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School Social Workers Preparation for Special Education Practice: An Exploratory Study

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School Social Workers Preparation for Special Education Practice: An Exploratory Study

Abstract

School social workers are designated as related service providers under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to support students with disabilities and their families. Despite this, state requirements for school or special education-specific training among social workers providing these services vary significantly. This mixed method study explored the potential impact of preservice training on school social workers' self-reported knowledge and skills to prepare them as related service providers. School social workers across the United States participated in an online survey to report knowledge and skills for special education practice upon beginning work in schools and at present. Analysis found a statistically significant difference in self-reported knowledge and skills for special education practice between school social workers who reported specific preservice training and those who did not. Findings highlight the potential importance of preservice training in special education to prepare social workers as related service providers in schools.

Keywords

school social work, special education, preservice training, related services provider

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Since the emergence of the visiting teacher in the early 1900's, school social workers (SSWs) have been a resource for students with medical and behavioral needs (Daftary, 2024; Shafer, 2007). As students with disabilities were increasingly included in less restrictive educational environments and schools were required to provide special education and related services, social workers were increasingly integrated into schools and School Social Work (SSW) became more associated with special education (Gherardi, 2017). As related service providers under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Sec. 300.34 (c) (14), school social workers prepare developmental histories, provide individual, family, and group counseling, and deliver resources and support to exceptional students, their families, and the school (2017).

The unique policy and practice implications of providing these services to students with disabilities within the context of schools and special education systems require substantive knowledge and skills that often exceeds those which masters of social work (MSW) students receive in their social work education (Knox et al., 2020). While SSWs are an integral resource for the most vulnerable students in schools, the reality is that many enter the field with limited knowledge of this population or the specific services they will be expected to provide them (Knox et al., 2020).

There has been robust debate about the appropriate nature of pre-service education for SSWs. Given the ongoing and increasing need to provide school-based services to students (Bains, 2017; Duong et al., 2021), restrictions which might limit the pool of qualified service providers do represent a consideration. At the same time, SSWs who work with special education students require unique and specific knowledge and skills; as such, they are likely to benefit from rigorous and specific training in their pre-service programs to understand and be knowledgeable about special education policies and procedures. In response to this debate, the current study explored SSWs perceived knowledge and preparation for practice in special education, the relationship between specific SSW or special education training and these factors through three specific research questions: 1) How do SSWs describe their knowledge of special education policy and their knowledge and skills for special education school social work upon beginning practice and currently? 2) What is the relationship between perceived knowledge and skills for special education SSW and pre-service training in school social work or special education? 3) What pre-service training needs or issues do current SSWs identify? We explore the answers to these questions through analysis of data

from an online survey disseminated to SSWs across the United States.

The School Social Work Landscape

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), in May of 2022 there were 51,550 SSWs employed in elementary or secondary education. This number accounts for all SSWs and does not differentiate between social workers hired to provide special education services, those hired to provide general education services, those who provide both, or those who fill other roles. Even though social workers are included as service providers on eligible student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) there is no data available to determine the number of students who receive this service (National Center for Special Education Research, personal communication, November 8, 2023).

Specialized Pre-Service Training

Given the large number of SSWs in the United States, there are relatively few opportunities for specific training in school social work. A review of accreditation information from the Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] (2024) found that 30 accredited programs across 15 states offer a degree in social work with specialized practice in SSW. However, 75 schools of social work across 24 states do offer school social work certificates and ten programs offer dual degrees in social work and education.

Although there is no set standard curriculum for a SSW certificate or specialization. Forenza & Eckhardt (2020) gathered data from SSWs to identify practice domains that are the most common school-based issues are encountered by SSW that include mental health and emotional regulation, truancy, special education, and risk behavior. Additionally, Forenza & Eckhardt (2020) found SSWs use individual counseling, group counseling and parent support to help students to address issues. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) outlined National School Social Work Standards in 2012, and the School Social Work Association of America has a National School Social Work Model (2012); however, no specific pre-service curriculum is suggested or required.

