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## Social Worker Experiences Serving At-Risk Youth With Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities

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Social Worker Experiences Serving At-Risk Youth  
With Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities

by  
Sherriese S. Anderson

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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## **Approval Page**

This applied dissertation was submitted by Sherriese S. Anderson under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Name

September 22, 2016

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## **Abstract**

Social Worker Experiences Serving At-Risk Youth With Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities. Sherriese S. Anderson, 2016: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. Keywords: at-risk youth, school social workers, special needs, high school

This dissertation was a qualitative study of school social workers who worked with special needs adolescent youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a public high school. This study centered on the experiences of 10 school social workers in a public high school in New Jersey. All 10 school social workers were interviewed individually to uncover (a) how they perceived the school social worker's role within the public school setting, (b) the lived experiences of school social workers who worked with special needs youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, and (c) why they desired to continue working with at-risk special needs youth based on their own experiences? Besides one-to-one interviews, each social worker completed a survey and wrote a personal statement reflecting on his or her work as a school social worker in the research setting. The researcher conducted interviews of each social worker at a mutual location decided by the researcher and the social worker.

Results and findings may decrease misunderstandings and inconsistencies in the literature regarding school social workers and their role as they work with at-risk special needs youth in public schools. Social work practice and public school administrators may acquire new knowledge regarding the social worker's desire to continue working with this population group. The study should also contribute to existing literature regarding school social workers, adult social support, at-risk youth, special needs youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, and qualitative studies aimed at understanding the lived experience working with the at-risk youth population. At the same time, this study should increase the researcher's personal and professional growth of how this population group perceived and acclimated to social work experiences.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In 2013, 73.6 million children lived in the United States and of this total number, children aged 0-17 made up 23.3% of the population (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015). During the 2012-2013 school year, there were 49.8 million public elementary and secondary school students in membership, which was an increase of 0.5% from student membership in the 2011-2012 school year (Keaton, 2013). For the 2012-2013 school year, the state of New Jersey had 1,331,925 students enrolled in public schools and 2,340 public schools within the state (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). Adolescent youth spend the majority of their day in school or at school-sponsored events. As a result, schools provide a unique way of promoting successful outcomes for students who may be at risk for school failure or other social problems.

In the United States, a child is abused or neglected every 42 seconds, gunfire kills a teen every 3 hours, and 6.7% of 16-19 year olds are high school dropouts (Children's Defense Fund, 2011). According to The NCES (2010), the dropout rate for Latino youth (18.3%) is about four times higher than for White youth (4.8%), while the dropout rates for African American youth (9.9%) is about two times higher than Asian/Pacific Islander youth (4.4%). These negative outcomes harm the individuals themselves and have far-reaching social costs and consequences (Aronowitz, 2005). Detachment of youth from school and employment and activities that typically occupy teenagers increases their risk of having lower earnings and a less stable employment history than their peers who pursued these activities (Daly, Shin, Thakral, Selders, & Vera, 2009; Fernandes & Gabe, 2009). Schools often provide a safe haven from the often stressful or negative events some youth encounter. As these youth transition through adolescence, the negative

experiences they encounter often expose them to factors that can place them at risk for school failure. When adolescent youth have a strong relationship with a supportive, caring adult, they typically do well, despite the negative circumstances they have encountered. According to Tiet, Huizinga, and Byrnes (2010),

An additional competent and loving adult may prevent youth from engaging in antisocial behaviors, which in turn may lead to engaging in more prosocial behaviors. Ultimately, such behaviors may alter the youth's contextual environment and then lead to better academic performance and other adjustment domains. (p. 374)

The number of youth in the United States is projected to increase significantly in the years to come. As the number of youth continues to increase, these youth will face various obstacles while navigating throughout their school years and various developmental stages. A positive, caring adult can provide help to mitigate the effects of any obstacles faced by these youth. Schools and other organizations that serve youths can increase access to relationships with caring adults who have high expectations and offer opportunities for meaningful participation (Brooks, 2006). The positive relationships with caring adults in the school provides these at-risk youth with a sense of belonging and much-needed emotional support. Laursen (2008) noted, "With the caring and emotional support given by others, youth acquire the belief that their lives have meaning and that they are in control of their own fate" (p. 8). This sense of belonging and emotional support also aids in increasing academic achievement. The support a school social worker will provide can have far-reaching effects that will extend beyond the doors of the school building. Montague, Enders, Cavendish, and Castro (2011) emphasized,

Understanding the specific risk factors and the variables that are most closely

related to negative, as well as, positive academic, social, and behavioral outcomes across the school years is essential to providing optimal services for children and adolescents most at risk for poor outcomes. (p. 142)

### **Research Problem**

School social workers, who work with at-risk students with emotional and behavioral disabilities at the high school level, do not face an easy task. The dissertation study took place at an urban high school located in central New Jersey. The study site had approximately 988 students and 17% of the student populations were students with disabilities (New Jersey Department of Education, 2015). At the study site, it was vital school social workers remain dedicated and committed to working with the at-risk special needs youth they served daily. School social workers at the study site often faced numerous obstacles (i.e., high caseloads, staff reduction, resistant parents, high administration turnover, budget deficits, policy changes, legal issues, disgruntled parents, etc.), yet the work they performed on a daily basis was crucial to the well-being of the students under their care. An administrator at the study site noted that in order to accomplish this, school social workers must continue to remain dedicated and committed to making a difference in the lives of the students they served.

The dedication and commitment to have these students succeed must outweigh the daily challenges encountered when working with this population of youth. School social workers working with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities at the study site faced the arduous task of working with youth facing various life issues that placed them at risk for school failure (i.e., poverty, gang involvement, drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile delinquency, truancy, abusive homes, violence, low academic achievement, and truancy). Lee (1998) said, “School social workers are uniquely

positioned to help schools develop an important balance in students' lives between their educational and social—emotional needs” (p. 66).

### **Background and Justification**

Many students in America are negatively affected by multiple risk factors including poverty; underfunded schools; crime-ridden neighborhoods; family problems; and peer groups involved in drugs, crime, and violence (Aronowitz, 2005; Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). During their high school years, at-risk youth with emotional or behavioral disabilities are in great danger of falling prey to various societal maladies, such as juvenile incarceration, gang affiliation, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, school dropout, and violence. These multiple risk factors leave adolescent youth vulnerable to harmful environmental influences, as well as various problem behaviors (Aronowitz, 2005; Gerard & Buehler, 2004). These risk factors also place these youth at an increased risk for school failure and eventually negative life outcomes.

According to Early and Vonk (2001), “Where schools are serving a major role in providing mental health services to children and adolescents, school social workers are prominent among the professionals involved in mental health services” (p. 9). Social workers have also taken on various titles and functions to assure the needs of their students are met, whether at home, school, or within the community. Constable and Montgomery (1985) noted, “Social workers in public schools have been given a variety of titles, including home and school visitor, visiting teacher, attendance worker, attendance officer, counselor, and school social worker” (p. 244). These various titles paint a vivid picture of the various roles social workers have taken throughout the years within the public school system. Johnson (1987) emphasized,

From Costin's seminal research in the late 1960s through other studies in the 1970s and 1980s, it is clear that the role of school social workers has changed.

The change has been uneven and sometimes halting, but the task of the worker has broadened from traditional casework to more systemic approaches and activities and liaison between home, school, and community. (p. 32)

School social work has evolved into a complex and specialized practice field, one presumably affected by changes in relevant practice models, education policy, and school-based intervention research over the past decade (Kelly et al., 2010). The school social worker helps students cope with daily life struggles, thus assisting them to find solutions to overcome these struggles. Social workers assess the needs of their clients and help link them with the available services and resources that may be crucial for the client to lead a successful life. Social workers who have certain experiences working in school settings, with this population of youth, are also able to provide the necessary information needed to help clearly define essential support services, as well as contribute to the research that is vital to assist these students' lead successful lives.

The researcher believed that by conducting this study, valuable insight on the topic of working with at-risk special needs youth from a school social worker's perspective can be shared with principals, teachers, parents, school administrators, the local community, local school boards, and current and future social workers. This study provided valuable insight, from the school social worker's point of view, about their experiences working in the public school system with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. This will be beneficial to expand this area of social work practice.

### **Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Various aspects of the social worker's job related to working with at-risk youth

were represented in the current literature. The researcher was able to find an extensive amount of literature researching the resiliency of at-risk youth (Ahern, Ark, & Byers, 2008; Aronowitz, 2005; Tiet et al., 2010; Ungar, 2006), protective factors involving at-risk youth (Brooks, 2006; McNair & Johnson, 2009), and the beneficial effects of adult social support (Broussard, Mosley-Howard, & Roychoudhury, 2006; Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Maschi, 2006; Tiet et al., 2010). The researcher was able to find extensive research literature pertaining to social workers who worked with at-risk youth. Nevertheless, the majority of the studies found came from the viewpoint of the adolescents in these studies and not always the adults who worked with these youth.

