support to learners on an individual level and through group work. This was described by a participant in the following way:

... my duties that I do here on a daily basis are mostly case work or individual therapy that I work with learners. ... I also do group therapy that promotes our children's overall well-being, awareness and empower the learners with skills.

Kemp (2013) states that some of the duties of school social workers are counselling and conducting support groups. Sederholm (2003) agrees that individual counselling helps learners to identify their problems and group work helps learners to cope with certain circumstances, for example bullying. It therefore creates a supportive environment for learners.

Subtheme 1.2: Support to Learners with regard to Emotional Barriers to Learning

The majority of participants indicated that they provide support to learners who experience emotional barriers. The following excerpts show that the participants indeed regard emotional support as part of their responsibilities in schools:

... then further is being a therapist to some of the learners with emotional problems.

... the problem is difficult, not necessarily cognition, but it is emotional ... to address the emotional problem in time.

... helping children with any emotional problems.

Fischer et al. (2007) agree that social workers must provide emotional support to learners as part of their role and by using their knowledge to establish a supportive environment at schools. Part of this emotional supports includes compassion and understanding for the learners' circumstances and discussing their emotions by providing a "safe place" for the child (Compton, Galaway, and Cournoyer 2005).

Subtheme 1.3: Social Workers' Understanding of Inclusive Education

The majority of the participants indicated that they have a clear understanding of the term inclusive education:

... to my understanding inclusive education is a school that accommodates different learners with different kinds of needs ... that the school will be able to accommodate learners whether they are having learning disabilities or using assistive devices ... so it is a school that caters for a wide variety of learners with a wide variety of needs.

Inclusive education for me is to accommodate the learners that struggle ... to keep them within mainstream education for as long as possible.

What I understand inclusive education to be is that every learner gets the opportunity to function in the wider community with their special needs to reach their potential.

... to see how we can accommodate the learner.

Rheeders (2010) states that inclusive education within the Department of Basic Education is the process where learners who experience barriers to learning gain access to mainstream education. It is furthermore clear that inclusion challenges teachers to consider all aspects of their classroom to accommodate the learners and the learners' diversity in the classroom (Nel, Nel, and Hugo 2013). This includes the different personalities of the learners and the different circumstances that affect their academic performance. The participants reveal in the data that they feel that inclusive education should give all children access to education, no matter what their circumstances or abilities are. Through the data it became clear that the participants support the fact that all learners, no matter what their circumstances are, must be supported in mainstream schools.

Theme 2: The Responsibilities of the School Social Worker

The participants were asked to reflect on what they perceive as their responsibilities as school social worker. Different viewpoints arose, as discussed below.

Subtheme 2.1: Networking and Collaboration with Other Professionals

The participants indicated that it is important to network and collaborate with other professionals in order to render an effective service in schools. It is reflected in the following quote:

... I will network with professionals outside of our school ... for instance referring a child for an eye test ... occupational therapist.

Another important aspect when doing counselling with the learners is that the school social worker should act as a link between school and home, as shown by the participant who made the comment in this excerpt:

Yes, I see my role as social worker ... to develop a relationship between school, home and the child.

Sederholm (2003) supports this by stating that the school social worker also collaborates with specialists like psychologists, physicians and psychiatrists. As promoted by the National Association of Social Work (NASW 2012), the school social worker is the contact person between school, home and the community.

Subtheme 2.2: Development of Prevention Programmes in Schools

The participants indicated that they are also responsible to work proactively and to develop prevention programmes as described in the following excerpts:

... then also I have another role, is preventative programmes that I would say to work proactive with the learners in the sense of for instance anti-bullying, substance abuse, rather stay away, the danger of gangsterism and the use of drugs.

... It is also programmes that I developed myself like anger management, self-esteem or alcohol, substance abuse programmes.

... part of my duties of course is prevention and to address themes like bullying and social media.

... I also have projects that I initiate and develop.