The pre-service requirements for state SSW licensure have evolved over the last decade. In 2020, Mitchell and colleagues found 18 states that require education-specific course work for SSWs, a number that was unchanged from previous years. Outside of specific course requirements, the study found 13 states required a specialization or certificate in SSW, an increase from zero in 2009. Unfortunately, there is little additional data regarding special education specific SSW pre-service requirements and states

vary substantially; some require specific coursework, internship experiences, and tests whereas others have no requirements at all.

An initial review of state SSW licensing requirements of special education preparation was conducted by the authors by examining websites for each state licensing board, and public education department. The minimum requirements for SSWs in twenty-five states do not include any school or special education-specific pre-service training. Seventeen states require a certificate, specialization, or coursework in school social work but do not require specific special education course content. Eight states have special education related pre-service course requirements. Although most SSW courses will cover special education content, the extent and quality of special education knowledge will vary significantly. This variability makes evaluation of SSW preparation upon entering the field complicated (Mitchell et al., 2020; Mumm & Bye, 2011). While such variability in preparation has been documented, the impact of this variability on knowledge and skills for practice both upon beginning in the field and later in a SSWs career has not been well-documented.

The Impact of Pre-Service Training

Literature exploring the impact of pre-service training (or the lack thereof) on specific school social work skills or competencies is limited. Research has supported that SSWs trained for generalist practice enter the field with a skillset apt to coordinate IEPs, assist with transition planning for students with disabilities, facilitate group work, grief work, and crisis intervention, and engage in policy practice (Cox et al. 2021; Phillippo et al., 2017). However, the direct services, engagement strategies, and Evidence-Based Practices SSWs engage in vary significantly, and are dependent on training, experience, and length of time in the field (DeCarlo Santiago et al., 2014).

The literature suggests there are gaps in SSW preparation, competency and efficacy in some areas, many of which have strong links to special education-related services. Kopels et al. (2022) highlighted the need for SSWs to be knowledgeable in direct observation of behavior combined with the use of standardized assessments to evaluate and support the social-emotional concerns of students, a critical role in the special education referral process; this training is unlikely to be found in generalist preparation. In regard to how SSWs use data to identify interventions or evaluation practice, Lucio et al. (2024) found inconsistent use of data among SSWs to inform their practice, and that SSWs tend to choose interventions based on experience. Importantly, this study highlighted the need for training, resources, and consistency in data collection expectations for fidelity of intervention and services.

Some research has specifically highlighted the gaps in special education preparedness among SSWs. To investigate the impact of pre-service preparation and school social worker perceptions of competency, Knox and colleagues (2020) surveyed SSWs in New Mexico (a state which has no specific pre-service training requirement). They found that SSWs reported being markedly unprepared for practice upon entry into the field and that they specifically identified special education policy and disability-specific practice knowledge as significant gaps.

Further, SSWs should be well versed on how special education students are impacted by the school to prison pipeline, as research shows that students who are on probation are over-represented as having special education needs. Additionally, they may be at greater risk for mental health related issues, low self-regulation skills and higher rates of recidivism; as such, school-based personnel should be knowledgeable and trained in IDEA related policies (Kim et al., 2021). Importantly, responses to the incongruencies between social work training and school district working conditions have included calls for school social work mentorship programs, internship exposure to the school social work special education services, and increased training in school social work role definition, behavioral intervention plans, school culture, education law, and special education, and diagnoses (Evans et al., 2022; Phillippo et al., 2017).

The literature reviewed suggests three concurrent realities. First, many (if not most) SSW provide some level of service to students with disabilities or provide special education related services. Second, many SSWs provide these services with little to no specific training in school social work or special education upon entering the field, and third, research has documented gaps between the skills required of SSWs and those for which they are trained in the pre-service period. Given these realities, the current study explored SSWs' perceptions of their own knowledge and skills in the areas of special education policy and practice. We examine both retrospective perceptions of their knowledge/skills upon beginning practice and current perceptions of their knowledge/skills in light of reported pre-service training, probing the relationship between pre-service training and self-reported knowledge/skills for special education practice among SSWs.

Method

To explore SSW perceived knowledge and skills for special education related services, an exploratory mixed methods study surveyed SSWs across the United States. The intent of the survey was to (1) assess their perceived

knowledge and skills for special education services upon beginning practice and currently, (2) to explore the relationship between these perceptions and pre-service preparation, and (3) to gather SSW perspectives on pre-service preparation needs in the field.