Drolet and Arcand (2013) synthesized “research on the sense of school belonging . . . [and] positive ties with adults and with peers” (p. 30). Drolet and Arcand’s study focused on identifying the perceptions held by 12- and 13-year-olds and youth workers/school staff in relation to their sense of belonging at school. Drolet and Arcand acknowledged, “The interviews clearly underscored the importance of the supportive roles played by non-family adults and peers in the lives of early teens, such people being essential to the sense of belonging to the school or other milieu” (p. 35). Although this article clearly indicated the importance of nonfamily adults in the lives of youth at school, the gap the researcher’s specific study fills, based on future research suggestions, focuses on the lived experiences of school social workers who provide support to youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

Tiet et al. (2010) hypothesized children and adolescents who had strong conventional bonding with family and school would function well and be more resilient to the environmental risks of living in socially disorganized neighborhoods that were poor, unstable, crowded, and crime ridden. This study drew its data from the Denver

Youth Survey, a longitudinal study of the youth development that targeted socially disadvantaged neighborhoods with high crime rates in the Denver metropolitan area. The study concluded that bonding with family and teachers, greater commitment to school, more involvement in extracurricular activities, lower levels of parental discord, lower levels of adverse life events, and being less involved with delinquent peers were predictors of resilience among inner-city youth. Tiet et al. said, “Ultimately, such behaviors may alter the youth’s contextual environment and then lead to better academic performance and other adjustment domains” (p. 374). The gap this study fills, based on future research suggestions, will be the role positive adult support plays in assisting youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities to have successful outcomes.

Few studies explored the experiences of school social workers and why these social workers continue to work with at-risk youth in the school setting who have emotional and behavioral disabilities. The researcher did find some research studies where gathering information from the social worker’s point of view was the focus. The researcher found research studies conducted on factors related to social service workers’ job satisfaction (Smith & Shields, 2013). In Smith and Shield’s (2013) study, respondents were social services workers participating in an evaluation of a training program in Missouri. This study used Herzberg’s concept of motivation to work as a means of investigating job satisfaction among social service workers.

Rackauskiene, Kasnauskiene, and Virbaliene (2013) conducted another study that focused on gathering information from the social worker’s point of view. The aim of their research was to reveal the social workers’ intrinsic and extrinsic motives to work in the social work field. The results of the study made clear the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that influence social workers’ decision to work in this area, have

influence on the quality of their activities, and the level of personal satisfaction (Rackauskiene et al., 2013).

Although these studies were able to report their findings from the social worker's point of view, they were in no way specific to school social workers who work exclusively with at-risk youth with behavioral disabilities within the public school setting. Although these articles indicated job satisfaction and motivating factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) among social workers, which helped them continue in the field, it was not specific to social workers who provide services in public schools. The gap this study fills, based on future research suggestions, focuses on why school social workers continue to work with at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in the school setting.

After reviewing the research available, it was evident there was a need for further research giving a voice to the social worker's point of view, thus contributing to the scarce literature regarding the perceived roles and the lived experiences of the social workers who work with at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in the school setting. In essence, after reviewing the research studies, this study sought to fill the following gaps in the literature to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of school social workers who provided support to youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, as follows:

1. The role positive adult support plays in assisting youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities to have successful outcomes.

2. The reasons why school social workers continue to work with at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in the school setting.

### **Audience**

This study would be of great assistance for social work students who aspire to



work in public school settings with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. This study will be beneficial to mentors and athletic coaches by helping them to understand the impact of their relationship as role models and positive social supports when working with these youth. Primary caregivers will also benefit from this study by gaining a better understanding of their role in their student's life by providing a foundation of encouragement and support to their child. Teachers will be able to gain a greater level of understanding of their role with these students as well as how their compassion and positive interactions can provide support that can extend beyond the classroom walls. This study will benefit principals and local school board members by providing them a greater level of insight into the impact of the services and emotional support school social workers provide to students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

The results could also have great influence on the implementation of wraparound programs and services within the schools and community that could be beneficial to these students and their families. This study would also have a significant impact in assisting with the formation of education policy and with adding changes to existing education and social work policy. This study could also have a significant impact on assisting with the development and implementation of programs, interventions, and systems of support to assist youth with behavior disabilities to lead productive lives as they transition from the school setting and into postsecondary settings or the workforce.

### **Definition of Major Concepts and Terms**

The following terms are operationally defined for use in this study.

*Special needs* (n.d.) are the special educational requirements of those with learning difficulties, emotional or behavioral problems, or physical disabilities.

*Social support* was defined by Sheafor and Horejsi (2006) as “the information, encouragement, and tangible assistance that is offered to a person, by others and is perceived by the person as being beneficial to his or her functioning” (p. 258).

*Risk factor* is a measurable characteristic in a group of individuals or their situation that predicts negative outcome on specific outcome criteria; for example, poverty, premature birth, or parental divorce (Evans, Marsh, & Weigel, 2009; Kitano & Lewis, 2005).

*Resilience* was defined by Atkinson, Martin, and Rankin (2009) as “the ability to apparently recover from the extremes of trauma, deprivation, threat or stress is known as resilience” (p. 137).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the lived experiences of school social workers who provided adult social support to at-risk, special needs youth who had emotional or behavioral disabilities in a large urban high school in central New Jersey. The researcher also sought to understand how the daily experiences encountered by school social workers motivated them to continue working in the social work field.

The study expands the current literature by incorporating the lived experiences of school social workers’ interactions with at-risk, special needs youth who had an emotional and behavior disability in the public school setting. Furthermore, the findings of the present study uncovered from the social worker’s experience why they continued in the social work field within the public school system despite the many obstacles they faced in their role. According to Costin (1969b), “Social workers in the schools serve in one of the most significant of the community’s institutions, and they occupy a strategic position for exercising professional leadership within the school and its neighborhoods

and community” (p. 280). This study fills the gap in knowledge by increasing the understanding of the school social worker’s role from the social worker’s point of view.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **History of Social Workers in the School Setting**

The school social worker has been a part of public school education since the early part of the 20th century (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Constable & Montgomery, 1985; Costin, 1969a). School social workers play a vital role in providing a variety of services to the youth who attend school. School social workers in the early decades of this century were mostly concerned about the effect of environmental problems on the learning process of the pupil (Constable & Montgomery, 1985). During the 1930s, the role of the social worker began a shift from that of attendance officer or community liaison to more of a social caseworker. There was a gradual shift in the 1940s toward clinical casework with the emphasis on the psychosocial functioning of the individual pupil (Constable & Montgomery, 1985; Peckover et al., 2013).

School social workers during the 1940s and 1950s put great professional energy into developing casework services in the public schools. As this occurred, they gave up the earlier tasks of school-home-community liaison and of bringing about social change in the community (Costin, 1969b). The 1960s ushered in a new wave of school social work. Relationships between schools and communities became a primary area of concern (Peckover et al., 2013). Another major change was implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act midway through the 1970s. Assessment of handicapped children became priority for social work, thus heightening social worker involvement with assessment and work with families, communities, and other school personnel (Johnson, 1987). During the 1970s and 1980s, the number of school social workers increased considerably due to the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. School social work was now considered a related service, thus opening up a new

stream of funding for school social workers (Peckover et al., 2013). The social work profession continues to grow rapidly as the number of youth in need of services increases. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), “Employment of social workers is projected to grow 19 percent from 2012 to 2022 . . . Employment growth will be driven by increased demand for health care and social services, but will vary by specialty” (Summary section, para. 5).

### **Social Workers and Social Support in Schools**

An understanding of the social work profession begins with a deep appreciation of humans as social beings. LeCroy and Stinson (2004) explained, “Historically, social workers have been guardians of the vulnerable and disenfranchised members of society. Social work has exemplified the value of caring for the less fortunate” (p. 164). School social workers serve as positive role models and sources of emotional support for at-risk youth in schools. These dedicated adults have taken the time to make a difference in the lives of the youth under their care, thus giving them hope for a brighter future. Kelly et al. (2010) explained,

A century ago, the first school social workers were called “visiting teachers,” and many of their practice innovations (e.g., conducting home visits, leading classroom groups, and consulting with teachers and principals) are still widely practiced today in the field of school social work. (p. 132)

The social workers at that time were a direct link between the student’s home, community, and school. Kelly et al. (2010) further noted, “Over time, school social work shifted from a role linking students, home, and school to a clinical casework model where individual students experiencing acute social, emotional, or behavioral problems were served by school social workers” (p. 132). The roles of social support in increasing

youths' coping abilities may serve an important function in decreasing the negative impact of trauma, including being a victim and or witness to violence or experiencing stressful life events (Maschi, 2006).

