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**EXPERTS IN THE ROOM: ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY IN
SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK AROUND CHICAGO**

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Abstract

The American public school system is facing a severe shortage of school social workers, such that the country employs only one of these professionals for every two elementary and middle schools. Because school social workers are less common on school grounds than faculty, administrators, or even counselors, educational institutions often lack organizational knowledge of their roles and responsibilities, making school social workers particularly prone to being misunderstood and overworked. This investigation draws upon organizational sociology theories and interview data to assess not only the degree to which school social workers are misunderstood throughout the school day, but also whether and how these individuals revise their colleagues' inaccurate impressions of school social work. Nine school social workers from around the Chicago area and one education researcher participated in semi-structured interviews, lending perspectives which I analyzed via hand-coding. Their testimonies reveal that misunderstandings of school social work are highly dependent on the organizational context of a school – further, the school social workers interviewed described a variety of strategies for preventing or mitigating misunderstanding, such as politely correcting the offending party, passing out handbooks at the start of the school year, or disavowing their job description entirely. This study concludes with a series of policy recommendations designed to increase the awareness and understanding of school social work among school staff.

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Introduction

“I feel like, in my 30 years, I’ve tried to keep a humble framework of understanding on my role. In other words, I don’t think I’m that rigid. Now, I have seen peers where their rigidity got in the way. Just because a social worker thinks their role is this- if the other people in the building thinks it’s something else, well, shit, what good is it?”-

Mr. Robinson, school social worker

Recent reports from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) indicate that in May of 2020, almost 46,000 school social workers were providing services to students in public elementary and middle schools. Given that the American public school system contains over 90,000 schools, this amounts to roughly one school social worker for every two public schools in the nation. As a result, school social workers are often overloaded with high caseloads and mountains of paperwork, particularly in schools and school districts without a large supply of school social workers on staff. Further, school social workers are one of many auxiliary positions in schools – like counselors or psychologists, they are less ubiquitous than teachers or administrators. Existing work, such as that of Blake (2020), posits that counselors are particularly prone to being misunderstood or overlooked by the school community; no analogous investigation exists for school social workers, who are even more sparse in the American public school system and, as a result, perhaps at greater risk of being misunderstood by their colleagues.

Research within the tradition of organizational sociology, namely that of Biddle (1986) and Rizzo (1970), has examined how actors within organizations, such as schools, understand and cooperate with one another. These scholars elaborate the concepts of role conflict and ambiguity, which describe stressful experiences in which one’s responsibilities are misunderstood, contested, or left up in the air (Biddle 1986, Rizzo 1970), Sell et al. 1981). However, almost no research has been dedicated solely to how school social workers navigate

role conflict or ambiguity on school grounds. Given the fact that school social workers are already few and far between, ensuring that these professionals feel respected and valued within schools is of the utmost importance.

The following inquiry represents one of the first examinations of role conflict and ambiguity which is focused solely on school social workers. Interview data from 9 Chicago-area school social workers and one education scholar is used to explore the frequency of role misunderstandings, as well as how these individuals navigate and negotiate their responsibilities in tandem with the expectations of their colleagues. In doing so, this research not only illuminates the experience of a profession not thoroughly examined by sociologists, but also provides insight into how specialized actors – that is, those with highly specific and less ubiquitous roles – make themselves known within their organizations.

Theoretical Framework

Role Conflict and Ambiguity

A wealth of foundational sociological research has studied the structure of human interaction within organizational contexts. In particular, the study of *role theory* is illuminative in understanding social dynamics within organizations. Biddle (1986) identified role theory's primary concern as "patterned and characteristic social behaviors," as well as the identities adopted by social participants and the expectations that others impress upon them in an interaction (p. 68). Roles, then, describe a combination of these phenomena – an organizational actor adopts particular identities and behaviors in response to the expectations placed upon their position by their peers. Ideally, organizational actors have "consensual expectations" of each other's roles, such that they understand and agree to the responsibilities and codes of conduct

unique to each other's place in the organization (p. 76-77). However, the existence of "distinct and incompatible" expectations between actors can result in *role conflict*, or the "concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations" of an actor's behavior (p. 82). Role conflict can create stress among organizational actors whose role is disputed, forcing them to iron out contested or vague responsibilities while continuing to perform them – as such, they must carry definitional labor alongside their professional duties (82). Undergoing such an episode of role conflict can thus cause great stress, affecting worker morale and their ability to effectively serve their organization (Rizzo 1970, p. 151). Key here is the notion that role conflict is harmful on both individual and organizational levels: actors undergo personal duress when their role is under contention, affecting their ability to assist organizational functions and stability.

Similar effects can be observed when role descriptions are unclear or difficult to interpret, manifesting in what Sell et al. (1981) identify as *role ambiguity* (p. 44). They conceptualize role conflict and ambiguity as functions of microinteractions between actors, as well as the broader organizational context in which roles are created and understood – such organizational factors include "structure, level in the organization, role requirements, task characteristics, physical settings, and organizational practices" which, in turn, affect the way two actors interact and negotiate their roles (p. 46). As such, role conflict and ambiguity are not strictly localized to working relationships between colleagues - they are functions of organizational structure and practice (while these terms are not interchangeable, this investigation will occasionally refer to them in conjunction as *role misunderstanding* for the sake of being concise). This application of role theory is commonly applied to contexts such as education, where employees have highly specialized duties and work towards a common interest: educating students. In particular,

Bacharach (1986) notes that school staff are forced to assert their individual expertise and credentials within highly bureaucratic systems aiming to standardize and streamline operations. As such, understandings of staff roles are inextricable from organizational context, and are rooted in much more than “idiosyncrasies of individuals” and their relationships (p. 27).

Schools as Organizations

The work of Bidwell (2001) constructs the school as an object of organizational sociology, emphasizing how its formal and informal characteristics permeate working relationships between faculty, staff, and students. Bidwell characterizes schools as “organic institutions” which, instead of featuring a distinct number of offices, have “an informal and adaptively changing division of labor” alongside “formal hierarchies by networks” (p. 105). In other words, while educational institutions do feature stable hierarchies – such as principals possessing more authority than teachers – roles and duties are always changing according to school resources such as time, funding, and staff availability. As organic institutions, schools organize themselves around a series of informal relationships which reinforce the set-in-stone structure of the organization. However, standards are also informal – the instructional goals of schools are often “multiple and changing” as a function of the “complex of group interests in curricular content, instructional methods, and academic performance,” as well as the decentralization of American education (p. 105). As such, school staff “usually work in the absence of well-specified methods and clear standards” - such practices are created through the sorts of informal relationships which characterize organic institutions (p. 105). While longstanding codes of conduct exist, they are interpreted on the ground through day-to-day, informal interactions between staff members.

Organizational structure is, in a way, undergoing constant improvisation according to the moment-to-moment availability of resources.

Because negotiations regarding roles and responsibilities occur within informal networks between staff members, those in schools may be especially prone to the role conflict and ambiguity described by Biddle (1986), Rizzo (1970), and Sell et al. (1981). However, literature on school organization rarely connects schools' unique lack of consistent standards to the possibility of role ambiguity. Further, those working in schools operate under their work site's particular understanding of roles and interaction, reflecting and reinforcing organizational characteristics through their day-to-day interactions with others. Bidwell (2001) notes that educational organizations draw stability from "small, informal problem-solving social systems" between organizational members like teachers and administrators (p. 105). These networks, in turn, lend stability to the whole school by protecting its organization from external changes or shocks. Given that informal staff networks have the potential to sustain the organizational structure of schools, the interpersonal dynamics of staff interactions are worthy objects of study – in particular, the possibility of role conflict or ambiguity emerging within such networks and posing a threat to staff satisfaction and organizational stability warrants further investigation. Indeed, surveyed school staff frequently report occurrences of role conflict and ambiguity within their informal networks. Noting that "role conflict and ambiguity in various professions significantly affect job performance and personal stress," Schwab & Iwanicki (1982) examined the link between issues of role understanding and burnout among teachers (p. 62). Their findings indicated a significant correlation between one having their role contested or misunderstood and experiencing "emotional exhaustion" related to the school politics of negotiating their role (70-71). Thus, role conflict and ambiguity are critical for understanding staff morale within

educational institutions – informal networks between faculty and staff can strengthen the school on the whole, but present perpetual dangers for misunderstandings and conflicts in regard to roles and expectations.

Examinations of how role conflict and ambiguity play out on the ground in educational settings has produced fascinating research, particularly in regard to auxiliary professionals such as school social workers, counselors, and psychiatrists. Often dubbed paraprofessionals, these specialists serve to support and uplift students both inside and outside of the classroom.

However, work in role theory has often neglected to account for these individuals, opting to instead focus on faculty. While these investigations are undoubtedly important, their lack of focus on paraprofessionals is puzzling, given their unique positions in school hierarchies.