Sample

This study analyzed data from a national survey that was collected from November 2022 to June 2023 in which N=238 completed responses were collected. Emails to both formal and informal SSW networks, and an active link on social media pages of state associations of social work or SSW recruited participants. Survey links were posted via national SSW organizations of the American Council for School Social Work, SSWAA, and the NASW forum. Survey responses were expected to take 20-30 minutes to complete. Table 1 includes demographic information from the survey sample; table 2 reflects the breakdown of responses by state. In addition to demographic and location information, the survey assessed the degree to which participants engaged in direct special education services as part of an IEP and whether this was their exclusive role (14% of respondents), whether they provided these services in conjunction with general education services (46% of respondents), or whether they did not provide direct services as part of an IEP (40%).

Table 1
Participant Characteristics (N= 237)

Licensure/Credential	N	Percentage
MSW	69	29
LCSW	101	42.4
LSW	38	16
LBSW	2	.8
Other	21	8.8
Not Licensed	6	2.5
Years Social Work	N	Percentage
6-10 years	41	17.3
0-5 years	48	20.2
11-15 years	40	16.9
16+ years	108	45.6
Years School Social Work	N	Percentage
0-5 years	98	41.3
11-15 years	30	12.7

6-10 years	47	19.8
16+ years	62	26.2
Race/Ethnicity	N	Percentage
Caucasian	181	76
African/African American	24	10
Hispanic/Latino/Latinx	24	10
Native American	3	1
Asian	3	1
Pacific Islander	0	0
Multi-racial	6	3
Prefer not to respond	4	2
Gender	N	Percentage
Male	12	5.1
Female	222	93.7
Transgender	1	.4
Non-Binary	3	1.3
Prefer not to respond	0	0
Other	0	0

Table 2
Responses by State

State	N	Percentage
IL	68	29
GA	54	23
NM	33	14
NH	10	4
CO, NY, NC	6	2.5 (each)
CA, MI, KY	4	1.7 (each)
PA, ME, TN, MD, NE, OR	3	1.2 (each)
NJ, IA, KS, VA, WI, CT, IN, MO	2	.8 (each)
DC, UT, TX, AZ, NV, WA, WV, LA	1	.4 (each)

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were asked to complete a survey about their pre-service training in SSW and special education that prepared them to work as a special education related service provider. The researchers developed the exploratory survey to gain feedback from current SSWs in the United States about their knowledge of special education policies, and their knowledge/skills for special

education practice when they were first hired and at present. The researchers reviewed the survey for clarity and content, undergoing three revisions prior to distribution. Survey items included both closed ended/Likert scale and open-ended questions to allow for both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Likert scale items utilized a 5-point scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=neither agree or disagree, 4=somewhat agree, and 5=strongly agree. Using this scale respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the following four statements: (1) I felt I had the requisite knowledge of special education policies to provide services in this area when I was first hired. (2) I felt I had the requisite knowledge and skills to deliver special education services to students when I was first hired. (3) I currently feel I have the knowledge and skills of special education policies to provide services in this area. (4) I currently feel I have the knowledge and skills to deliver special education services to students.

Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics to reflect participant demographics and state of origin and descriptive statistics reflecting the sample's reported experiences with specific training or education in SSW or special education. Descriptive statistics reflecting participant responses to the four key questions assessing perceptions of their policy knowledge and knowledge/skills for practice in SSW and special education were also calculated. Independent sample t-tests were run to assess for significant differences in perceived policy knowledge and knowledge/skills for practice between participants who reported pre-service training in SSW versus those who reported none and those who reported pre-service training in special education versus those who reported none.

The Qualitative portion was composed of one open-ended question to understand participant experiences of needs in the field. Participants responded to the question: what suggestions do you have for preparation and practice for school social workers in special education? Once the open-ended responses were collected, the transcript was read several times in their entirety to gain an overall perspective of the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the transcripts were read, the authors identified emerging themes in the data. The authors used thematic analysis to categorize and sort the participant responses into four themes to capture the essence of preparation needs for school social workers (Roulston, 2010).