Nonparental adults play a pivotal role in the lives of youth at risk for unsuccessful outcomes. These adults assist the youth to become successful by providing them with guidance and social support. Malecki and Demaray (2002) defined *social support* as “an individual’s perceptions of general support or specific supportive behaviors (available or enacted upon) from people in their social network, which enhances their functioning and/or may buffer them from adverse outcomes” (p. 2). Malecki and Demaray conducted a study in efforts to learn more about students’ perceptions of social support. They sampled 1,110 students in Grades 3 through 12 (353 elementary school students and 757 from middle and high school) from schools in Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, and Nebraska using The Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASS).

The goal of the study was to develop a psychometrically sound tool to measure students’ perceptions of social support. The use of the CASS, when measuring student social support, would lead to interventions designed to improve the supports the students received from significant individuals in their lives. Sterrett, Jones, McKee, and Kincaid (2011) conducted a study of adolescents between the ages of 10 and 20 years old, identifying specific types of social support that promote specific youth outcomes. This study used the lens of social support to synthesize current research regarding supportive nonparental adults in relationship to adolescent psychosocial adjustment, academic functioning, self-esteem, and behavior and emotional problems. Social support is directly associated with individual well-being and has indirect effects by working as a buffer against risk factors (Sterrett et al., 2011).

Woolley and Bowen (2007) conducted a study examining the association between the number of supportive and caring adults in the home, school, and neighborhood and the school engagement of students in early adolescence. Results revealed students who reported supportive adults in their lives also reported higher levels of psychological and behavioral engagement with their schooling. Sterrett et al. (2011) emphasized, “Support from non-parental adults has been linked to a number of indices related to academic functioning, including higher levels of positive academic attitudes, motivation, school attendance, and academic achievement” (p. 288). Additionally, the support of nonparental adults has been associated with decreasing behavior and conduct problems in schools. The presence of supportive nonparental adults has been associated with lower levels of conduct problems, substance abuse, and sexual activity in youth (Sterrett et al., 2011; Woolley & Bowen, 2007).

In addition to the other studies, DuBois and Silverthorn (2005) conducted a study using nationally representative data examining the impact of natural (or informal) mentoring relationships on health-related outcomes among older adolescents and young adults aged 18-26 years old. The results indicated youth who engaged in natural mentoring relationships were more likely to exhibit favorable outcomes in the areas of education/work (i.e., completing high school, college attendance, and problem behavior), reduced risk of gang membership and hurting others in physical fights, decreased risk taking, psychological well-being (i.e., heightened self-esteem and life satisfaction), and better physical health (i.e., greater physical activity level and birth control use). Bernat (2009) acknowledged, “Youth success is associated with youth having adults in their lives that care about them and set high expectations for them to succeed” (p. 251). The proposed dissertation study will obtain in-depth stories from the social workers who

provide social support to at-risk youth in schools every day.

Supportive adults working with at-risk, special needs youth in the school setting played a vital role by intervening in the lives of these youth. Adolescents spend the majority of their day in school or at school-sponsored events; therefore, schools provide a way of promoting successful outcomes for students who may be at risk for school failure. Schools are safe and positive places that can assist at-risk youth while fostering a sense of connectedness and belonging, thus increasing their likelihood to succeed. Social support provided by school personnel can serve as a powerful impetus for increasing school connectedness, particularly among minority students attending urban schools (Daly, Buchanan, Dasch, Eichen, & Lenhart, 2010). When good support systems are put in place at school that are designed to help students succeed, school becomes a rewarding experience instead of a negative one. According to March and Gaffney (2010), “Educators who are willing to go beyond their instructional duties to establish committed and caring relationships with the students at every stage of schooling function as catalysts toward satisfying educational pathways” (p. 12).

### **Social Workers at the Research Study Site**

In 2012, 2,026,384 children lived in the state of New Jersey. Of the total number of children living in New Jersey, nearly one in six children (310, 226 or 16.4%) were poor, nearly 5,000 children were homeless, and 9,031 children (4.5 out of 1,000 children) were abused or neglected (Children’s Defense Fund, 2015). In 2010, 40,578 children were arrested in New Jersey, a rate of 4,240 out of 100,000 children aged 10-17. In 2011, 1,005 children and youth were in residential placements, while seven New Jersey children were in adult jails (Children’s Defense Fund, 2015). Education data in New Jersey during the 2012-2013 school year reported there were 2,598 public elementary and



secondary schools and 1,331,925 students enrolled in schools (NCES, 2015a). These data are significant because they reveal a lot about the needs of students in the state of New Jersey, as well as at the research study site.

The school district for the research site indicated that during the 2012-2013 school year, there were six schools with 5,238 students (NCES, 2015b). There were 1,113 students enrolled in the ninth through 12th grades during the 2013-2014 school year, with a student population consisting of 73% Hispanic, 19% African American, and 5% White students (New Jersey Department of Education, 2015). During the 2013-2014 school year, 17% of student enrollment was students with disabilities (New Jersey Department of Education, 2015). The research study site also had a free and reduced-price lunch program of 81.6% (New Jersey Department of Education, 2015). These statistics report that the district, including the research study site, had a high number of students who were poor or poverty stricken, thus increasing the likelihood of these students being at risk for negative outcomes. These findings are paramount for school social workers who serve the needs of the students in this district's public schools.

The school district for the study site consisted of the district preschool program (which has three campuses), one elementary school (kindergarten only), three other elementary schools (Grades 1 through 5), one middle school (Grades 6 through 8), and one high school (Grades 9 through 12). Each school's personnel included one principal, and the number of assistant principals varied from one to four, depending on number of students enrolled in the school. The number of school counselors varied from one to six depending on student enrollment in a building. There was one school psychologist and one learning consultant assigned to each school. The number of school social workers varied from one to two and one-half depending on the needs of the school in which they

were assigned. At times, the school psychologists, learning consultants, and social workers traveled and served all schools, as needed. The district administrators were centrally located at the Board of Education building. They included one superintendent, five supervisors, three directors, and other personnel, such as business administrator, human resources officers, employee benefits specialist, security specialist, payroll specialist, technology director, grants writers, and several secretaries associated with various duties in the above-mentioned departments.

At the time of this study, 10 female school social workers within the school district were members of the Child Study Team and, as such, worked with special needs youth who had a variety of learning and behavioral disabilities. The teams were broken down as follows: preschool, elementary school team (case managers provided services for one or two of the elementary schools within the district), and the secondary team (case managers provided services for the middle and high school in the district). Each social worker had a student caseload of approximately 75-80 students at the secondary level and approximately 35-40 students at the elementary level.

At the study site, the local board of education employed the school social workers and housed in the schools according to the team to which they were assigned. The role of the school social worker could also be a position filled with many pressures and demands during the school day. This was partly due to the many administrators from whom the social worker was responsible to take directives. These various supervisors often had varying views as to the role of the school social worker within the school setting. The school social worker was responsible to the Director of Student Services, Supervisor of Special Education, and Supervisor of the Child Study Team. The Supervisor of Child Study Teams was the immediate supervisor for the social workers. The school social

workers were also responsible to the principals, assistant principals, and other administrators in the buildings who relied heavily on these social workers to assist with any issues that arose with their students (i.e., discipline issues, social/emotional concerns, crises, educational struggles or achievements, parental concerns, etc.). When a student with special needs was having a difficult day, the Child Study Team was often the first line of defense.

School social workers took on a variety of roles while working with the special needs student population in the research setting. The social worker's job description was as follows: conduct and or attend Child Study Team meetings, write individual education plans (IEPs), conduct social assessments, assist with schedules and career planning, plan transitions, and do home visits. If necessary, the social worker was to meet with teachers, guidance, and administrators regarding problem behaviors, observe classrooms, tour various private schools for disabled for possible placement, conduct parent conferences, link students and families to community resources, and provide counseling services (individual, group, or crisis).

Social workers also met with general education students, when the need arose, to provide counseling or crisis intervention services when the guidance counselor was unavailable. The job responsibilities that school social workers carried out daily also varied depending on the needs that arose on any particular day. School social workers' primary responsibilities were essentially to serve as case managers for special needs students on the Child Study Team, as counselors, as advocates, as support staff to teachers and administrators, as a link to various resources, and as liaisons to families and the community. Social work is a profession that is committed to helping individuals, groups, and communities reach the most optimal life they can achieve.