Because employees like counselors or social workers are neither faculty members nor administrators, they occupy extremely specialized roles which are in limbo between the largest sectors of educational employees. Despite the opportunity to investigate these unique positions in schools, a focus on role conflict and ambiguity among paraprofessionals is difficult to find within the literature. What does exist is incredibly informative – the fieldwork of Blake (2020) reveals high degrees of role ambiguity between school social workers and counselors, with the latter frequently contending with unclear job descriptions and overlap with other paraprofessionals. Here, counselors reported a “thin line separating the roles of social workers and [themselves]” such that the true role of a paraprofessional was often murky, leading both counselors and social workers to feel underutilized in different ways at various times (p. 321). While such work on paraprofessionals is few and far between, even less research can be found regarding the appearance of role conflict and ambiguity among *school social workers* – the

development of such knowledge is critical, as school social workers already face high levels of stress in the workplace, as well as labor shortages among their professional peers.

The Case of School Social Workers

Research like that of Blake (2020) provides a fascinating look into how role conflict and ambiguity operate within networks of paraprofessionals; however, it also highlights an even larger gap in the literature. Little to no research exists about how *school social workers*, rather than school counselors, experience and navigate role ambiguity within educational settings. This is of particular concern because, as the previously presented research notes, educational professionals (1) are prone to role conflict and ambiguity, and (2) report higher levels of unproductivity, unhappiness, and burnout when undergoing duress in regard to their roles. Further, the positions of school social workers are even more specialized than that of faculty or administrators; it may be less common for school staff to know and understand the role of a school social worker in the same way that they might understand teachers, principals, or even counselors.

Even without role conflict or ambiguity, school social workers occupy a particularly precarious position. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) estimated that, in May of 2020, only 45,960 school social workers were actively operating within primary and secondary schools. Just two years before, the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) reported that there were 91,290 public schools throughout the country, leaving approximately one social worker for every *two* public schools. Although crude, this calculation suggests a shortage of school social workers relative to the amount of primary and secondary schools in the United States; compare this estimate to that of Bastien et al. (2019) who, on behalf of the School Social Work Association of America, recommend that schools provide one social worker for every 250

students in the building. Although little data exists on the exact distribution of school social workers, it is reasonable to assume that their presence falls along previously researched lines of academic inequity across America, following the research of scholars such as Owen (1972).

The shortage of school social workers is no less severe in the greater Chicago area. Ballew (2019) recently reported that Chicago Public Schools, the city's largest public school district, employed only 346 full-time school social workers for its nearly 300,000 students in 2019. Their analysis highlights testimonies from CPS school social workers, many of whom express emotional burnout, exhaustion, and even the development of post-traumatic stress disorder from dealing high caseloads of trauma-affected students. Such a shortage has been recognized by state leadership, with bills like the Illinois General Assembly's (2021) SB0661 proposing scholarships that incentivize students of school social work to complete their certifications and enter the workforce.

Combatting this crisis in school social work is critical to the health of students around the country. According to Hoffman (2017), school social work is an important, indispensable intervention for students who benefit from individualized education programs (IEPs); as such, school social workers' main responsibility centers around the delivery of social-emotional learning. Although the term can refer to a wide variety of strategies and orientations towards social work, social-emotional learning generally refers to programs which help students increase their emotional awareness, form positive relationships with others, and navigate difficult social situations. The work of school social workers extends even beyond students in need of individualized plans – Hoffman emphasizes that when social-emotional learning programs are generalized and accessible to an entire school, the whole community benefits from a systematic approach to developing skills for navigating academic and emotional stress. As such, school

social workers play a vital role in caring not only for students who require individualized learning plans, but also the social-emotional health of the entire school.

Given the function of school social workers and their scarcity within the American public school system, researchers of role theory should be particularly concerned about how comfortable these professionals feel in their role and amongst their colleagues. However, despite the empirical research illustrating shortages of school social workers, almost no research covers how they experience and navigate role misunderstandings. The literature acknowledges these phenomena as problems but, rather than investigating them directly, stresses the need for collaboration between individuals whose roles might already be subject to confusion. This research is indeed helpful – for example, Lynn (2003) proposes an ecological model which posits each staff member as being equipped to serve the needs of students in their own unique way. In this model, teachers are involved “in every aspect of school-based mental health care for students” (p. 198). This combines the strongest attributes that both professionals bring to the table – while teachers have the most direct contact with students, classroom interventions based on social work principles are often “too complex for [them] to implement independently” or “too distinct from standard educational practice” (p. 201). As such, combining the expertise of school social workers and faculty provides an ecological, collaborative perspective towards providing more effective and efficient social-emotional care. Similarly, Bronstein & Abramson (2003) write that school social workers are “outsiders in the school setting” and thus must collaborate with teachers in order to effectively serve students (p. 324). Because both kinds of professionals operate within a bureaucratic setting and are oriented towards serving students above all else, school social workers and teachers can uplift each other’s work by lending each other their own unique toolkits, inside and outside of the classroom, for social-emotional labor and teaching (p.

328). These models present innovative ways to approach collaboration between school staff; however, they do not account for how school social workers perceive their own roles. In other words, they lay an excellent model over a shaky foundation rather than addressing role conflict and ambiguity at their sources.

Those experiencing role conflict or role ambiguity may not benefit from merely more teamwork; further, they may not even be interested in alleviating role conflict or ambiguity on an organizational level. The work of Allen-Meares (1994) illustrates that school social workers greatly prioritize meeting with students, running groups, and developing programs over more bureaucratic tasks, such as policymaking or advocating for their *own* legitimacy and position within the school setting. Thus, school social workers are much more interested in conducting their work than defending it against a bureaucracy which homogenizes standards of practice. If the previously listed research is any indication then, despite this desire to put their time and energy towards students, school social workers may be forced to contend with role conflict or ambiguity which hinders their ability to work effectively. This has the potential to create a disconnect between what a social worker *wants* to do and what they *must* do in order to function at their optimal levels.

This disconnect is best understood in the context of street-level bureaucracy, a concept popularized by Lipsky (1980). Educational professionals such as teachers or school social workers can be thought of as *street-level bureaucrats*, as they enact education policy through extended interactions with the clients of their organizations – namely, students. These individuals are endowed with a particular discretion in how to perform their work, as settings like classrooms require particular and personal attention to individual emotional needs. However, the discretion of street-level bureaucrats can be significantly constrained in the face of resource

strain – in the case of school social workers, this often manifests in the form of high caseloads and an accompanying mountain of paperwork. Thus, the various avenues for social work practice can be limited by the resources a school social worker has on hand; when caseloads are high, one may have less time to meet with students and devise creative strategies for their success.

However, a school social worker's time and energy can be depleted by more abstract constraints – role misunderstanding can be understood as a form of resource inadequacy. School social workers' main responsibility is to conduct student-facing, social-emotional work within the school community; however, having to demarcate the boundaries of one's role may result in less time, energy, and immediate support from understanding colleagues with which to serve students. Such resource strain is, again, exacerbated by the small number of school social workers relative to students in the American public school system. When these professionals must distribute their time and discretion between large numbers of students, there exists little to no room for negotiating job responsibilities with school colleagues.

Although the following investigation is tailored to the experience of school social workers, it also aims to investigate more general phenomena within organizational sociology. As previously noted, school social workers occupy specialized roles which do not fit neatly into faculty, administration, or other large professional categories typically associated with schools. While most of a school's staff is likely to be familiar with the role of a teacher, excavating the exact boundaries which demarcate school social work may be less straightforward – this notion is especially pertinent given that school social workers are in short supply, and thus anything but universal. What results from the relative rarity of school social workers is a lack of organizational knowledge about how school social workers spend their days, interact with children, and, most importantly, navigate the division of educational labor with their colleagues.

As such, these professionals present a unique opportunity to examine how organizations understand and employ highly specialized individuals, particularly those whose purpose may not be common knowledge to all involved. When school social workers take preventative or corrective action towards role conflict or ambiguity, they reveal how highly specialized professionals broadly respond to incidents of role misunderstanding within organizational settings. In other words, this research intends to accurately portray the perspectives of school social workers while relating their experiences to broader studies of organizational relations and role theory.

In summary, organizational sociology has noted the dangers of role conflict and ambiguity for organizational actors – those whose roles are in contention may experience high levels of stress, burnout, or other emotional duress related to the ease of effectively performing their duties. These effects have been observed in educational settings such as public schools, yet little research has focused entirely on how school social workers navigate being misunderstood. This is a particularly problematic gap given national shortages of school social workers, who may be at increased risk for role conflict and ambiguity given (1) their specialized role and (2) a lack of institutional knowledge about school social work, a fact facilitated by the rarity of school social workers compared to teaching staff, administrators, or even school counselors. Given that school social workers are already few and far between compared to other paraprofessionals, a study of their experience regarding role understanding is long overdue.

This study attempts to bridge the divide between studies of role misunderstanding and empirical research regarding the low numbers and morale of school social workers. By analyzing school-employee relations through a lens lent by organizational sociology, the research interrogates the informal networks surrounding school social workers and reveals how such

professionals locate, understand, and solve role misunderstandings in their work site. In doing so, it contributes a new understanding of specialized roles to the study of misunderstandings, conflict, and ambiguity within role theory.