Results

Overall, respondents represented a range of experiences regarding pre-service training. Less than half reported any specific training in school social work. Of those, approximately one-third reported a concentration in school social work

while 40 and 46 percent respectively reported a SSW course or an internship in a school. A larger number of respondents reported some training in special education (approximately 63%); of this, 71 percent reported a special education course while approximately 29% reported a special education internship. Table 3 reflects experiences with pre-service training in either SSW or special education among the entire sample.

Table 3
Pre-Service Training

	N	Percentage
Reported School Social Work Training		
Yes	99	41.8
No	138	58.2
Type of SSW Training		
SSW Concentration	80	33.5
SSW Course	94	40
Internship in School	109	46
Other	6	2.5
Reported SPED Training		
Yes	149	62.9
No	88	37.1
Type of SPED Training		
SPED course	169	71.3
SPED internship	68	28.6
Other	10	4.1

Table 4 illustrates the mean responses on Likert scale items across the entire sample. Results suggest that participants felt unprepared in the areas of policy and practice for special education upon beginning their careers in this field (means below 3) although they felt more prepared at present (means between 3.5-4).

Table 4
Perceived Knowledge and Preparation for Practice

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
SPED policy knowledge first hired	245	2.66	1.43
Knowledge/skills to provide service first hired	245	2.96	1.40
Current SPED policy knowledge	245	3.97	1.31
Current knowledge/skills to provide service	246	3.74	1.48

T-tests assessed the potential impact of specific pre-service SSW training

and pre-service training in special education on perceived knowledge and preparation for practice by comparing sub-samples of respondents who reported such training with those that did not. There was a significant difference in perceived knowledge and preparation for practice (both initial and currently) between those who reported pre-service and SSW and those that did not (Table 5); similarly, there was a significant difference in perceived knowledge and preparation for practice (initially and currently) between those who reported pre-service training in special education and those who did not (Table 6).

Table 5*Independent Samples T-Test School Social Work Pre-Service Training*

	Training N	Training Mean	No Training N	No Training Mean	One-tailed p value
Training and SPED Policy Knowledge Upon First hire	138	3.18	99	2.14	<.0001
Training and Knowledge/skills for Practice Upon First Hire	138	3.30	99	2.73	.0006
Training and SPED Policy Knowledge Current	138	4.30	99	3.83	.0005
Training and Knowledge/skills for Practice Current	138	4.16	100	3.46	<.0001

Table 6*Independent Samples T-Test Special Education Pre-Service Training*

	Training N	Training Mean	No Training N	No Training Mean	One-tailed p value
Training and SPED Policy Knowledge Upon First hire	88	3.61	149	2.23	<.0001

Training and Knowledge/skills for Practice Upon First Hire	88	3.64	149	2.72	<.0001
Training and SPED Policy Knowledge Current	88	4.45	149	3.90	<.0001
Training and Knowledge/skills for Practice Current	88	4.40	149	3.55	<.0001

Qualitative Findings: SSW Recommendations

Themes emerged in the qualitative data for suggestions to improve preparation and practice for social workers in special education. Participants recommended pre-service content in (1) the IEP process and services, (2) intervention and special education social work skills, (3) coursework and training on special education law, policies, and procedures, (4) specialized pre-service training through coursework or practicum placements.

Specific knowledge should include learning about the IEP process, disability categories, document writing, goal setting and typical scope of social work services included in an IEP. Participants suggested beginning SSWs should be competent and knowledgeable with Multiple Tired Systems of Support (MTSS) processes and interventions that schools may utilize when a student is struggling academically, behaviorally or emotionally. Pre-service programs should prepare SSWs in appropriate culturally responsive assessments or testing procedures social workers may use in the educational setting including Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP) or Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA). Respondents discussed additional pre-service training for specific interventions that are evidence based to support exceptional students with diagnoses such as autism, behavior intervention skills, threat assessments and de-escalation.