### **Other Helping Professionals Within the School Setting**

In today's schools, there exists a critical need for school-based mental health services to be provided by the school social worker, as well as other disciplines that work in the school setting. At the time of this study, four additional social workers worked in school-based services at the researcher's study site. These social workers worked in conjunction with the Child Study Team, guidance counselors, teachers, and school administration and were under contract to provide services to students in the district through the local mental health clinic. These social workers provided services to students in conjunction with any services provided by the Child Study Team. These social workers provided counseling services (individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, family counseling, education and awareness, etc.) to students who were general education and classified.

School psychologists and school counselors are other support personnel who work in conjunction with the school social worker to provide services to students in schools. There are many overlapping functions among school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers; however, a uniqueness remains to each specialty (Humes & Hohenshil, 1987). Although there are many instances where each discipline's job description may overlap at some time, each discipline continues to be unique in its own right. There are various other helping professionals and support personnel in the school building who also provide support to students, helping them become successful academically as well as on a social and emotional level (i.e., coaches, mentors, peer leaders, etc.).

In the district of the study site, the school psychologist, the school social worker, and the school counselors were all housed within the school buildings (preschool,

elementary, and secondary). The school psychologists and the school social workers were members of the Child Study Team and worked primarily with special needs students (and some general education students, at times). School psychologists were case managers and counsel students, held and attended Child Study Team meetings, and conducted psychological assessments. School psychologists specialized in student and school problems and were responsible for selecting and implementing appropriate interventions to improve outcomes at home and school. Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, and Pollitt (2013) noted, “School psychologists typically have extensive knowledge of learning, motivation, behavior, childhood disabilities, assessment, evaluations, and school law” (p. 11).

The school counselor’s role entails working with all students but working in conjunction with the Child Study Team to meet the needs of the special needs student population. According to Cowan et al. (2013), “School counselors are generally the first school-employed mental health professional to interact with students as they commonly are involved in the provision of universal learning supports to the whole school population” (p. 11). At the study site, school counselors provided a variety of services, including academic counseling, scheduling courses, classroom issues, career and college readiness, assistance with applying to college and or vocational school, and crisis intervention. The school counselor’s area of expertise was in curriculum and instruction and helping students successfully transition through the school years and eventually to college.

Professional and certification restrictions have not prevented these helping disciplines from working together in terms of both practice and training. Together, the social worker, school psychologist, and counselor are expected to support the needs of at-

risk students (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). Lee (1983) noted, “School social workers define what they can do to help students in ways that teachers, counselors, psychologists, and other school personnel cannot” (p. 304). School psychologists primarily look at the psychological and cognitive aspects of student development. The school counselor’s focus is on helping students attain academic achievement, personal and character development, and acquire the necessary college and career readiness skills. Constable and Montgomery (1985) noted, “The social worker has been perceived at different times and places as an educator, psychotherapist, social planner, and liaison between home and school” (p. 244). Contrary to these other disciplines, school social workers have a primary responsibility to look at students’ social development as it is linked to their cognition. According to Allen-Meares (1977), “School social workers have a vital part to play in assisting the educational system in its principal purpose---educating children” (p. 196).

### **The Purpose for Social Workers in the School Setting**

As the number of youth continues to increase in the United States, student enrollment will increase, thus marking a need for more school personnel, particularly social workers. School social workers are a significant group of individuals within the school setting who are instrumental at being a source of social support and encouragement for at-risk special needs youth in the 21st century. In 2012, social workers held about 607,300 jobs and 15% of social workers were employed in educational services, state, local, and private, with median annual wages of \$54,590 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

According to Jozefowicz-Simbeni (2008), “The contemporary school social workers’ time is often spent on student psychosocial assessments, one-on-one and group

counseling, behavior management, crisis intervention, and consultation with teachers and parents” (p. 49). School social workers also serve as case managers for special needs students on child study teams, as counselors, as advocates, as support staff to teachers and administrators, and as liaisons to family and community resources.

Bernat (2009) emphasized, “Despite the recent national concerns about school violence, school can be a place of refuge for youth if school personnel attend to the emotional and physical needs of children under their charge” (p. 254). Schools, or some form of educational setting, are where youth spend most of their time during the day. Although schools have a primary concern to educate students, schools must also concern themselves with a student’s social and emotional development, as well as their academic needs. According to School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA, 2014), “School Social Workers are trained mental health professionals with a degree in social work who provide services related to a person’s social, emotional and life adjustment to school and/or society” (p. 1).

School social workers provide much needed support and encouragement to at-risk, special needs youth within the school setting. Supportive adults act as role models of positive behavior and create atmospheres where youth expect to succeed. Student behavior often changes when they feel safe and are a part of a community at school. This sense of belonging the youth feel increases the likelihood these students will accept the school rules and policy. Students are also more likely to take educational risks when they feel safe in their school environment (Knestling, 2008).

### **Social Workers as Community-School Liaisons**

According to McCullagh (1982), “School personnel and the community must believe that services provided by school social workers are unique, essential, and

effective for many children and that such services are best provided within the school setting” (p. 5). As such, the relationship between school social workers, families, and the community is one of extreme importance. Schools are safe, positive places that can assist at-risk youth while fostering a sense of connectedness and belonging to school and the community, thus increasing the chances of succeeding.

School social workers have the responsibility of being liaisons to students, their families, and the communities in which they serve. School social workers are uniquely trained to facilitate the multiple complex interactions in and among families, schools, and communities (Edwards et al., 2007). The school social worker, as the liaison, must also keep abreast of the many resources that are available for students. Cowan et al. (2013) emphasized, “School social workers have special expertise in understanding family and community systems and linking students and their families with the community services that are essential for promoting student success” (p. 11).

School social workers coordinate with teachers, parents, and school administration to develop plans and strategies to improve students’ academic performance and social development. Students and their families are often referred to social workers to deal with aggressive behavior, bullying, or frequent absences from school (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). School social workers feel they are being valued when they know they are helping others better themselves, thus assisting for better future outcomes. Daly et al. (2010) explained, “Social support provided by school personnel can serve as a powerful impetus for increasing school connectedness, particularly among minority students attending urban schools” (p. 19).

Understanding the changing demographic characteristics of America’s children is critical for shaping social programs and public policies. According to The Federal



Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2012), the number of children determines demand for schools, health care, and other services that are essential to meet the daily needs of families. This is also important to the work of social work in public schools today. March and Gaffney (2010) noted, “When students, families, and school professionals successfully negotiate their relationships, students are able to thrive in school contexts, refine their own identities, and effectively traverse educational pathways toward goal attainment” (p. 4).

### **Social Development of Adolescents in School**

Wodarski and Dziegielewski (2005) explained, “Adolescence is the life stage marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. Like those developmental phases that preceded it, distinct biological, psychological, and social changes occur within the individual” (p. 94). Adolescent youth experience many changes as they transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence is a time of rapid development and change with important consequences, some of which include the adoption of risky behaviors (Ahern et al., 2008; Sharland, 2006). Adolescent youth often struggle with many variables as they come into who they are as a person and attempt to exert their independence. It is a time of conflict and tension between adolescents and their parents, frequently regarding issues of authority and control (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2006). Behaviors such as unprotected sexual behavior, alcohol and drug abuse, school dropout, and violence contribute to the primary causes of morbidity and mortality in youth (Aronowitz, 2005).

Schools are important to adolescents in the context of identity development. School environments can be viewed as salient contexts in which individuals undergo significant developmental changes (Brown, Kanny, & Johnson, 2014). Schools must be able to support the student’s academic needs, as well as their needs regarding their

development and sense of identity. As cited in Brown et al. (2014), seminal work introduced the stage-environment fit model. This model conceptualized schools as ecological systems where identity development occurs. Brown et al. emphasized,

For adolescents, academic success is dependent on the uniqueness and transformability of a school environment to initiate change in contrast with the messages received from peers and the surrounding community, and also to support new identity formations that promote long-term academic success. (p. 179)

This model included the school setting as an intermediate environment situated within a hierarchy, emphasizing interactions between the layers as student development occurs. According to Eccles and Roeser (2009), “Schools must be characterized by multiple levels of analysis composed of various regulatory processes (organizational, interpersonal, and instructional in nature)” (p. 404).

The study conducted by Brown et al. (2014) investigated individual aspects of the school setting and its influence in promoting positive academic outcomes and youth development. Thirty-one African American eighth-grade students participated in the study by participating in 2 one-on-one semistructured interviews, two demographic surveys, one short-answer questionnaire, and a videotaped tour of the school. This study presented evidence that schools played a fundamental role in changing high-risk, African American youths’ academic perceptions, trajectories, and aspirations. Brown et al. noted, “The findings of this study suggest that school settings serve to change how high-risk, African American adolescents perceive their future academic opportunities and identities as academic beings” (p. 186).