Data & Methods

To explore the strategies school social workers use to mitigate or prevent role misunderstandings, I collected data on their experiences via interview methods. I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with school social workers and scholars of education within Chicagoland. 3 of these individuals work or worked within the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) district, while 6 operate in independent school districts outside of CPS. Of the non-CPS school social workers, 2 are stationed within a suburb west of downtown Chicago, and the remaining 4 work in the north suburbs of the city. In addition, I conducted one interview with an education professor who currently teaches at a major university in the Chicago area. All interviews took place over Zoom. Each conversation lasted between 20 and 45 minutes; all but one was recorded via Zoom, with a single interview being recorded via handwritten notes. Interviewees were contacted via cold emailing; I combed the websites of various schools within and outside of CPS, pulling all contact information for school social workers and emailing them a brief recruitment script.¹

¹ The project's population of interest was initially limited to school social workers within CPS. However, recruitment challenges – including legal barriers and the time of year – made it nearly impossible to reach and interview CPS employees. The population of interest thus shifted to school social workers in the suburbs surrounding the city. I aimed to interview professionals from all corners of the Chicagoland suburbs, but only received responses from a handful of school social workers, particularly those in the aforementioned north and west districts.

The interview data was analyzed via a process of hand coding. An artificial intelligence algorithm, courtesy of Otter.ai, was used to transcribe each interview audio file; manual adjustments were made when the algorithm failed to properly mirror interviewees' responses. I then read over each transcript, making mental notes of any themes which emerged in previous conversations. After an initial readthrough and comparison to prior interviews, I took a deep dive into each transcript and coded the responses with a legend and various highlighter colors. After coding was complete, a memo with a brief summary and analysis of the interviewee's responses was appended to the transcript.

This inquiry is centered around how the perception of school social workers affects their ability to adequately provide services to students; as a result, collecting and coding data interview data was the most appropriate methodological approach. Central to my research interest is whether school social workers feel respected and able to perform their duties within the workplace – thus, lending a spotlight to their unique perspectives was the highest priority of the project. The synthesis of the following interview findings provides a look into the work and perspectives of Chicagoland school social workers.

Results

Level of Understanding

The school social workers within the sample reported that the understanding of school social work on the part of faculty and administration was highly dependent on the school's organizational characteristics; when factors such as the time allotted to teachers (a function of school size) and department-wide connections to social work varied, the overall understanding of

school social work wavered in tandem. In addition, the organizational context surrounding a school social worker had a significant effect on whether their own perception of their work matched that of their colleagues. Mr. Stevens, a school social worker within CPS, testified that his faculty and administration “definitely do seem to have a strong grasp” of what social workers, such as himself, should do within the building. He attributes this comprehension to the previous occupant in his role, noting: “I have to thank our other social worker who was there before me... she was really good at setting those boundaries and being like, ‘this is what my job means, this is what should be outside my job.’” Mr. Stevens directly attributes these conversations to the fact that there were “very few times last year” when faculty or administration “asked [him] to do something that kind of felt out of [his] zone of operation.” Mr. Stevens thus notes a through-line between the previous social worker’s quest for mutual understanding and his own balance at work. Although brief, his short expression of gratitude towards the previous social worker reflects an implicit satisfaction with other employees’ near-complete comprehension of what role a school social worker fulfills. Such a sentiment reveals the importance of informal networks within the work site’s organization – because the previous social worker was adept at setting boundaries with other staff members, many have retained an accurate understanding of how school social workers fit into their networks. As a result, Mr. Stevens can navigate any role misunderstanding with ease.

Similarly, non-CPS school social worker Ms. Harris noted that despite frequent administrative turnover in her work site, she doesn’t feel “dumped on at all” by administrators who need to offload ad hoc tasks onto specialists. Further, she claimed, “I don’t feel as though I’m being pulled in a bunch of directions,” immediately adding: “I guess I feel lucky that I work where I do- you know, it’s not so bad.” Critical here is how Ms. Harris directly links her job

satisfaction with external respect for the tasks delegated to her in her job description. Because she feels as though faculty and administrators understand what she's supposed to be doing at any given time, Ms. Harris feels grateful to practice school social work at her work site; her colleagues' expectations regarding her role are congruent with her own.

On the other hand, some respondents noted a profound lack of understanding on the part of faculty and administrators. Mrs. Anderson, a school social worker outside of CPS, declared: "I haven't found one principal yet who really knows what we do." Mrs. Mitchell, who worked in a CPS elementary school for almost 20 years before transitioning into a private preschool, remembers: "People would just send kids to me like I didn't have a schedule, like I didn't have things that I needed to do within my day." Unlike those of Mr. Stevens and Ms. Harris, these accounts illustrate a subset of faculty and administrators who offload additional responsibilities onto social workers, such as referring large numbers of students or making schedule changes which indirectly inhibit school social workers' ability to perform their duties. This might, in turn, create a sense of role conflict among these professionals; having to integrate additional responsibilities into their job description forces them to reallocate their energy and existing priorities. Further, incomplete understanding on the part of faculty or administrators has ramifications beyond frustrating interpersonal conversations – these understandings become ingrained into existing structures of hierarchy and practice, eventually becoming reinforced via constant interaction between school staff.

These two extremes – feeling almost entirely or not at all understood – bookended a middle ground where most respondents fell. Many school social workers reported great variation in role misunderstanding on the part of their colleagues and a wide discrepancy between the knowledge of faculty and that of administrators. This is apparent in the experience of Ms. Jordan,

who works in a northern suburb of Chicago; Ms. Jordan said that while her administrators generally understand her role:

Sometimes teachers will want to kind of deflect and put tasks on me... I shouldn't say 'a lot,' but there are a few teachers in the building who don't understand my role. A kid's acting out in class, they go, "Go to the social worker, go outside." I'm called down... so I feel like some teachers are putting me in positions where they want me to be a disciplinarian, and to come up with consequences for students misbehaving, and that's not what I do. I coach students, I teach them skills that they can use on their own. I empower them to do that on their own... and then there are some other tasks other than disciplining students and like, I think also- this is kind of a gray area, but some teachers- like for attendance, for example, they'll be like, "I'm concerned about this student who's consistently missing school on Mondays. Can you reach out to the parents?" And it's like- that first line of contact should be from you, because you're that kid's teacher... because in some situations, communicating with families would totally fall into my job description. And it does. That's what I do. But I think teachers sometimes struggle to understand that they can do a lot of the things that I naturally would do when they would call me, if that makes sense.

Here, Ms. Jordan notes that teachers' understanding of school social work is much less complete and nuanced than that of administrators. She cites a specific sort of role conflict, where her colleagues treat her as the first line of discipline rather than someone who provides specialized services to only a select portion of students. This contrasts sharply with her own understanding of her role, which involves teaching the principles of social-emotional learning to students *and colleagues alike*. Her hesitation to homogenize the understanding of the faculty, and instead single out a select few teachers, reflects great variation in how well her colleagues understand the purview of someone like Ms. Jordan. Ms. Kate, a retired CPS social worker, also spoke to this variation – she claimed that although her faculty and administration were not by-and-large uninformed, the level of understanding among them is variable enough to necessitate flexibility in the work site. According to her, being understood “depends on the personality” of the

teachers, so a school social worker may need to “explain it a little bit more than you would normally do.” Note that school social worker job descriptions do not include such instructive work; this responsibility is a direct consequence of role misunderstanding, representing another obligation to fulfill on top of high caseloads.

Mistakes even happen in schools where teachers are, overall, relatively knowledgeable about school social work. Mr. Stevens, who earlier noted a high degree of understanding in his work site, later said that “teachers can be a little bit more of a hit or miss” because “they’re also super busy with their jobs.” Likewise, Ms. Harris spoke about an environment which, despite high understanding, was still prone to a few mishaps:

I do think that there are times that that they- yeah, that the teachers just kind of want the social workers to fix the kid, for lack of a better word, you know. The kid isn't doing well in class, you know, you get the social worker, and it's something- you know that this kid has a lot going- it's, you know, all these things are happening. Sometimes the teachers may know that, but they sort of still expect the same results. That's sometimes a little frustrating.

These testimonies indicate that although some school social workers sense building-wide patterns in role understanding, many are acutely aware of small variations in comprehension between different levels of their work site’s hierarchy. In particular, they more frequently claimed that teachers were hit-or-miss than they did administrators. Underscoring their responses is a perceived need to contextualize behavior within each faculty member or administrator – the unique organizational structure of each school dictates the possibility and nature of role conflict or ambiguity, particularly at distinct levels of the school hierarchy.

Nature of Misunderstanding

Although the incidence of role conflict or ambiguity can be difficult to predict, an overwhelming majority of the situations that do occur were centered around an unequal distribution of social-emotional labor. More precisely, school social workers described a shared responsibility between themselves and teachers to provide social-emotional support to students; most misunderstandings involved teachers offloading a portion of their responsibility onto the school social workers, leaving the latter with unsustainable influxes of casework.