Jonson-Reid et al. (2005) state that when school social workers enhance the self-esteem of learners as part of their duties, it can contribute to the improvement of the children's performance at school. Considering the South African context, Kemp (2013) argues that school social workers have the responsibility to share information and to develop programmes that can assist the strategic goals of the Department of Basic Education. Participants on provincial, district and school level included programme development as part of their duties.

Subtheme 2.3: Empowerment and Training of Educators

The majority of the participants agreed that they also have a responsibility towards educators to empower them with information. This was echoed in the following statements:

... I also train educators in programmes that would empower them to support our learners in the school.

The district-based school social worker educates educators on policy.

... we are the custodians of legislation and policies ... we are acquainted with legislations relating to children protecting, acting in the best interest of the child.

... develop and empower educators with legislation relating to the protection of children such as Children's Act 38 of 2005.

... also training of educators.

The above statements are supported by Kemp (2013) who argues that within the South African context, school social workers at provincial, district and school level are responsible for the empowerment and training of educators regarding policy, management of social matters and psychosocial barriers to learning. The Department of Basic Education (2014) prescribes that school social workers have the responsibility to share information on the process of reporting cases of abuse. This includes all forms of abuse, namely physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. This subtheme indicates that the school social worker has a responsibility not only towards the learners, but also towards the educators. They have to focus on empowering them with knowledge so that they can act in the best interest of the children. School social workers must collaborate with educators, and support and assist them in dealing with learners' problems (Fisher et al. 2007).

Theme 3: School Social Workers' Challenges in Being Part of Inclusive Education

Several participants indicated that they face a number of challenges within the framework of inclusive education.

Subtheme 3.1: Lack of Support from the Department of Basic Education

The participants felt that they are not being supported by the Department of Basic Education. The following excerpt is a good example of this view:

... I think one suggestion that I would say is that the Department of Education can maybe be more supportive in the sense of like programmes or tools that can assist us when working with these learners ... like ongoing assistance like ... books or techniques or any kind of items that we can use in therapy.

The Western Cape Education Department's *Guidelines for Full-Service/Inclusive Schools* (2010) promote a view that the support of the school social workers and the support programmes, developed at the district base, are essential for learners at these schools. Kemp (2013) confirms that part of the school social workers' tasks is to develop programmes for schools. It is therefore evident from the data that, although the available literature emphasises that school social workers must develop programmes and that

they should be supported by the Department of Basic Education, the participants felt that they do not receive support in this regard.

Subtheme 3.2: No Guidelines Regarding School Social Workers' Roles and Responsibilities

Participants felt that there is no uniformity on their roles and responsibilities, as the following statements indicate:

... proper guidelines for what exactly are our role and our responsibility.

... it came to my attention that what I do is not done at other schools.

... or they expect certain things.

... so we don't have a specific job description ... there is much confusion ... where do our duties stop and where do they start?

... you know there is not a specific job description, there are no specific guidelines. I am talking about school-based social workers now who are appointed by the governing bodies at schools.

Subject literature emphasises the importance of clarifying the roles of the school social workers. This is supported by the NASW (2012), which states that the applicable departments within the education system must provide a clear description of the roles and expectations of the school social worker. However, it is evident from the data that this is not the case. The research data are confirmed by Kemp (2013), who laments the fact that there are no national policy guidelines or guidance that clarifies what exactly is expected of the school social worker.

Subtheme 3.3: No Supervision in Certain Provinces

Several participants indicated that they experience challenges in terms of supervision or guidance:

... we all struggle with supervision.

... guidelines and regulations because some of these people have no supervision in any form.

Literature emphasises the importance of supervision. Sederholm (2003) writes that supervision is important when dealing with sensitive issues and that the social worker must get support to prevent burnout. The NASW (2012) also prescribes support to school social workers with the appointment of a person with experience in school social

work and preferably with a master's degree. Professional supervision will assure a high quality of service to schools (NASW 2012).