Wodarski and Dziegielewska (2002) acknowledged, “One of the important tasks

for the adolescent is the development of a sense of identity” (p. 94). Adolescent youth often try to figure out how they fit in as individuals and where they belong in relation to their same-aged peers. Aronowitz (2005) stated, “A critical developmental task of adolescence is the formation of a sense of identity, a comprehensive set of personal values regarding career goals, relationships, and political and religious beliefs” (p. 205). As adolescents transition through this developmental stage, they should be able to form healthy relationships with other people in their lives (family, siblings, friends, teachers, etc.). On the contrary, if the adolescent experiences great turmoil or is exposed to negative situations, this may be detrimental to his or her development (i.e., issues with social interactions, increase in behaviors, personality or developmental disorders, etc.). Subsequently, supportive adult role models assist youth in pulling from an “inner strength” while tapping into the protective factors that have led them to overcome the obstacles in their lives. Hurd (2010) stated, “As adolescents become less dependent on their parents, they may actively seek out other adults who they can look up to or who they can go to for support and guidance” (p. 3).

As these youth encounter various circumstances and societal maladies, they will benefit from having caring, competent adults who can offer them much needed support and guidance. Because at-risk youth spend most of their day in a school setting, schools will be the optimal place for these youth to utilize the supports made available to them. Sheafor and Horejsi (2006) believed “effective social work intervention during this developmental period can prevent serious problems and have lifelong, positive effects” (p. 527). This is a valid reason why supportive, competent social workers are of great need in schools.

## **Social Support and At-Risk Students**

According to Lipschitz-Elhawi and Itzhaky (2008), “The living environment of at-risk adolescents differs from that in which normative adolescents grow up” (p. 386). At-risk youth often face various challenges as they navigate through these formative school years. These youth often encounter circumstances that can have deleterious consequences on their future. DiCecco and DiCecco (2007) commented as follows:

What is known is that high risk youth are usually heavily involved in behaviors and situations that have potentially damaging consequences. These often include: early “acting out”; evidence of an absence of nurturing parents; having been a victim of child abuse; disengagement from school; involvement with a negative peer group; depression; residence in disadvantaged neighborhoods; and little exposure to the work world. Many come from high-risk families who may also need intervention services. (p. 32)

These situations often place many stressors on the student, as well as their families. Lipschitz-Elhawi and Itzhaky (2008) noted, “An at-risk adolescent whose family environment is characterized by stress and disadvantage often does not have role models who feel a sense of mastery over their lives and surroundings” (p. 386). Schools have become the “safe place” for some students who have numerous familial, environmental, educational, and social or emotional issues with which to contend. According to Bernat (2009), “Despite the recent national concerns about school violence, school can be a place of refuge for youth if school personnel attend to the emotional and physical needs of children under their charge” (p. 254).

When at-risk youth know they have someone in their corner who is concerned about their well-being, the way they view life and their current circumstances is changed.

Laursen (2008) believed that, “with the caring and emotional support given by others, youth acquire the belief that their lives have meaning and that they are in control of their own fate” (p. 8). In those instances where these youth cannot see past the negative life events and difficulties they encounter daily, having someone who they can trust may show them they have other options of which they can take advantage. Maschi (2006) acknowledged, “While some of these negative life events may be unavoidable in the lives of youth, increasing the level of social support may be an important avenue for prevention and intervention efforts geared toward at-risk youth” (p. 63).

For many of these youth, this is due to the devotion of significant, supportive adults at their school, particularly, a social worker. The importance of social support for traumatized and delinquent youth is a particularly important finding to the field of social work (Maschi, 2006). These students need to know there will be someone there for them, should the need arise. A competent and caring adult may prevent youth from engaging in antisocial behaviors and support more prosocial behaviors. Ultimately, such behaviors may alter the youth’s contextual environment and then lead to better academics and social behaviors (Rosenfeld, Richman, Bowen, & Wynns, 2006; Tiet et al., 2010).

Broussard et al. (2006) studied community-school mentors in collaboration with social workers, teachers, administrators, and parents to boost protective factors by wrapping services around youth. In 1987, the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (CYC) was formed in response to high failure and dropout rates in Cincinnati public schools. The CYC multidimensional mentoring program, sponsored through collaboration with area businesses, schools, and volunteers, matched more than 1,000 one-to-one mentors with area children in Grades 3 through 12. The study concluded urban schools and communities together with families are in a position to meet many challenges through

collaboration.

Findings from a large research study indicated a positive relationship between social support and outcomes of interest to educators (Rosenfeld et al., 2006). It is important to recognize that current reviews of the research literature revealed there remain a number of at-risk youth with behavioral disabilities who, despite being categorized as at-risk, manage to lead successful lives. Current research on social support indicated that youth who are successful at school could attribute their school success to having supportive adults in their lives. Sterrett et al. (2011) added, “In summary, support from non-parental adults has been linked to a number of indices related to academic functioning, including higher levels of positive academic attitudes, motivation, school attendance, and academic achievement” (p. 289).

### **Students With Special Needs**

According to Greene and Winters (2007), “In 1975, the federal government enacted the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which requires States to provide a ‘free appropriate public education’ to all students with disabilities” (p. 67). This also called for many changes to special education, including the implementation of laws needed to meet the growing needs of this population of students adequately. Greene and Winters added, “Since the implementation of the federal law and subsequent state laws, the percentage of students in the nation identified as requiring special education has risen sharp” (p. 67). NCES (2015a) noted, “The number of children and youth ages 3-21 receiving special education services was 6.4 million, or about 13 percent of all public school students, in 2012-2013; 35 percent of those students receiving special education services had specific learning disabilities” (para. 1).

As the number of students who require special education services in public schools increases, a growing need for professional and certified staff members to cater to the needs of these students is warranted. The students who require these services will enter school with a variety of academic, medical, physical, developmental, and social/emotional issues that will warrant the need for individualized educational services. NCES (2015a) stated, “Among all children and youth ages 6-21 who were served under IDEA, the percentage who spent most of the school day in general classes in regular schools (i.e., 80 percent or more of time) increased from 33 percent in 1990-91 to 61 percent in 2012-13” (para. 5).

Rosetti and Henderson (2013) conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study entitled, “Lived Experiences of Adolescents With Learning Disabilities.” The purpose of this study was to capture the lived experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities. A small, purposive sample of four adolescents with learning disabilities was interviewed concerning their experiences related to the following themes: social support, learning disabilities understanding, school experiences, and self-advocacy. This study shed light on the need for more research concerning the lived experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities. Learning more about the lived experiences of this population can help to identify areas in which they can be supported and encouraged. Rosetti and Henderson’s study provided an in-depth understanding of the role of family, as well as more about the impact of school experiences. An individual IPA research design was the most appropriate method to provide these four students the opportunity to voice their experiences with learning disabilities.

As an advocate for students who require special education services, the school social worker is responsible for a number of duties. Some of these duties include

attending individual education plan (IEP) meetings, providing counseling (individual or group), participating in crisis intervention, meetings with families and child study teams, linking students and families to outside resources, meetings with administration, consulting with teachers and guidance counselors, participating in case management, and visiting schools, just to name a few. The school social worker, as a case manager for special needs students, is also responsible to make sure the students receive the proper services they may need to succeed during the school day.

### **Youth With Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities**

In the United States in 2012, 5% of children aged 4-17 were reported to have emotional and behavioral difficulties (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015). Research suggested these statistics may or may not depict a true representation of the current data involving students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Broussard et al. (2006) acknowledged, “Children enter school with varied learning behavioral, emotional, and social characteristics, some of which increase their risk of school-related problems” (p. 122). Students who have emotional and behavioral disabilities often struggle during the day at school. These students have difficulty with their relationships (familial and peer relationships), social interactions, and they seem to also have poor academic outcomes. These challenges can impair psychosocial adjustment, parent and peer relationships, and school performance, and they can be severe enough to warrant intervention from the special education and or mental health systems (Wagner et al., 2006). According to Bartick-Ericson (2008),

Emotional disturbance is defined by the American Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, that adversely



affects a child's educational performance: (a) an inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; (c) inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or (e) tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (p. 50)

Bradley, Doolittle, and Bartolotta (2008) emphasized, "Many advocates of students with emotional and behavioral issues and mental health personnel have viewed the number of students who are served as being only a fraction of the students who truly need assistance" (p. 6). This is significant because there are already huge demands placed on schools and school personnel daily in efforts to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of these students. Deloach et al. (2012) noted, "In schools, students with EBD require significant mental health and educational services by school mental health professionals and educators" (p. 6). Students with EBD have the poorest educational, behavioral, and social outcomes of any disability group, including lower grades, lower social interaction, more course failures, school failure, higher retention, highest school dropout, and lower rates of passing minimum competency tests. There have been no apparent improvements over the past several decades (Bartick-Ericson, 2006; Bradley et al., 2008; Deloach et al., 2012; Wagner et al., 2006).