Ms. Harris illustrated a balance of social-emotional responsibility between herself and the faculty within her work site. According to her, faculty with busy schedules tend to pass students in crisis off to the social worker, rather than attempting to work with the student on their own – they often times “want the social workers to kind of fix the kid, for lack of a better word... the kid isn’t doing well in class, you know, get the social worker... but they sort of still expect the same results. That’s a little frustrating.” Her work site has since addressed this issue with an increasingly formalized referral process but, before its introduction, teachers would send students to the social worker at the drop of a hat because they “feel that it’s just way too much work, you know, to collect this information” about how they could assist the students themselves. Ms. Harris notes that these teachers would observe abnormal behavior student and quickly jump to thinking the following to themselves: “He looks sad today, like, let’s send him to the social worker.” This was exacerbated by the fact that Ms. Harris’s work site has many “kids that have a lot of emotional needs,” requiring that teachers “know what that looks like.” The school’s social workers felt overwhelmed by the task of evaluating classroom behavior, and thus felt compelled to conduct “a lot of trainings over the years with [their] faculty” about “the things that [they] could do before social work.” The faculty of Ms. Anderson’s worksite also tend to refer students

quickly and without any teacher-led investigation of the issue – before somewhat formalizing the referral process, she notes that “it used to be, you had a kid with an issue, send them to the social worker” rather than supporting them on the spot, such that the school was “just shoving everybody onto social work.”

This testimony implies a perception of shared responsibility between school social workers and administrators, such that teachers should exhaust their toolkit of social-emotional learning before referring students to the school social worker. Otherwise, in the words previously used by Ms. Jordan, school social workers begin to feel like “disciplinarians” who must take full responsibility for every student who displays concerning behavior in the classroom. When teachers are “expected to do some social-emotional work with their students” but fail to do so, they “kind of deflect and put tasks on [social workers]” which are beyond the scope of their work. In other words, teachers are not only responsible for some burden of social-emotional work but are even conceived of as the “first line of contact” with students in need of such services. However, they often fail to fulfill such a role by immediately referring students to social work.

In fact, this unequal distribution of responsibility extends into reporting standards for students in need of urgent intervention. Ms. Mitchell, who splits her time between two work sites, described feeling as though her energy was spread extremely thin because of role conflict – she has to run back and forth, both physically and metaphorically, between the two schools. Even more frustrating is the fact that, among the chaos of working at two sites, she is often forced to act as a mandated behavior despite the legal obligation of teachers to do the same:

I feel like sometimes I'm stretched and pulled in both directions. This program needs me here for this. The other program needs me for that. Today was a great example- I was in my building where I spend the majority

of my days, going through, doing my groups, getting things done. All of a sudden, the office is paging me, which is rare... so I go down to the office, and they're like, 'Hey, it's the other school on the line, and they've got some things going on. And it's an emergency and they need to talk to you right now.' That never has happened before. I pick up the phone, and one of the kids in the PFA program has come to school with bruises on his arm. He, you know, got in trouble at home and parents were upset with him. "And we need to call DCFS. And we need you." Well, I can't be there. I'm in this building right now.

Ms. Mitchell here indicates feeling spread thin between her two work sites, particularly when her work at one is interrupted by an urgent task arising in the other. Although she recognizes the gravity of being paged, she also communicates that she has no surplus of time, and certainly not enough to drop her responsibilities in favor of her other work site. Standing her ground by remaining at the original work site, Ms. Mitchell continues:

"But there are other social workers in the building where you are. So you're gonna have to maybe ask them if they can jump in there and just try and help you with this. Because a lot of times a social worker will make that call, even though teachers could- they're mandated reporters, just like we are. Yeah, they often don't make the call. They look to you to do it. So unless you want me to make the call from this other building where I- just go to one of the social workers who's there, explain what's going on, [and] they can make the call for you. And we can go from there. So yeah, I can't leave when I have groups to do, I have minutes to meet."

These descriptions show a particular sense of overload associated with having to bear more than their fair share of social-emotional work, particularly that which should occur in the classroom – when faculty shirk this responsibility, school social workers feel as though they cannot keep up with the volume of referrals heading their way. Their role undergoes an unsustainable expansion, such that these professionals are forced to either bear the brunt of the misunderstanding or outright refuse the request.

Seeking further context on the division of labor between school social workers and faculty, I spoke with Mrs. Smith, a professor and scholar of education at a major Chicago research university. Mrs. Smith framed the tug-of-war between these professionals as a result of school social workers' relative novelty within the public school system. "Because the social worker in school, particularly full time, is still a novel idea, the resources for them are sporadic," said Mrs. Smith; further, while research has established the optimal number of teachers per school, "there's no algorithm that's sort of tossed in there" for the hiring the perfect amount of school social workers for a given school. Both school social workers and faculty, however, are "the people at the bottom fighting for resources" within school hierarchy. Importantly, Ms. Smith notes that the orientations, practices, and goals of school social workers and teachers are, in their current form, are fundamentally different. "For a lot of teachers, their accountability structure is different, so it's test scores," said Mrs. Smith, referencing academic performance as the key benchmark of a teacher's success. "For social workers, it's well-being. Sometimes those don't align. Because it's happening in a school setting, however, the academic stuff rises to the top." School social workers and teachers, then, are attempting to impress different skill sets and perspectives upon their students. While faculty seek improved academic performance on standardized tests, school social workers are chiefly concerned with social-emotional behavior and student mental health.

Of course, these interests are not entirely dissimilar – a faculty member may help a student avoid test anxiety by helping them learn new study skills, and a school social worker might conduct social-emotional lessons with a student in order to boost their confidence and performance on assignments. However, the achievement of higher grades and greater well-being operate on different time scales, creating tension between the ambitions of school social workers and faculty. Mrs. Smith elaborates:

Social workers have to do their jobs within the constraints of how schools are set up... social workers don't get three years to work with the student and their families, because these students gotta take standardized tests, these students gotta figure out what's the next grade. Teachers want those students dealt with so that they can get good test scores out of those students. They could teach them and then not have discipline problems, right? I want that done immediately as a teacher. For a social worker, that's a long-term process. And it ends up being just really convoluted. It's a big reason why social workers burn out very quickly. Because if you can imagine- you've been taught in your program adolescent development, and you've been taught how to deal with families and children systems, and you know that sometimes this work takes 3, 4, 5, 6 months. And yet now you have three teachers breathing down your neck to get this settled next week. And then you have 20 students like that.

In other words, the end goals of school social work require time – time that the current structure of American public schooling simply does not provide to faculty. How, then, are clashes between these timelines negotiated? Or, when desires for better grades and better peace of mind are impressed upon a student, who wins? “Teachers have a- I don't want to say a power over,” Mrs. Smith said, “but they definitely have this heightened veto of ‘people should listen to me when it comes to how my students are doing, because in the end, I care about their academic features and success.’” Such a privilege stems from the ubiquitous nature of teachers and, by extension, their well-defined roles within the school bureaucracy – teachers are rightfully viewed as the backbone of education, regardless of whether that credit should be extended to professionals such as school social workers. Further, their goals are more closely aligned with the direct function of the school itself: academic performance.

As a result, teachers can exert a particular influence over the nature and timeline of a student’s learning; if they deem social-emotional learning to be too time-consuming or distracting, school social workers may be at their mercy, as observed by previous respondents recounting faculty dismissal of proper social work procedures. Noting that this dynamic may

often tilt the balance of social-emotional labor in favor of teachers, Mrs. Smith testified: “And what we don't have in schooling systems is this concept of ‘we have time to work with what we get,’ right? It's always ‘no, [the school social worker] is gonna immediately fix it,’” such that students meet the standards held by faculty. Here, the practice of treating school social workers as disciplinarians returns into focus – because teachers have clearly defined and widely understood goals which generally favor test scores over mental health, they are able to prioritize short-term academic improvement over long-term changes in a student’s social-emotional well-being. Surely teachers are not unconcerned with students’ overall happiness – however, performing long-term mental health interventions in the classroom is not conducive to the academic improvement on which teachers are assessed. Attempting to perform social work within a school is thus, in the words of Mrs. Smith, putting a square peg into a round hole.

It's like taking a social work field and discipline- let's say that's a circle, and putting that into a square peg and saying, "No, you have to fit. Do what you have to do to fit inside this square peg." Because the square isn't going to change. It's not going to change for nobody, right? Over the past however many hundreds of years we've had the school system, the change has been slow and minuscule in comparison to a lot of other systems. Schools don't like to change, and we don't want them to. If we wanted schools to change tremendously and dramatically, they would, but we don't want them to, you know. But we ask social workers to fit into a square peg, and it's not an easy task.