Theme 4: School Social Workers' Role as Part of a Multidisciplinary Team

The Department of Basic Education promotes the fact that care and support should be provided within a multidisciplinary team that is comprised of different professionals with different fields of expertise to assist the children in the best possible way. The majority of the participants indicated that they form part of a multidisciplinary team and felt that they have a specific role in this team.

Subtheme 4.1: The Role of the School Social Workers as Part of the Multidisciplinary Team at Provincial and District Level

Some participants form part of the multidisciplinary team at the provincial and district levels and have specific roles to play. Some of them provide assistance to the social work managers, as indicated by the following responses:

... I am based at the provincial office as a social work supervisor who assists the social work manager with policy development and implementation of social work services in schools ... on provincial level we call it a provincial task team. ... it comes from the provincial and goes to the district ... Psychologists are there ... curriculum is there ... educators that are rendering services like substance abuse they are there ... so there are different levels of teams that we are working with.

Some of the participants take part in programme development:

... So social workers as part of the multidisciplinary team in the Department of Education develop programmes for the department of education and advocate for what is in the best interest of the children ...

Some participants are placed at a specific division of the district office:

... so in psychosocial ... where they provided the following assistance ... we have an overarching plan of action which covers ... the psychosocial section ... I am on the trauma team of the district ... District-based ... render services in 30 schools.

According to the Department of Basic Education (2014), the provincial team is a management structure and its role is to provide leadership. The multidisciplinary team within the Department of Basic Education is responsible for intervening when there is problem behaviour that has an impact on the educational performance of the child. This is called the district-based support team, which is based at the district offices. These services are rendered at special schools, resource centres and full-service schools or

other educational institutions (Department of Basic Education 2001). The data reveal that participants do see themselves as part of the multidisciplinary team. Networking with other professionals who form part of the multidisciplinary team is of extreme importance and social workers cannot work in isolation; this is to make sure that all the needs of the learners (community) are provided for (De Kock, Van Kerckhove, and Vens 2014).

Subtheme 4.2: The Role of School Social Workers as Part of the Multidisciplinary Team on School Level

The majority of school-based participants indicated that they form part of a multidisciplinary team at school level that consists of several disciplines:

... in the school the people that are officially in our school the school-based support team is me and the educational psychologist and then the teachers ... like the HOD and the deputy principle ... once a month we discuss the issues they are concerned about ... then there is master's students in psychology that each year come and do their practical and assist learners that cannot afford psychologists.

... there is a professional nurse at some of the special schools ... then at certain school there are also psychologists.

I am part of, we call it a caucus team, the headmaster, the support teacher and then we involve the educator of the child who is being discussed and then later we involve the parent.

The participants as part of the school-based support team also have the following roles to play within the school setting:

... in the school ... part of the school-based support team ... myself, the learner's teacher and the learner's support teacher ... the headmaster is involved in the decisions, psychology students help us with the assessments ... we reach out, curriculum teachers identify problem areas.

School social workers can also form part of the school-based support team which can consist of school management, educators and parents who collaborate with the district-based support team and/or other professionals who are available in their community. The school-based support team is usually managed by the principal to ensure that the school becomes an "inclusive centre" of learning, care and support (Department of Basic Education 2014). Du Bois and Miley (2008) support the fact that school social workers form part of a multidisciplinary team that may include the following professions: guidance counsellors, school psychologists and teachers. The data indicate that school social workers see themselves as part of the multidisciplinary team that acts in the best interest of the child. The available literature supports this view.

Theme 5: School Social Workers' Contribution to Inclusive Education and in Schools

The majority of the participants felt passionate about the fact that they have a definite contribution to make within schools. They base their statements on the fact that they felt that they can make a difference within schools because they are usually the first available person within the school to assess the problem, and also for their specific skills and knowledge.

Subtheme 5.1: School Social Workers' as First Point of Initial Assessment

As many of the social workers are placed at schools, they are most of the time the first person to whom the child is referred to. Therefore some participants were of the opinion that the school social worker is the starting point in assessing the children's problems at school. The following comments explain this:

I think the social worker can be the starting point ... we can play an important role ... so that we can assess ...