A research study conducted by Montague et al. (2011) investigated academic, behavioral, and emotional outcomes for adolescents who were followed longitudinally from middle through high school to determine if early assessment of achievement and behavior predicts academic and behavioral outcomes for adolescents who were identified as at risk for developing emotional and behavioral problems when they were in primary

school. Montague et al. stated, “Understanding the relationships among these problems in children and how their early manifestation affects development is important for preventing poor outcomes in adolescence that include delinquency, violence, substance use, teen pregnancy, and school dropout” (p. 141). Teacher ratings and student self-reports suggested the behavioral and emotional symptoms for this school-based sample of predominantly minority adolescents decreased over time, although there was significant variability for individuals.

The results of the study by Montague et al. (2011) indicated that at-risk students in special education had significantly higher self-ratings of emotional problems than the other groups and viewed school more negatively. Results also had implications for early identification, prevention/intervention programs, and transition planning for children and youth at risk for developing behavior problems. Montague et al. summed up the study by stating, “Understanding the specific risk factors and the variables that are most closely related to negative as well as positive academic, social, and behavioral outcomes across the school years is essential to providing optimal services for children and adolescents most at risk for poor outcomes” (p. 142).

A study conducted by Bartick-Ericson (2006) looked into the importance of feelings of security in relationships for emotionally disturbed adolescents in special education. The impact of several relationships in the home and school life (i.e., mother; father; teachers; therapists, especially social workers; and peers) on the school experience of these adolescents were explored. The results of the study showed that all these relationships were potentially “secure bases” for adolescents, providing the emotional safety necessary to engage in the challenges of the academic environment (Bartick-Ericson, 2006). Sixty-four students, with a classification of emotionally disturbed and

who were between the ages of 11 and 19 years old, participated in the study. According to Bartick-Ericson, “The provision of a safe environment in which to learn and the opportunity for the development of secure relationships may be of great importance for academic success” (p. 57).

Another study conducted by Bradley et al. (2008) added to the existing literature, based largely on longitudinal studies, regarding identification of students with EBD, the services students with EBD receive, and their outcomes. The specific educational services children with EBD receive are a critical factor influencing their outcomes (Bradley et al., 2008). Bradley et al. highlighted the need for comprehensive and focused efforts geared toward improving outcomes for children with EBD. The results from Bradley et al.’s study confirmed that, in order to serve students effectively with EBD,

The responsibility for their outcomes must be expanded to focus not only on change in the individual child, but also on the changes needed in both the child’s environment and the behaviors of the adults who interact with the child. (p. 5)

Bradley et al. (2008) also expressed that the lack of training and support for teachers of students with EBD was an issue that contributed to these students’ poor outcomes. Bradley et al. expressed that more needs to be done for these students, including the use of response to intervention, early intervening services (as appropriate), positive behavior supports, increased interagency collaboration, and coordination, all on a school-wide basis. Bradley et al. added,

Whether deliberate or not, there appears to be a bias associated with the EBD label and, regardless of academic abilities or performance, students with EBD experience far less school success than other students with disabilities, either as a result of their own actions or the perception of their actions by the adults that

surround them. (p. 20)

According to DiCecco and DiCecco (2007), “School administrators report gaps in services and high levels of frustration with efforts to navigate through the maze of services that are available. Community support providers report a lack of adequate funding to respond to existing priorities” (p. 32). The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act required that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment, be taught using the general curriculum (as the general education students), participate in district-wide testing, and taught in a manner to achieve adequate yearly progress as all students. Students with emotional issues often require numerous supports and accommodations to assist them to be successful during the school day. Bradley et al. (2008) emphasized, “Although the ultimate goal is to serve each child in the least restrictive environment possible, school-based behavioral intervention programs may not have the capacity to address all of the needs of a child with EBD” (p. 17).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Ahern et al. (2008) proffered, “Resilience is often associated with discussions about periods of transition, disaster or adversity” (p. 32). As a result, resilience has become increasingly popular in the psychology, social science, and mental health fields. Researchers are constantly looking at how some people strive and do well, despite the trauma and negative experiences they have encountered in life. Researchers have found there are multiple factors involved with the concept of resilience (i.e., numerous individual characteristics, various coping strategies, community resources, personality types, etc.). The common experiences of resilience influenced the development of research on individual assets, rather than deficits, and successful outcomes rather than

negative outcomes (Atkinson et al., 2009). According to Atkinson et al. (2009), “Adult resilience studies have included the following as outcomes: longevity . . . physical and mental health status . . . and career success” (p. 142). Current research also examined various interventions that can be put into place to offset the effects of the adversity, trauma, or stress a person has experienced.

The role of a school social worker can be a very rewarding experience, although the stress of the job can also be emotionally draining at times. Many social workers tend to get overwhelmed due to work stress, burnout, turnover rates, as well as the levels of compassion and trauma associated with the field of social work. Despite the increasing stress and high demands of the job, many resilient school social workers remain in this field of social work. The reasons may vary for many social workers, which will give these social workers a voice and possibly open up another view into the profession.

Adamson, Beddoe, and Davys (2012) conducted a study on the topic of building resilient practitioners in the social work field, which took

the conceptual focus of resilience from that of the service user and community to the experience of the social work practitioner and . . . explored the perceptions of experienced social workers in relation to resilience in the face of workplace demands and stressors. (p. 522)

Twenty-one participants, who were experienced practitioners in health and in mental health social work, and experienced supervisors of student social workers in New Zealand participated in Adamson et al.’s (2012) study. According to Adamson et al., “Individual qualitative interviewing was chosen as the methodology in order that the richness of practitioner experience and the unique narratives regarding their own perception of resilience could be captured” (p. 528). The results indicated that being

resilient connected the social worker's personal motivations for being in the profession with effective practice and good outcomes for service users.

The dissertation investigated the resilience of the social workers in the study and discovered the meaning these social workers took from the work they did with the students they served, as well as the reasons why they remained in the social work field. The dissertation also used a resilience lens to analyze why social workers continued in their field of work within the public school system, despite the many obstacles they faced in their role. According to Adamson et al. (2012), "Resilience does not imply invincibility, but it does signal an ability to resist becoming overwhelmed to the point of extreme physical or psychological distress" (p. 525).

In conjunction with resilience, this researcher utilized a strengths-based perspective as an analytical lens for the dissertation. Resilience is central to the paradigm of strengths-based practice and recovery within the social work field (Atkinson et al., 2009). *Strengths perspective* was defined by Barker (1999) as "an orientation in social work practices that emphasizes the client's resources, capabilities, support systems, and motivations to meet challenges and overcome adversity" (p. 468). Saint-Jacques, Turcotte, and Pouliot (2009) used strengths perspective with families in difficulty and examined the interventions of practitioners working in youth centers and in local community centers.

The mixed-methods study by Saint-Jacques et al. (2009) was conducted using 13 child case managers and seven child case-management administrators who participated in a yearlong implementation of an intensive services program in a rural setting; a qualitative analysis of the practitioners' personal practice and a quantitative survey measuring the practitioners' work with 118 families were conducted. The results of the

study indicated the practitioners elected to concentrate on the weaknesses of the participants instead of their strengths, which was contrary to the strengths-based perspective utilized in the study. As a result, the findings did not efficiently measure or place importance on the participants' strengths, which could have led to different outcomes.

Saint-Jacques et al.'s (2009) study did express areas that would be beneficial for further research studies. The study suggested further understanding of the factors and experiences that encourage practitioners to adopt a strengths-based approach to assist in determining how their work influences practitioners. The researcher employed a strengths-based perspective in the dissertation study to investigate the experiences of school social worker's challenges and successes serving at-risk students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

After reviewing the available research, it was evident further research would need to be conducted giving a voice to the social worker's point of view, thus contributing to the scarce literature regarding the perceived roles and the lived experiences of the social workers who worked with at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in the school setting. In essence, after reviewing the research studies, the current study sought to fill the following gaps in the literature to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of school social workers who provided support to youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, as follows:

1. The role positive adult support plays in assisting youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities to have successful outcomes.
2. The reasons why school social workers continue to work with at-risk youth

with emotional and behavioral disabilities in the school setting.