These perspectives of school social workers, combined with the insight of Mrs. Smith, reveal a particular character of relations between school social workers and faculty. Put simply, faculty often do not have time to conduct social-emotional work with their students; however, because their roles are established, omnipresent, and closely aligned with the school’s goals at large, teachers have a “veto power” over school social workers and their insistence on long-term, wellness-focused interventions taking place in the classroom. Academic performance is upheld

as the key benchmark in the classroom, and any students deemed to be exhibiting problematic or concerning behavior are immediately sent to the school social worker. What often results is an influx of student referrals, allowing teachers to pursue higher test scores but forcing school social workers to stretch their resources and own well-being to their limits.

Strategies for Mitigating Misunderstanding

The school social workers interviewed frequently mentioned the development of personal strategies for resolving role conflict and ambiguity. These strategies fell mainly into three categories; school social workers either (1) worked proactively to educate their colleagues before misunderstandings arose, (2) chose to mitigate misunderstandings by providing friendly corrections during or after an expansion of their role, or (3) contrary to the previous approaches, welcomed any opportunity to venture outside of their job description. Informing each of these strategies was a unique understanding of *why* they were being misunderstood. Most downplayed the severity of such incidents, choosing not to identify the problem as disrespect towards their authority or expertise. Rather, they attributed the cause to school-level factors, such as the rush of the school day or lack of administrative training; in short, school social workers report no ill will on the part of faculty and administrators, even if role conflict and ambiguity make the practice of school social work more difficult. These accounts illustrate an organizational context which may not always understand school social work, but still extends respect to those who practice it. According to school social workers, even faculty and admin who shirk the brunt of social-emotional work only do so because they're overwhelmed, mismanaged, or inadequately trained; put simply, it isn't personal. This pattern is apparent not only in how school social workers describe being misunderstood, but also in the *strategies* they use to correct such

confusion. Their approaches to making themselves known are direct, yet incredibly civil and respectful – they treat faculty and admin as individuals who *can* acquire an accurate perspective on social work, and just have yet to do so. Their testimonies suggest that they give this respect because, even in times of misunderstanding, they receive it themselves.

One strategy for mitigating role conflict or ambiguity was to momentarily accept the perception of the other while also explaining that such a responsibility was not within the purview of a school social worker. This approach was often employed among professionals who described great sympathy for the time demands placed on faculty and administrators. For example, Mr. Stevens previously pinned misunderstandings of his role on the busy schedules of faculty; speaking about his strategies for correcting misconceptions, he describes communicating with faculty in terms of picking up favors for them:

Well, in a couple cases, I'll be like, "Okay, this typically is how we do this. I do have a light caseload this week, so I can check, send the email, see what's up, or do some sort of check in with the student-" if I felt like I had the time. But, also kind of making it clear that, "Hey, I typically don't do this. But this time, I can." Just kind of letting them know, so I'm still- that's kind of how I handle it, like "Hey, not what I should be doing necessarily, not like in the fine print of my job. But let me help out. But let you know, next time, it should look like this." Or, "We're gonna- I'm going to do this in addition to that, to make sure it goes about the right avenues."

Knowing that an uneven distribution of social-emotional responsibility is due in part to teachers' hectic schedules, Mr. Stevens corrects misunderstandings by emphasizing his ability to do them a quick, just-this-once favor – he follows along with the misunderstanding, using it as a teaching moment rather than the opportunity to outright refuse a responsibility which is not entirely his. Similarly, Ms. Harris said: "We'll try to make sure that the teachers have the information on how to support the behavior," she says, "so hopefully, a lot of those kids that need [social work] will

already be identified.” Here, she frames role conflict as being detrimental to both herself and the other party’s workload – as a result, she appeals to the teachers’ busy schedules by respectfully providing them with resources to manage disruptive behaviors in their classrooms.

Mr. Stevens and Ms. Harris’s perspectives offer implicit insight into how teachers experience intense demands on their time. Both convey that teachers struggle to properly refer students to social work because of demands on faculty’s time – however, busy schedules do not prevent teachers from actively ascertaining the role of their school social worker. Instead, they reveal that teachers simply don’t have time to conduct discipline or social-emotional work with students exhibiting abnormal behavior in the classroom. As a result, shifting such responsibility to the school social worker is a quick, knee-jerk method of deferring additional problems when slack time is already minimal at best. Teachers, according to Mr. Stevens and Ms. Harris, are too unavailable to even wonder whether social work is the right call. This often manifests, then, in the outsourcing of discipline to the school social worker. Thus, social workers who perceived good intentions but little time on the part of faculty or admin were more likely to momentarily accept and work within a contested role. These findings align well with the previous perspectives of those such as Mrs. Smith, who noted that faculty simply do not have time to conduct social-emotional learning within the framework on which they are assessed. Mr. Stevens and Ms. Harris reiterate that faculty are busy and describe opportunities for polite teaching moments, rather than harsh criticisms or refusals.

Ms. Jordan described a similar strategy, further explicating the dynamics of how school social workers and faculty divide up the labor of social-emotional learning. She claimed that although faculty would occasionally attempt to expand her job description by asking her to fill a disciplinarian role, she is “more lenient to have a conversation” with students who have

individualized learning plans, as those are already seen in the social work domain. However, she expressed slightly more resistance to faculty who immediately associate improper behavior with a need for social work, noting that “a lot of the responsibility of the teacher is to manage behavior and talk about behavior.” As such, Ms. Jordan typically initiates a brief conversation like that described by Mr. Stevens and Ms. Harris; she begins the dialogue by suggesting that intervention will be more effective in the long run if the teachers speak with the students themselves. However, if the expansion of her job description becomes unsustainable, she is forced to be firmer:

Other times, it's a little hard, because- let's say it's a staff member that has asked me to do so many things, and then this is like an additional thing, like the cherry on top, like, "Oh, you're asking me to do get another thing?" Then it gets a little more difficult. So that's just that's just a hard conversation to have, always. But I typically will be like, you know, "I would be happy to help support you and help you figure out a way to do this. But I think that this is too much on my plate right now."

Like the other school social workers, Ms. Jordan is often willing to tolerate misunderstanding in moderation, especially if it relates to students who are already being served by the social work office. However, if the duties become too much to bear, she politely redirects their requests elsewhere. Note that the expansion of her role directly affects her motivation and ability to confidently and efficiently perform her work – at a particular point, she feels so bogged down that she cannot possibly tolerate the navigation of what she should or shouldn't be doing.

Other school social workers attempted to avoid role conflict and ambiguity before either arose at all. Retired Ms. Kate noted that, because the degree of cooperation and understanding “depends on the personality” of each individual staff member, she developed a handbook and passed it around, along with her phone number, each time she entered a new work site. Ms. Kate

notes that with some individuals, “you have to explain it a little more than you would normally do” because “some would know what social-emotional needs are, and then suddenly you have to kind of help them, coach them in doing it.” Similarly to Mr. Stevens and Ms. Harris, she would set up an informational conversation:

“Just one-on-one to talk them about my role in the school, you know, and how we work together as a team. I always explain that we are a team, you know. You are the front line, you're the one that sees the kids every day, sees the children every day. You know, I'm here to support you and what you do.”

Like the other school social workers, Ms. Kate approaches making her role understood by initiating helpful, respectful conversations engineered to put all involved on the same page. These meetings are not opportunities to scold or prove one’s expertise – they are meant to build teamwork and, ultimately, build understanding out of an existing foundation of respect between school social workers and other school staff.

Ms. Anderson, who previously noted that she had never met an administrator with a complete knowledge of social work, directly speaks to this feeling of professional support. She also said that administrators, even those with an incomplete understanding of the profession, were willing to learn and lend support – Ms. Anderson noted that the school clinicians “generally feel very supported and heard,” and that the administration quickly hired more social workers when presented with data indicating a need. In fact, Ms. Anderson and her team were meeting with administrators that afternoon to discuss their complaints about the C day schedule. “I do feel like they’re trying. Is it perfect all the time? No,” said Ms. Anderson. “But for the most part, yeah. We get along really well.” Ms. Harris expressed a similar sentiment, saying: “I haven’t met one administrator that doesn’t value [school social workers].” Any misunderstandings of roles, according to her, are due to abnormally high administrator turnover bringing a variety of “styles”

of how to perform social work – namely, a tension between “objective” practices which deal in data collection versus the “subjective” method of emphasizing groups and sessions with students in need of services. Note that although both Ms. Anderson and Ms. Harris feel hindered by role misunderstandings, neither describe feeling undervalued as a person or professional; rather, they describe misconceptions of their work as incidental. Likewise, Ms. Jordan acknowledged the need to curb her own frustrations, especially given the workload that faculty and administrators face:

Generally speaking, yes. I feel respected. There are times when I like, "Oh my God, I'm so overwhelmed. Teachers are asking too much of me, I'm starting to feel disrespected." That's more so me reacting emotionally in the moment. But when I really think about it, like, teachers and educators in general are just really overwhelmed and everyone needs help. But at the end of the day, I feel like the staff and admin here totally respect me. They often want to hear my insights, my social work perspective, which shows me that they value my opinions, and they value my educational background and how I'm doing certain situations, so I feel respected.