Participants overwhelmingly identified a need for pre-service programs to include SPED policy, law, and regulations in both the BSW and MSW curriculum for proficiency. Furthermore, respondents suggested that additional course work in special education, a minor, or specialization in school social work with an emphasis in special education should be included in pre-service requirements. Specialized

field placements supporting exceptional students should be required for those who intend to work as a special education related service provider. Respondents suggested that participation in professional organizations such as a state school social work association, NASW, or SSWAA are helpful to gain more exposure to school social work-based networks and training.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the perceived special education knowledge and skills for practice in special education among SSWs upon entering the field and at present. The survey data reflected that SSWs, regardless of training, did not feel they had adequate policy knowledge or knowledge/skills for special education practice upon entering the field. While overall perceptions of knowledge and skill improved over time, they were significantly lower for those who reported no specialized pre-service preparation both upon entry into the field and at present. The data from this sample suggests that pre-service training experience in either/both SSW and/or special education was substantially and persistently (over time) associated with improved self-reported knowledge and skills for special education practice among SSWs.

The data presents several important conclusions. First, self-reported policy knowledge and preparation for special education practice among SSWs upon entering the field is alarmingly low. The findings can have a substantial impact on service delivery in the field if SSWs are not adequately prepared to provide related services to special needs students. SSWs without pre-service training may take weeks, months or even years to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to feel confident and competent in special education knowledge and policies. As a result, the time delay for training may impede quality related services support for students and families.

Second, self-reported policy knowledge and preparation for special education practice among SSWs at present is concerningly low for those who reported no specialized pre-service training. Mean scores in this group did not even reflect agreement with the statement that they had the knowledge and skills necessary for practice. The difference in self-reported knowledge and preparation between those with no specialized practice and those who do implies pre-service learning is critical for readiness to provide specialized social work services for special needs students. Although SSWs self-reported knowledge improved over time, there was still a significant difference in perceived knowledge and preparation in special education $p \leq .0001$ to support special needs students for those that had special education specific training and those that did not. In other words, the lack of special education specific pre-service experience continues to impact perceived knowledge and preparation, even with time and training.

These outcomes echo findings from previous research suggesting that SSWs report substantial limitations in special education policy knowledge and knowledge/skills for practice with special education student populations (Knox et al., 2020). Current findings suggest specific pre-service course work related to school social work, which incorporates special education policy, assessment, knowledge and evidenced based practices can be used to support special needs students and families. Participants stated they wished they had in-depth knowledge prior to beginning work as a SSW in IEPs, writing goals and objectives for special need students, FBA, BIP, IDEA, special education law and policy, disability category eligibility, and EBP for special needs students. Even though respondents stated they felt their pre-service program did not prepare them to support special needs students, they felt well-prepared to be a social worker.

Given the limited and inconsistent requirements across states for pre-service knowledge in special education, and limited access to social work programs that enhance special education competency for related service providers, this is a call for social work programs to give attention to knowledge and skills for special education services. SSWs spend substantial time and effort to support special needs students and their families in schools (Phillippo et al., 2017), and as such social workers should be prepared when beginning work as a school social worker, or related service provider.

Limitations

Though this study provides important information regarding special education pre-service exposure to a SSW's knowledge, skills and readiness to provide special education social work services upon hire and over time, this study has several limitations. Given the survey's exploratory nature, survey questions may not fully reflect the pre-service experience of all respondents. Individuals may have received specific SSW or special education training in more generalized coursework or through personal or other experience. Secondly, because the survey was based on self-report, it is possible that participant responses were over or under inflated based on individual experiences and differences. Finally, differing SSW roles and experiences with special education across the sample are important to consider. While 60% of the sample provided direct special education services either exclusively or as part of their role, 40% of the sample did not provide these services. While this is likely to limit their responses regarding their perceived special education policy knowledge or their perceived preparation for special education practice, it is also important to consider the reality that all SSWs are likely to engage with students with disabilities and special education systems in some capacity.

Knowing this, special education policy knowledge and practice skills are critical for SSWs to fulfil their roles as effective advocates in the school setting, even when they are not responsible for providing direct IEP services.

Conclusion

Social work pre-service programs provide limited opportunity for students to become proficient in special education knowledge and skills that will prepare them to be related providers for special needs students and families in schools. Although these findings are alarming, this is an opportunity for schools of social work to enhance their pre-service programs to prepare all social work students regardless of their intention for SSW to have the basic knowledge and preparation to support special needs students in school from the onset of hire.

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