Children today are increasingly victims of many social forces that negatively affect their role as students. The family is in a state of change and until it becomes stabilized, in whatever form, children's unmet physical and emotional needs will continue to interfere with their ability to learn and adjust in school (SSWAA, 2014). As a result of this, there is a need that exists to help us better understand the significant role of the school social worker in providing emotional support to at-risk, special needs youth with emotional or behavioral disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher used the following research questions to guide the study:

1. What are the lived experiences of school social workers serving at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a large, urban, central New Jersey school district?
2. What meaning do the school social workers serving at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a large, urban, central New Jersey school district make of their role in working with at-risk youth?
3. What are the successes, challenges, and risks for school social workers serving at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a large, urban, central New Jersey school district?



### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This phenomenological qualitative study investigated the lived experiences of school social workers who served at-risk, special needs youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a large urban school district in the central New Jersey area. The researcher sought to understand the experiences these school social workers encountered while working with this student population. In this research study, the researcher conducted interviews with 10 school social workers following IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). This chapter presents a detailed account of the research methodology and design, including the process for selecting participants, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, potential research bias, and limitations to the study.

#### **Qualitative Research Approach**

The design for the research study was a qualitative IPA. According to Smith et al. (2012), IPA is a recently developed and rapidly growing approach to qualitative inquiry and that phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experiences. Smith et al. further stated, “IPA is concerned with understanding personal lived experience and thus with exploring persons’ relatedness to, or involvement in, a particular event or process (phenomenon)” (p. 40). Thompson (2014) stated that,

in his or her efforts to uncover or understand the experience of another, a phenomenological researcher must attempt to establish a credible relationship with the person so that person can feel confident in providing insight into his or her life. (p. 41)

A phenomenological research approach was an appropriate strategy to this research topic, as this approach shaped the type of questions asked, the form of data

collection, and the steps of data analysis. Rosetti and Henderson (2013) conducted an IPA study entitled, “Lived Experiences of Adolescents with Learning Disabilities.” The purpose of this study was to capture the lived experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities. A small, purposive sample of four adolescents with learning disabilities were interviewed concerning their experiences related to social support, understanding of learning disabilities, school experiences, and self-advocacy. This study shed light on the need for more research concerning the lived experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities. Learning more about the lived experiences of this population can help to identify areas in which they can be supported and encouraged. Rosetti and Henderson’s study provided an in-depth understanding of the role of family, as well as more about the impact of school experiences. An IPA research design was the most appropriate method to provide these four students the opportunity to voice their experiences with learning disabilities.

According to Smith et al. (2012), IPA was chosen as an appropriate approach for examining the lived experiences of school social workers who work with the at-risk youth in public schools because IPA is committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences. IPA is the preferred qualitative method to investigate adequately the experiences of school social workers. Utilizing an IPA allowed the researcher to gather the social worker’s personal and intimate details of their experiences in the field of social work with the at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

### **Participants**

Ten school social workers from a public school district in central New Jersey between the ages of 32 and 59-1/2 years of age, of various ethnicities, were purposefully

selected to participate in the IPA qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). These school social workers shared the experience of working in a public school district with at-risk, special needs students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The research study took place at an urban high school in central New Jersey. The study site had approximately 988 students and 17% of the student population consisted of students with disabilities (New Jersey Department of Education, 2015).

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with 10 school social workers who worked with the emotional and behavioral disabilities student population at the high school study site. Each social worker had a bachelor's or master's level degree in social work and also worked in the study site with special needs students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. A detailed chart of the participants is in the table. Besides their experiences of being a school social worker, these participants were also chosen because of their efforts to continue working with this at-risk population of students providing them with social supports. The researcher recruited 10 school social workers who worked with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities at the study site. The demographics of all 10 participants are depicted in the table.

All of the participants in the study were employees of the school district at the study site and had worked at the study site with at-risk, special needs youth with emotional and behavior disabilities while employed there. Each social worker selected as a participant for the study participated in two interviews (approximately 60 minutes each in length), which helped the researcher gain a greater understanding of their experiences as social workers serving students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Participants also filled out a demographic questionnaire to help the researcher gather some background information on each of them.

Table

*Study Participants Demographics*

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Highest level of education	Number of years practicing as a social worker	Number of years working in current school district
P1	57	Female	Caucasian	Master's	10.0	10.0
P2	32	Female	Hispanic	Master's	5.6	5.6
P3	56	Female	Caucasian	Master's	13.4	13.4
P4	59 ½	Female	Caucasian	Master's	5.0	5.0
P5	48	Female	Hispanic	Master's	10.0	10.0
P6	41	Female	African American	Master's	12.0	12.0
P7	38	Female	Caucasian	Master's	14.0	14.0
P8	57	Female	African American	Master's	15.0	15.0
P9	33	Female	Hispanic	Bachelor's	5.0	5.0
P10	45	Female	Hispanic	Master's	14.6	14.6

Each social worker's involvement and participation in the research study was voluntary. Each social worker was informed he or she may choose to withdraw or discontinue his or her involvement in the research study at any given time. The participants were not offered any form of compensation for their participation in the study. The participants had their privacy and personal information protected and kept

strictly confidential. Participants were asked where they would like the interviews to take place. The interviews were conducted at mutually agreed-upon locations between the researcher and each participant.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The research study included a demographic instrument designed by the researcher (see Appendix A) and a questionnaire instrument that was used by Peckover et al. (2013; see Appendix B). Peckover et al. gave the researcher permission to use the instrument for this study as a means for gathering information on school social work roles. The qualitative study by Peckover et al. identified major shifts in current education policy related to the school social worker's practice of social work tasks in Iowa. The study concluded that school social work policy is experiencing a shift toward multilevel systems of intervention, such as response to intervention, whereas school social work practice continues to follow a traditional model of clinical social casework (Peckover et al., 2013).

The semistructured interview instrument allowed the researcher to ask in-depth interview questions to elicit responses that reflected the personal experiences of each participating school social worker during the one-to-one interview process. The interview questions were open-ended and semistructured, allowing participants the opportunity to expound freely upon information they deemed relevant to the study topic. The questions were open-ended, which allowed participants the opportunity to explore topics fully as they related to the various experiences for the social worker.

Smith et al. (2012) noted, "Interviewing allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of participants' responses, and the investigator is able to enquire after any other interesting areas which

arise” (p. 57). This allowed participants to give detailed accounts of their lived experiences as school social workers. These interviews were the primary method used to elicit conversation about each social worker’s experience. The interviews also helped each social worker recall stories and assisted them with expressing their thoughts and feelings about the students they served with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

This instrument also provided each social worker with an opportunity to voice what it meant to be a social worker and why he or she continued working in the social work field. After each interview, the researcher recorded and transcribed the interview data. IPA requires a verbatim record of the data collection and, for individual interviews, the norm is an audio recording (Smith et al., 2012). This researcher utilized audio recordings to assist with collecting data from the interviews. The data collected were only be heard by the researcher.

## **Procedures**

The researcher first obtained permission to conduct the research study from the Institutional Review Board of Nova Southeastern University. The researcher also obtained permission from the Superintendent of Schools for the high school study site and from the Board of Education for the district. The researcher obtained permission from the Board of Education by sending a letter to the Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education requesting permission to conduct the research study. Once permission was granted from the Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education, the researcher then requested from the Director of Pupil Services the contact information of all social workers who worked for the school district.

The researcher then recruited each social worker as potential participants by sending an e-mail informing them of the study taking place and requesting their

participation in the study (see Appendix C). The researcher picked the 10 social workers who responded to the researcher's e-mail and who met the criteria for participation. Once the social workers were chosen and they agreed to participate in the study, the researcher scheduled dates for each participant to be interviewed. At the initial interview, the researcher went over the informed consent with each participant and answered any questions about the research study before proceeding with the interview.

Two 60-minute interviews were scheduled with each school social worker. Responses to the demographic and questionnaire instrument assisted with understanding the lived experiences of school social workers who worked with at-risk, special needs youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Each interview was separated by at least 1 week. The time that was given between each interview gave the researcher time to transcribe each interview. According to Smith et al. (2012),

A good IPA study will always have a considerable number of verbatim extracts from the participants' material to support the argument being made, thus giving participants a voice in the project and allowing the reader to check the interpretations being made. (p. 181)

This also allowed each participant the opportunity to review the transcriptions for accuracy and make necessary edits he or she did not want to appear to the public (Smith et al., 2012).