These school social workers don't express that faculty and administration don't *care* about school social workers – just that they are not always knowledgeable about the responsibility they share with the social work departments. Further, Ms. Newsom identified professional trust as the key to effective relationships between school social workers and administrators, noting that the best administrators are willing to defer to the “experts in the room” when needed. She claimed that, like teachers, administrators are limited by their own concerns and duties; as such, they are forced to pursue their own interests while trusting school social workers to be the “eyes on the ground” for student behavior. Ms. Newsom is, like her colleagues, deferring the blame of misunderstandings away from individual behavior and

perceptions – instead, misunderstandings arise because administrators are simply tied up in their own business.

Each of these perspectives implies a shared connection of professional respect between themselves and the other members of the school community; even when school social workers are not understood as a member of the school community, they don't express feeling personally attacked or undervalued as a knowledgeable professional within the work site. Rather, they pin the confusion on different levels of understanding about school social work, made variable by chaotic schedules and district-level priorities regarding social work. Other school social workers, however, completely eschew the notion of job descriptions, roles, and any bureaucratic conflicts that may arise – the testimony of Mr. Robinson, a school social worker in a north suburb, reveals a particularly optimistic orientation towards organizational conflict and school social work practice. Initially, Mr. Robinson's strategy resembles that of Ms. Kate or Ms. Anderson, who attempted to prevent misunderstandings before they occur:

I want the adults in the building who have compassionate eyes and ears and heart, and know the kids, because a lot of times, they're the ones that will see the change in behavior of a child. Yeah, so even a lunch lady, right? So although I've been in these buildings here now for five years, I always try the first week of school- because you might have new staff in the building or new students, what have you, new teacher, I always try to make sure everybody knows my name and knows my cell number. And that's just not a cognitive thing. I want them to feel like they can reach out to me no matter what.

This perspective, like those before, emphasizes school social workers' desire to build informal networks with other members of school staff. Where Mr. Robinson, differs, however, is his assessment of why role conflict occurs – put simply, everyone has their own style of practice. “I think there are many colleagues who don't know what a school social worker does,” Mr. Robinson shared, “because they have had different experiences with different social workers

who, just like me, try to find a way to practice in that school building.” Not only teachers, then, possess their own ways of practicing social-emotional work – school social workers, too, approach their work in such a variety of styles that confusion is understandable or even expected. Asking teachers to become familiar with every single approach to school social work is unreasonable and arguably impossible, especially when their schedules are hectic.

Mr. Robinson claimed that each school social worker thus brings a unique understanding of their labor from which teachers can learn; he described this as a “subtle, relational way” of teaching faculty “how to interact with the kids in this way, in a relational way, versus top down or [being] real didactic.” Such work requires great care, as teachers are “the real pillar of the educational system” – however, according to Mr. Robinson, making a difference in students’ lives requires the active participation of every school staff member. He particularly privileges relationships with teachers, acknowledging their participation in bureaucracy but also a desire to reach past its confines:

I believe that we work together to help these kids have a positive experience in school, even when shit's happening in their lives where they're having a crisis. And I've told this to teachers throughout my career, and I think it gets their attention because it resonates with their reality. Instead of just sort of a bureaucratic approach, you know, "Hey, here's my job title. And this is what the district says." And it's straight up one to one with a teacher, I say, "Look, if you've got an issue with a kid that you want to kill or send to prison, like, you're so pissed, you're ready to blow it, call me, man. Let me take the kid out of the classroom. I'll go walk with him, I'll go throw some ball with him, whatever. There's no need for you to have that kind of crisis in the classroom, because this little one's getting under your skin.” So what I have found is, on a consistent basis, wherever I've worked, I get regular requests from teachers to help them to de-escalate.

This approach manifests as Mr. Robinson attempting to connect with staff at any chance possible, be it on the recess grounds or in the faculty lounge. Such a strategy has paid off for Mr.

Robinson, who reported that approximately 90% of school staff understand his role – and for the other 10%, he simply ignores them. Implicit in Mr. Robinson’s commentary is a particular affinity to find like-minded individuals: those who are committed to working together in the interest of students, even if they do not entirely understand each other’s role in doing so. Such details can be improvised via negotiation and on-the-fly division of labor, as long as the students are thriving.

Most fascinating about Mr. Robinson is his perspective on role conflict itself – he approaches it with open arms. “Just because a social worker thinks their role is this- if the other people in the building think it’s something else, well, shit,” he remarked, “what good is it?” In one instance, Mr. Robinson enlisted his school’s art classes to decorate wood paneling for a ball pit, which he designed and constructed on his own time. Emphasizing that this provided an outlet for non-violent play, he dismissed the notion that such an endeavor was problematic because it was not in his formal job description. He conveyed genuine excitement as he recounted a time he was asked to fill in as a substitute teacher:

I don't see that as a negative thing. That's great. I just got 30 minutes of free group therapy with these kids. And we start talking about all their personal lives and, you know- it's just a fun conversation. We might have like a sharing circle, whatever it is. But my point is, I guess I see it in a non-bureaucratic way. No, that's an opportunity to have a good experience with these kids you normally wouldn't see.

Roles and bureaucracy, then, are secondary to the needs of students. While other school social workers expressed indifference or reluctant understanding towards an expansion of their responsibilities, Mr. Robinson quite literally invites role conflict – in his words, it provides an opportunity to further negotiate with others in his networks of school staff, such that everyone becomes a bit more flexible in helping students achieve their full potential. Assimilating

ambiguity into one's work can further serve the interests of the school, rather than limiting its function. "There's really no limit to what a school social worker can do... it almost doesn't matter what your job description is," said Mr. Robinson, ending his interview on a remarkably powerful sentiment. "They can't take you out of you. You are you."

Ultimately, these perspectives indicate an implied current of respect which pervades the networks between school social workers, faculty, and administrators. Misunderstandings of roles are rare, but they do happen – in such an event, however, school social workers are hesitant to assume ill will or purposeful disrespect towards their expertise and authority. Instead, they explain being misunderstood by pointing to factors external to their interpersonal relationships – such as intense demands on faculty and administrator time. Moreover, some social workers even celebrate opportunities to navigate role conflict, seeing it as an opportunity to develop staff networks and further connect with students. Critical is the notion that the faculty and administrators are *themselves* not at fault – instead, they are pressured by busy classrooms, or were simply never taught how to interact with social workers. While the school social workers interviewed had a variety of strategies for correcting misunderstanding, each and every one implied a particular respect for their colleagues, professionally and personally. This underscores deep networks of respect between these individuals, and that any quarrels related to task delegation are not centered at the personal level – not a single school social worker reported feeling disrespected via episodes of role conflict or ambiguity.

Further, the professional respect within school staff is so prevalent that, even when their colleagues directly make one's responsibilities too much to bear, school social workers attempt to correct the confusion with strategies that are equal parts diplomatic and polite. These strategies intervene at different stages of the misunderstanding; while some school social

workers aimed to prevent misunderstanding entirely, some school social workers opted to let it occur and correct it on the spot or shortly after, while others were completely fine with being misunderstood and never saying a word. However, implicit in each strategy was a particular care and understanding for their colleagues, even those whose misunderstanding of school social work actively created obstacles for the professionals interviewed.

The temporality of school social worker interventions – before versus during or just after being misunderstood, if at all – can be abstracted beyond school grounds. Given the documented incidence of role conflict and ambiguity, role theorists should be particularly concerned with how professionals, especially those with specialized or relatively uncommon roles, work to correct inaccurate perceptions of their role within the organization. This investigation reveals not one or two, but three possible points of intervention that such specialized professionals take. Those interviewed often opted to momentarily accept an expansion of their role, politely reminding the other actor of what their role *should* be. Meanwhile, others spread an awareness of their role which, for the most part, precluded the possibility of any future role conflict or ambiguity. Further, some simply accepted being misunderstood and saw it as a personal challenge, one that pushed them to pursue broader organizational goals in creative and unorthodox ways.

Policy Recommendations

These testimonies suggest several policy improvements which would increase recognition and understanding of school social workers in school communities. Most respondents were asked to provide recommendations that would, in a perfect world, make their jobs easier to manage and perform. This section, which draws directly on their answers, presents

four areas of opportunity for future policy regarding school social workers: organizing building space around social workers, improving existing MTSS-based tier systems which presently designate which school staff should respond to social-emotional concerns, strengthening unions, and organizing programming regarding the role of school social workers.