... we can make a difference immediately.

Fischer et al. (2007) argue that school social workers must assist the school in assessing the children socially and emotionally on a regular basis. Sederholm (2003) agrees that the information that school social workers receive is "privileged", which means they know about it first and can therefore act immediately and make a difference.

Subtheme 5.2: Skills of Social Workers and Knowledge of Different Models to Assist the Children According to Their Specific Needs and Problems

The following excerpts indicate that participants agree that school social workers have specific skills that can make a contribution to schools:

... yes, I think when school social work is involved in skills ... we can empower children, assist children and their families and teachers to develop the child to the best of their abilities ... to give the child a feeling of belonging.

We are trained in statutory work to have someone on the staff that is trained in statutory work.

... we have skills, we have people skills.

I also use ... problem-solving skills ...

Fisher et al. (2007) agree that school social workers have specific skills that can be applied successfully in the school environment. This is why the staff at schools utilise social workers to act in the interest of the learners.

It is evident from the data that school social workers have knowledge on and use several theoretical models in service delivery to children, depending on the specific needs of the children or the children's level of functioning:

... because we work with so many so different kinds of children there is such different kind of needs and problems ... I think it is an eclectic kind of model ... bit of different kinds of models ... like systemic ... ecologic systemic perspective where the child stand to ... different kinds of systems ... whether family, community and friends and educators ...

Some participants use the ecological systems theory:

I make use of the systems theory because systems influence each other ... we don't live on an island. The ecological one.

The Department of Basic Education (2010) adopted an ecological systems model to understand and deal with barriers to learning. Constable and Flynn (1982) agree that school social work services must be seen from an ecological perspective as children are seen, within the school system, as a subsystem that interacts with peers, family, school and the community.

Some participants indicated that they follow a problem-solving approach, as indicated by the following excerpts:

... I usually use problem-solving.

... I think the model that I use the most is the problem-solving model.

Problem-solving assists the child with the process of dealing with the problem.

The school social worker therefore helps the child to apply these skills (Simmons Staff 2014).

In addition, as echoed by the following statement, school social workers also apply the strengths perspective in service delivery:

... I usually use the strength perspective ... quick and effective.

Fisher et al. (2007) agree that the strengths perspective can work effectively when working with children as they use their own strengths and resources in their community to stimulate change.

Lastly, participants indicated that they use the developmental model:

... yes, I think all of us have our own model and theoretical framework from where we work.

... the developmental model is very important ... it tells you where your client is and then we have the psychosocial model where we look into the barriers of learning.

... and the specific needs ...

... but not a specific model.

... because I am at a special school ... it is difficult ... they ... cannot think in a concrete way.

Fischer et al. (2007) propound that the social worker in schools must have knowledge of various models and use the developmental perspective to understand the clients' own identity and the stage of life where the client is. They must also have knowledge of the children's current psychosocial functioning (Fisher et al. 2007). It is therefore clear that the school social workers do not use only one model, but make use of different models to assist the children in the best possible way.

Conclusion

The study provided a picture of how school social workers perceive their role within the framework of inclusive education. It was clear that they have a definite role to play within inclusive education which includes the support of learners on an individual level, through group work and also with regard to the emotional barriers that the learners experience. This support is done in collaboration with other professionals and within a multidisciplinary team. The school social workers perceive that they are furthermore responsible for the development of preventive programmes as well as empowering the educators with certain information and by involving them in training sessions.

Certain challenges were also identified by the school social workers which include the lack of support from the Department of Basic Education, the fact that there are no guidelines regarding school social workers' roles and responsibilities and that some school social workers in some provinces do not receive any support or guidance.