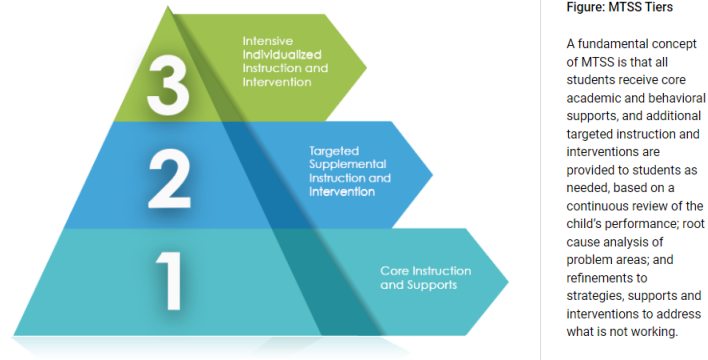
Local Interventions: Organizing Building Space + Improving MTSS Tier Systems

A handful of school social workers attributed faculty misunderstandings of their role to the physical layout of their work site. They often referred to space constraints in passing and did not directly relate them to role conflict; however, their descriptions of struggling with space implied that they might be better understood if they could perform their role in more organized spaces. Professionals like Ms. Newsom identified a lack of adequate space as the hardest thing about their job – upon remarking that her office is too small to protect confidentiality, Ms. Newsom lifted her computer to provide an aerial view of a small, cramped office hosting only a few chairs. Meanwhile, Ms. Kate recalled similar spatial constraints on practicing school social work. “One of the hardest things [in Chicago Public Schools] is that they don’t really value us enough to give us the space we need to see kids,” said Ms. Kate. “Oftentimes, you see kids in the hallway, which is not exactly what I would call the most confidential place-you know, closets.” While both Ms. Newsom and Ms. Kate point towards difficulties in working with students, their responses also imply hurdles for being understood. If school social workers are missing a dedicated and adequate space to see students, they also lack a place to meet with faculty and administration, especially in groups. Further illuminating this concept is the perspective of Ms. Harris, who “feel[s] very lucky” that her new building has a dedicated “social work suite” – such a space, according to her, is “really nice for collaboration” between all levels of school staff.

How can schools replicate the experience of Ms. Harris, who directly attributes a newfound sense of collaboration and teamwork to the existence of a social work suite? Simply put, schools should *organize their physical layout such that school social work offices are accessible, secure, and equipped to accommodate groups*. Implementing this recommendation could take a variety of shapes – for example, school social work offices can be placed in central locations in the building, such that the school community is by-and-large aware of where to find social work services. School staff might become more familiar with the role of a school social worker if they receive additional exposure to the physical location of the social work office. In addition, these offices should be large enough to accommodate groups of students, faculty, and administrators – such a change would be particularly rewarding for school social workers who want to host school staff in their office for trainings on school social work or social-emotional learning. In summary, understanding of school social work may be heightened if its offices are placed centrally within schools and large enough to host medium-to-large groups, whether that be for student services or faculty trainings on social work.

A second policy recommendation for local levels pertains to the MTSS tier system. Respondents occasionally referenced this concept when describing their practice, but only in passing and seldom in direct relation to faculty or administrator understanding. According to a guide jointly published by the Illinois State Board of Education and Illinois Association of School Social Work (2020), the Multi-Tiered System of Supports is a “data-driven process” which is used to “ensure that students receive differentiated instruction, curricula, and support according to their needs” (p. 30). In essence, MTSS defines levels of support according to how much support a particular student may need. Often taking the visual form of a pyramid, this

system has been adopted by schools and districts across the country – as an example, the below image shows Chicago Public Schools’ (2022) framework for MTSS:



Tiers of academic and behavioral instruction and supports

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Core Instruction and Supports General academic and behavioral support, differentiated for all students in a general education setting.	Targeted Supplemental Instruction and Intervention More focused, targeted instruction, interventions, and supplemental supports, provided in a general education setting (in addition to Tier 1).	Intensive Individualized Instruction and Intervention The most intense instruction and intervention that is made available and provided in a small group general education setting.

Figure 1: MTSS tiers used by Chicago Public Schools (2022)

The tiers describe particular levels of intervention according to how intensive a student’s needs are – for example, minor behavioral issues would fall under tier 1, while students struggling with urges to harm themselves or others would receive intensive tier 3 support. Lower-tier cases can be handled by faculty or school social workers, while higher-tier cases are almost exclusively handled by a school’s paraprofessional team.

While the school social workers interviewed had a great appreciation for MTSS guidelines, they often attributed misunderstandings to blurry boundaries between the tiers. For example, Ms. Harris noted that if the MTSS tiers were not clearly defined, faculty could mistakenly refer an overwhelming number of students to their school social worker. “So I think sometimes the teachers feel- and us too- that [the referral process] just feels very loose, you know,” said Ms.

Harris. “If the tier 1 system is a little bit loose, you're going to get a lot of kids coming up for tier 2. And that's just a little bit more of an intensive, you know. More intensive support.” Such a phenomenon, according to her, is possible even if both school social workers and faculty are making a great effort to understand these guidelines; this implies an urgent need to redefine and improve upon the rules themselves. Ms. Jordan, who claimed that a number of teachers have repeatedly misunderstood her role, identified faculty as one of the most important sources of tier 1 interventions such as emotional regulation strategies. Finally, Mrs. Parker directly tied ambiguity within tiers to feelings of burnout:

And I feel like there's so little time in the day to really provide the services that our students need in those areas, because of all this other tier 1 stuff. And, you know, I also work pretty closely with speech language pathologists who have very little of these tier 1 demands put on them. And I think that sometimes I'm a little jealous of that, because it seems as though they're able to, you know- when you're in a state of constant- like a constantly changing environment, there is so much like comfort in this stability of, like, "This is my role, and these are the four walls of my domain. And If I just focus on those things, then I can get through it." But we don't really have the option because we're in everything.

These testimonies indicate the great potential of an MTSS system whose levels are tightly defined and delineated, as well as the dangers of keeping the boundaries up to interpretation. If teachers are well versed in what constitutes tier 1 verses tier 2 intervention – in other words, what they can do on their own versus otherwise – they will be more knowledgeable about the services provided by a school social worker. Otherwise, situations like that experienced by Mrs. Parker emerge; school social workers may be forced to devote most of their day to tier 1 interventions, rather than conducting more intensive intervention with at the second and third tiers. The respondents indicated that faculty do not intentionally overload school social workers; however, when MTSS guidelines are loose or ambiguous, faculty are forced to quickly interpret

the rules and determine who should handle the intervention; this fact is especially problematic given the intense demands on a given faculty member's time. These school social workers note that if teachers deem a student's behavior to be concerning, they often immediately refer them to school social work without attempting any tier 1 intervention in their classrooms. Thus, the burden of social-emotional labor is shifted onto the school social worker, rather than being balanced between themselves and faculty. As Mrs. Parker indicated, this phenomenon can overload school social workers and exacerbate feelings of burnout. Teachers are opting out of being the first line of defense, with the hope that school social workers will take the problem out of their hands entirely.

Given this information, I recommend that schools *ensure that their MTSS tiers are clearly defined and understood among faculty members*. This suggestion could be manifested in several ways. Schools with adequate resources could hire support specialists dedicated solely to improving and maintaining MTSS tiers – for example, Ms. Anderson's work site employs a school social worker whose main responsibility is to focus on MTSS. Ms. Anderson disclosed this information when describing how her work site has improved MTSS systems, immediately remarking that the tiers were "getting better" as a result of her colleague's impact. Mrs. Parker, whose work site does not employ an MTSS specialist, said that hiring one would be instrumental in decreasing feelings of burnout among paraprofessional staff. "I wish there was more of that kind of model in all schools," she said while describing schools which have separate school social workers for general education, special education, and MTSS. "I do think that it allows a little bit more protection around where you get pulled in any given day." Such professionals, then, are directly linked to the prevention of role conflict and ambiguity; in Mrs. Parker's words,

they *protect* school social workers from being stretched in many directions and, consequently, experiencing intense overload or burnout.

Given these testimonies, it is reasonable to recommend the hiring of professionals whose sole responsibility is to maintain and monitor referrals along MTSS tiers. However, such advice is simply impractical for schools who lack the resources to hire even one school social worker. I recommend, then, that each and every school should *create and spread up-to-date, accessible information regarding MTSS tiers*. In other words, schools should create clear and concise criteria for when faculty should ping school social workers. For example, conducting research on MTSS yielded a one-pager from California’s Kern County (Limon & Arias 2019) – the one pager, an excerpt of which is provided below, lists clear-cut distinctions between each tier:

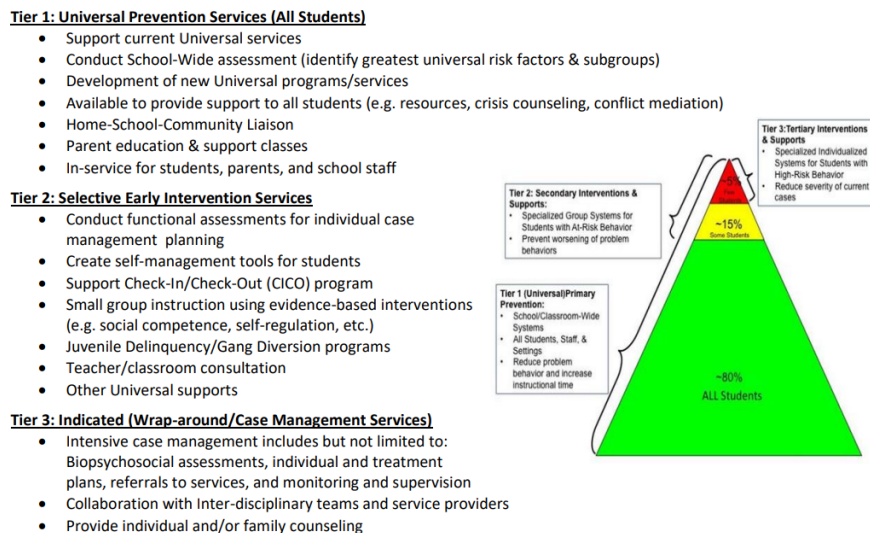


Figure 2: An example of a school’s boundaries between MTSS tiers (Limon & Arias 2019)

In addition to creating visual programming which is easy to reference (and hiring MTSS-dedicated staff, if possible), schools should hold training sessions which provide thorough overviews of MTSS with all school staff. Although not related specifically to MTSS, Ms.