Despite the challenges the school social workers believe that they contribute to the school community as their knowledge of various theoretical models, legislation and policies regarding children and also their skills enable them to render a professional service to the children.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are being made based on the findings of the study:

- The Department of Basic Education should focus on policy concerning the appointment of school social workers in schools, especially guidelines with regard to their roles in schools.
- Uniform supervision should be provided, seeing that there are social workers in some provinces who do not receive guidance and support. It will also be helpful if there is a managerial structure of support at national level that can guide school social workers in provinces on policies, procedures and programmes.
- An annual conference for school social work should be held that would also assist in discussing and dealing with issues concerning school social work.
- School social work should be recognised as a specialised field in social work.
- Further investigation on the placement of school social workers in schools should be conducted, especially in provinces where there are currently no school social workers.
- Future research should be conducted that include writing guidelines on the duties of school social workers and the development of an orientation programme for newly appointed school social workers on what their responsibilities in schools are.

References

- Allen-Meares, P. 1977. "Analysis of Tasks in School Social Work." *Social Work* 22 (3): 196–201.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/22.3.196>.
- Braun, V., and V. Clark. 2013. *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. London: Sage.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Clark, K. 2007. "The Social Worker as Facilitator in Inclusive Education." Master's thesis, University of Stellenbosch.
- Cohen, L., L. Manion, and K. Morrison. 2007. *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge.
- Compton, B. R., B. Galaway, and B. R. Cournoyer. 2005. *Social Work Processes*. Belmont: Brooks/Cole Cengage Learning.
- Constable, R. T., and J. P. Flynn. 1982. *School Social Work Practice and Research Perspectives*. Illinois: Dorsey Press.
- Creswell, J. W. 2009. *Research Design. Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Daniel, P. S., and A. G. Sam. 2012. *Research Methodology*. Delhi: Chowla Offset Press.
- De Kock, C., C. van Kerckhove, and E. Vens. 2014. *Social Work in an International Perspective: History, Views, Diversity and Human Rights*. Antwerp: Garant Publishers.