Mitchell described the benefit of all-staff meetings dedicated to school social work: “We put together a PowerPoint, and we were able to share some things with people,” she said, “and of course, if people had questions, they raise their hand, they ask questions. I feel like something like that can open the door to people being able to understand more about what you do. Yeah. Because you don't know what you don't know... all about the pedagogy of teaching, you know, but you might not know very much about how a social worker functions, you know, within a building.” These meetings, according to Ms. Mitchell, “opened the door to make people curious, to make people ask questions, to help them understand better what [school social workers] do.” I implore schools to host professional development meetings of this sort – ones that are focused *specifically* on the dimensions of school social work, including its practitioners and the guidelines that they follow, such as the MTSS tiers of support.

Making this information accessible and widely known is absolutely critical to improving faculty and administrator understanding of school social work. If school staff gain increased awareness of who should handle what, they are entrenching boundaries around responsibilities which may have previously been up for negotiation. In other words, the MTSS tier system not only provides an organizational framework for administering school social work services, but also serves to reinforce the division of social-emotional labor and learning within schools.

State-Level Interventions: Strengthening Unions

One recommended action for state-level policymakers is the bolstering of unions, particularly regarding increased protections for and trainings about school social work. Such a suggestion is directly inspired from the testimonies of school social workers who, when asked

about how they combat role misunderstandings, were eager to mention the strength gained from union participation. Their descriptions indicate great benefit from being active union members: namely, protections in the form of contract provisions and rights to set development schedules. Firstly, Ms. Jordan described how she resolves role misunderstanding with her union membership. “The union is really important because we do have contracts,” she explained. “If we are asked to do too much, and it goes against our contract, we have that protection in that sense. And, you know, unions are important right now, I feel like it's a good thing that we have representation.” Further, she expressed appreciation for the union leadership, who “communicates with the big top dogs in our district about the things that we're experiencing, and the things that we need help with, and we need support with.” Key here is the notion that union membership lifts the burden of negotiation from her shoulders, transferring it to qualified individuals so that she can successfully perform her role without interruption.

Additionally, Ms. Kate noted that unions ensure that school social workers receive their school assignments weeks ahead of school starting, an issue of particular concern for those working in Chicago Public Schools. “I was asked to give feedback about the union at our social work meeting,” described Ms. Kate. “And I walked up there and I just did a power fist. And the whole place broke up.” Even further, Ms. Newsom noted that her school district’s union “keeps us functioning and safe” by communicating information about social-emotional learning and organizing teacher strikes. These perspectives indicate a particular and collective strength that union membership lends to school social workers, providing both contractual and emotional security.

As such, I highly recommend that states take all courses of action which *strengthen union protections and encourage participation on school grounds*. Many school social workers with

which I spoke praised the union specifically for protecting their schedules, job descriptions, and peace of mind against role conflict or ambiguity; although some states may be reluctant or outright opposed to bolstering organized labor, they should be chiefly concerned with the well-being of their education professionals, particularly in regard to a profession with a limited amount of personnel such as school social work. Any opportunity to protect and enable these individuals' ability to perform social-emotional learning with students must be taken seriously; after all, many of them directly attributed a sense of security, understanding, and comfort to the union, explaining that they knew organized labor provided protections against role misunderstanding. In addition, whether or not states choose to bolster unions, organized labor might be an ideal conduit for the organization and dissemination of MTSS information. Unions could be chiefly responsible for the development of such content, provided that they are in conversation with local and district-level school leadership. In other words, unions protect school social workers from being pulled in a million directions; they might also, however, be a fitting site of MTSS development and refinement.

All Levels: Increased Programming on School Social Work

My final recommendation expands on my previous recommendation for tightening MTSS tiers at the local level, expanding the stakes to all levels of policymaking. Of all the perspectives that I collected and analyzed throughout the duration of this project, one theme repeatedly surfaced in the testimony of school social workers: when other school staff need to be educated on the parameters and boundaries of school social work, its practitioners cannot bear such a burden alone. As such, all levels of education policymaking have the opportunity to develop, revise, and amplify additional programming about the tasks of a school social worker and how

they fulfill them. As long as school social workers see added benefit to the community's understanding of their profession, anything is on the table: professional development meetings, annual reviews of social work understanding throughout school buildings, frequent conversations with school social workers about how their job could be better understood, and mandatory training programs all have the potential to increase school social work understanding.

This information should be disseminated across a variety of channels, such that school staff are repeatedly exposed to information regarding the role and duties of school social workers – while one-pagers like the one cited from Kern County are an effective way to spread information, they should be treated as supplementary to mandatory, all-staff development meetings focused solely on the roles, duties, and capabilities of school social workers. The implementation of such meetings may not be this straightforward, since a district's resources (both in terms of time, money, and staff available to develop and teach the programming) are in constant flux according to their current capabilities and needs. Schools, districts and states who are committed to supporting their school social workers, particularly as it pertains to role understanding, should prioritize literal and figurative investment in the development of mandatory programming which makes knowledge of school social work more commonplace, accessible, and at the front of minds throughout school grounds.

Conclusion

This investigation aimed to explore the strategies that school social workers use to understand and navigate misunderstandings of their role. The position of a school social worker

is already a precarious one – as such, any insight into whether and how these individuals feel misunderstood is critical for ensuring their continued work in the profession.

Interviews with school social workers in the Chicago area revealed that the incidence of role misunderstandings is not only highly variable, but also dependent on the organizational structure and practice of the work site. Some schools boasted institutional, generational knowledge of school social work; however, some suffered from chronic misunderstanding of its school social workers. Misunderstandings, then, were bigger than one-on-one differences between professionals – they often took the form of institutional patterns, leading to variable understandings among faculty and admin. Episodes of role conflict and ambiguity were negotiated on the ground when they occurred, supporting the notion of schools as organic institutions whose goals are multiple, complex, and ever-changing according to the needs and abilities of personnel.

Further, school social workers adopted three main strategies for understanding and responding to misunderstandings. While some (1) made a proactive effort to clear up any misunderstandings before they occurred, others (2) dealt with role conflict or ambiguity on the spot, often taking the form of a polite conversation with the offender after fulfilling their request. Finally, some school social workers (3) completely renounced their job description, describing role misunderstandings as opportunities to connect with students and staff in unforeseen ways. Regardless of the strategy employed, every single school social worker conveyed, either directly or implicitly, a feeling of respect on the part of their colleagues. As such, respondents did not feel personally devalued and located the cause of the misunderstanding in factors besides their own legitimacy – such as the time constraints faced by teachers. This was true among all respondents, even those who drew a direct connection between role misunderstandings and

feelings of exhaustion or burnout. Even when their actions were massively detrimental to school social workers, faculty or administrators with incomplete understandings were not described as mean-spirited or disrespectful. They were simply busy colleagues.

Given these findings, I propose four policy recommendations: school social work should be centrally located within school buildings, rather than on the periphery; MTSS tiers should be tightened, such that the boundaries between each tier are clear and frequently communicated to staff; union participation should be bolstered and encouraged; finally, all levels of education policymaking should focus on the development and dissemination of formal, mandatory training on school social work.

Further research should be done to expand on these findings. As noted in the theoretical framework, the distribution of school social workers likely falls along previously researched lines of academic inequity. Schools with the resources to hire a full social work team may interact with their school social workers differently than schools who barely have the resources to support one; such resources, as previously researched, often fall along lines of race and class. In other words, I invite further research to investigate different strata of schools according to their resources, rather than sampling from across the city – do wealthy districts, who often have the resources to consistently assign multiple school social workers to each school, have better paraprofessional-teacher relations than those who can only hire one per building? This project, then, provides a jumping-off point for others to examine the intersection of these findings and issues of academic inequity. I hope that my findings will be further elaborated in the context of these issues, ultimately expanding sociological understandings of school social work.

My findings indicate that faculty and administrative understandings of school social work are highly dependent on the structures, practices, and negotiations which take place throughout

professional, day-to-day interaction on school grounds. Understanding when, why, and how social workers feel misunderstood contributes crucial information about how to best support these professionals – after all, there aren't enough to go around as is.

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