- Delport, C. S. L., and A. S. de Vos. 2011. "Professional Research and Professional Practice." In *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 4th ed., edited by A. S. de Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouché and C. S. L. Delport, 45–60. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Delport, C. S. L., and W. J. H. Roestenburg. 2011. "Qualitative Data Collection Methods: Indexes and Scales." In *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 4th ed., edited by A. S. de Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouché and C. S. L. Delport, 88–99. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Denscombe, M. 2010. *The Good Research Guide for Small-Scale Social Research Projects*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Department of Basic Education. 2010a. *Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning*. Pretoria: DBE.
- Department of Basic Education. 2010b. *Care and Support for Teaching and Learning*. Pretoria: DBE.
- Department of Basic Education. 2014. *Inclusive Education Newsletter*. Wynberg: DBE.
- Department of Education. 2001. *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education. Building an Inclusive Education System*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Du Bois, B., and K. K. Miley. 2008. *Social Work: An Empowering Profession*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Fischer, R., S. V. Dillard, C. Sebian, C. Massat, S. Martin, S. Yeck, J. Raimes, P. Morton, and G. Thomas. 2007. *Student Services Providers: Recommended Practices and Procedures Manual: School Social Work Services*. Illinois: Illinois State Board of Education.
- Frey, A., and N. George-Nichols. 2003. "Intervention Practices for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: Using Research to Inform School Social Work Practice." *Children and Schools* 25 (2): 97–104. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/25.2.97>.
- Greeff, M. 2011. "Information Collection: Interviewing." In *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 4th ed., edited by A. S. de Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouché and C. S. L. Delport, 341–374. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Howitt, D. 2010. *Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Psychology*. England: Pearson Education.
- Huxtable, M., and E. Blyth. 2002. *School Social Work Worldwide*. Washington DC: NASW.
- Jonson-Reid, M., L. Davis, J. Saunders, T. Williams, and J. H. Williams. 2005. "Academic Self-Efficacy among African American Youths: Implications for School Social Work Practice." *Children and Schools* 27 (1): 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/27.1.5>.
- Jonson-Reid, M., D. Kontak, B. Citerman, A. Essma, and N. Fezzi. 2004. "School Social Work Case Characteristics, Services and Dispositions: Year One Results." *Children and Schools* 26 (1): 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/26.1.5>.
- Kelly, M. S. 2008. *The Domains and Demands of School Social Work Practice: A Guide Working Effectively with Students, Families and Schools*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Kemp, M. 2013. "School Social Work: Addressing the Social Barriers to Learning and Development in order to Ensure Educational Achievement." Accessed 14 August 2015.
<http://www.naswsa.co.za/conference2013/presentations/25%20September%202013%20-%20M%20Kemp%20%28School%20social%20work%29.pdf>.
- Kemp, R. 2014. "The Development of Management Guidelines for School Social Work in the Western Cape." PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape.
- Kemp, R. J., R. Kemp, E. Pretorius, and J. Avenant. 2015. "Application for School Social Work as a Specialization Area. A National Association of Social Workers SA Submission to the South African Council for Social Service Professions." The National Association of Social Workers SA.
- Lincoln, Y. S., and E. G. Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Magilvy, J. K., and E. Thomas. 2009. "A First Qualitative Project: Qualitative Descriptive Design for Novice Researchers." *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing* 14 (4): 298–300.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6155.2009.00212.x>.
- Merriam, S. B. 1998. *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*. California: Jossey-Bass.
- Mouton, J. 2001. *How to Succeed in Your Master's and Doctoral Studies*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- NASW (National Association of Social Workers). 1995. *Code of Ethics*. NASW Press.
- NASW (National Association of Social Workers). 2012. *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services*. NASW Press.
- Nel, N., M. Nel, and A. Hugo. 2013. *Learner Support in a Diverse Classroom: A Guide for Foundation, Intermediate and Senior Phase Teachers of Language and Mathematics*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Neuman, W. L. 2012. *Basics of Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Boston: Pearson.
- Nieuwenhuis, J. 2007. "Qualitative Research Designs and Data Gathering Techniques." In *First Steps in Research*, edited by K. Maree, 104–31. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Rheeders, E. F. 2010. "Die Omvang en Praktiese Uitvoerbaarheid van Ondersteunende Inklusiewe Onderwys in Publieke Laerskole in Gauteng" [The Scope and Practicality of Supporting Inclusive Education in Public Primary Schools in Gauteng]. PhD thesis, University of South Africa.
- Rubin, A., and E. Babbie. 2011. *Research Methods for Social Work*. 7th ed. Belmont: Brooks/Cole.
- Sandelowski, M. 2000. "Focus on Research Methods: Whatever Happened to Qualitative Description?" *Research in Nursing and Health* 23 (4): 334–340.
[https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240x\(200008\)23:4<334::aid-nur9>3.0.co;2-g](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240x(200008)23:4<334::aid-nur9>3.0.co;2-g).
- Scott, D., and M. Morrison. 2006. *Key Ideas in Educational Research*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Sederholm, G. H. 2003. *Counselling Young People in School*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Simmons Staff. 2014. "Theories Used in Social Work Practice and Practice Models." Accessed 16 October 2015. <https://socialwork.simmons.edu/theories-used-social-work-practice/>.
- Strydom, H. 2011. "Ethical Aspects of Research in the Social Sciences and Human Services Professions." In *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 4th ed., edited by A. S. de Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouché and C. S. L. Delpont, 113–29. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Swart, E. 2004. "Inclusive Education." In *Keys to Educational Psychology*, edited by I. Eloff and L. Ebersohn. Cape Town: UCT Press.
- Swart, S. 1997. *Riglyne vir die Effektiewe Bestuur van Skool Maatskaplike Werkers in die Wes-Kaapprovinsie* [Guidelines for the Effective Management of School Social Workers in the Western Cape Province]. Master's thesis, Stellenbosch University.
- Western Cape Education Department. 2010. *Guidelines for Full-Service/Inclusive Schools*. Cape Town: DBE.