**Interview 1.** The initial 60-minute interview centered on developing trust and rapport with each participant. According to Smith et al. (2012), "the most important thing at the beginning of the interview is to establish a rapport with the participant. They need to be comfortable with you, to know what you want, and to trust you" (p. 65). Beginning with the first interview, the researcher described her reason for conducting the research,

as well as how the data would be used. To establish rapport and promote trust, the researcher asked each participant general demographic questions (see Appendix A). Once the researcher felt the participant was comfortable with the interview, she began to explore his or her intimate experiences of being a school social worker by asking questions related to what led him or her to choose the social work field. This helped to elicit memories and responses from the social workers by asking them to recall memories of life events or moments they believe led them to choose to enter the field of social work. This also assisted with preparing each social worker for the second interview.

**Interview 2.** The second interview assisted each social worker with building upon his or her responses, thus helping to elaborate more on responses from the first interview. This assisted the researcher to elicit more in-depth conversation from each participant as he or she described the successes, challenges, or risks associated with working with youth with emotional or behavioral disabilities. Based on their responses, participants were able to reflect on why they desired to continue working in the social work field with this youth population. The researcher also provided each participant with an opportunity to elaborate on any experiences he or she may have left out or may have wanted to include in the previous interview discussion.

The researcher then conducted individual interviews using the questionnaire instrument by Peckover et al. (2013). The researcher was able to gather another perspective on how school social workers felt about the services they provided to the students they served. The researcher attempted to show how each social worker's experiences in the field had shaped his or her view of the importance of the social work role in schools and his or her desire to continue working in the field. Finally, the second interview enabled participants to share the meaning and lessons learned about the



phenomena.

### **Data Analysis**

This researcher intended to analyze the data to develop a greater understanding of the lived experiences of school social workers who work with at-risk youth with emotional or behavioral disabilities. To accomplish data analysis when conducting this qualitative study, the researcher read the interview transcripts several times, coded the information gathered from the transcripts, determined patterns from the interview dialogue, and created themes as they emerged from the data (Smith et al., 2012). The researcher based the data analysis on the six steps of the IPA process described by Smith et al. (2012) for interpreting and analyzing data for in-depth phenomenological interviews as follows:

1. Reading and rereading.
2. Initial noting.
3. Developing emergent themes.
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes.
5. Moving to the next case.
6. Looking for patterns across cases.

IPA's description of the process of analysis for a single case always analyzes the first case in detail; moves to the second case and, doing the same, then moves to the third case, and so on (Smith et al., 2012).

**IPA Step 1: Reading and rereading.** In the research study, the researcher began the process of data analysis by listening to each interview that was conducted a minimum of two times. The first step of an IPA analysis involved immersing oneself in some of the original data. To immerse herself in the data, the researcher read the data repeatedly until

a full understanding of what was said by the participant was better understood. Smith et al. emphasized repeated reading also allows a model of the overall interview structure to develop and permits the analyst to gain an understanding of how narratives can bind certain sections of an interview together. This also helped the researcher arrange the information in a way that assisted her with further data analysis. The researcher recorded each interview on audiotapes and transcribed each participant's dialogue.

**IPA Step 2: Initial noting.** The second step of the IPA data analysis is the most detailed and time-consuming (Smith et al., 2012). The researcher delved into the transcripts and took personal notes based on the participants' comments in an effort to become familiar with the data presented. Smith et al. (2012) emphasized, "This process ensures a growing familiarity with the transcript, and, moreover, it begins to identify specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands and thinks about an issue" (p. 83). This also assisted the researcher with the interpretation of the data presented.

**IPA Step 3: Developing emergent themes.** The third step of data analysis involved developing emergent themes. Smith et al. (2012) noted,

In looking for emergent themes, the task of managing the data changes as the analyst simultaneously attempts to reduce the volume of detail (the transcript and the initial notes) whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes. (p. 91)

The researcher utilized the notes-taken technique on each individual transcript to identify patterns from the transcripts and pullout themes that emerged. The researcher pieced together the areas of the transcripts that were similar or the areas that stood out among the participants interviewed. The researcher arranged the themes in the order in which they occurred within the interviews. The themes reflected not only the

participant's original words and thoughts, but also the analyst's interpretation.

**IPA Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes.** Step 4 involved the development of a charting, or mapping, of how the analyst thought the themes fit together. At this point in the data analysis, the researcher looked for a means of drawing together the emergent themes and produced a structure that pointed to all of the most interesting and important aspects of the participant's account.

**IPA Step 5: Moving to the next case.** Step 5 involved moving to the next participant's transcript or account and repeating the process. It was important to maintain the individuality of the next case and each case that followed, remembering that each participant's case in the study brought its own rich and unique qualities to the data. Bracketing the ideas that emerged from the analysis of the first case while working on the second kept with IPA's idiographic commitment.

**IPA Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases.** Step 6 involved looking for patterns across cases. The researcher attempted to discover how a particular theme in one case helped to bring a level of clarity to another case. The researcher strived to make connections among the themes presented in the study. The researcher's ultimate plan was to uncover the common themes that best represented the data studied. The results of this process could be presented in a number of ways but, in this case, connections for the group were shown as a whole.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher provided each participant in the study with a clear, detailed explanation about the nature of the study. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study at any point before and during the study. The participants were also informed their participation in the study was voluntary. Each participant was

advised that he or she had the right to withdraw from the research study at any time. Each participant answered the same set of questions for the study. The researcher was the only one who had access to and use of the research data. The participants' anonymity was protected at all times using pseudonyms. To ensure additional security, all data for the current study were also placed in a locked cabinet and stored on a password-protected computer. The researcher safeguarded the results of the interviews and the recordings, and information will be destroyed upon the publication within 3 years.

### **Trustworthiness**

To validate this instrument and maintain reliability, the researcher had a certified school social worker review the demographic and interview instrument and give the researcher feedback; this social worker served as the "expert" person. The researcher also had two additional certified school social workers, who did not participate in the current study, but piloted the instruments. This served as a means of identifying to the researcher if the instrument would be applicable for use in the current study. The researcher also provided the transcripts to participants to review their responses and make any necessary edits and omissions to their responses.

### **Potential Research Bias**

The researcher became personally acquainted with the area of school social work in 2002. She graduated with a master's degree in social work and was very much interested in working with adolescent youth. A friend, with whom the researcher graduated from grad school, was offered a job in a high school and notified the researcher the school was looking for another social worker to fill a position. Upon starting the position, the researcher quickly came to see how the needs of the at-risk, special needs population had gone underserved in this district. The administrators were looking for

fresh, young employees who were able to relate to and provide support and resources to the youth. Over the past 13 years in this position, the researcher has encountered many social workers who have left the field, as well as many who remain despite their displeasure with the current issues that plague school districts and the field of social work.

The researcher understood the importance of understanding and managing personal biases in relation to this research study. The researcher managed any potential biases she may have had through maintaining a personal journal. This personal journal served as a means of writing down the researcher's thoughts, reflections, memories, and insights that arose concerning each participant's interview responses during the data collection and analysis.

### **Limitations**

The data from this study relied solely on the accounts of 10 school social workers' interviews as the data source. The study focused on one school district located in central New Jersey. It would be advantageous in future research to supplement school social worker reports with findings from other disciplines (i.e., school counselors, school psychologists, teachers, school administrators, mentors, etc.), as well as from other geographic regions outside of central New Jersey. The data relied mainly on the school social workers as sources of information. It would be advantageous in future research, for example, to supplement the school social worker experiences with commentary from other disciplines (i.e., school counselors, school psychologists, teachers, school administrators, etc.). This could help increase the validity of the school social worker experience working with at-risk special needs youth.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of school social workers' interactions with at-risk, special needs youth who had an emotional and behavior disability in a public high school setting in central New Jersey. The intent of this study was to explore the phenomenon of the lived experiences of 10 school social workers and to garner emerging themes from the open-ended conversations to apply to the research questions. The IPA approach (Smith et al., 2012) and an exhaustive review of the literature were the criteria used for the analysis of the interview data.

The study was guided by the central research question, What are the lived experiences of school social workers serving at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a large, urban, central New Jersey school district? Subquestions assisted the researcher in gaining additional information in order to understand the social workers' experiences. What meaning do the school social workers serving at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a large, urban, central New Jersey school district make of their role in working with at-risk youth? What are the successes, challenges, and risks for school social workers serving at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a large, urban, central New Jersey school district?

### **Participants' Backgrounds**

The researcher interviewed 10 school social workers; all of the participants were females. Of those 10 school social workers, four identified as Caucasian, four identified as Hispanic, and two identified as being African American. At the time of the interview, the social workers ranged from ages 32 to 59 1/2. The time spent practicing as a school social worker ranged from 5 to 15 years. Each participant was given a pseudonym that

was used throughout the study so his or her identity remained protected. The researcher discusses each participant's background below.

**Mary.** Mary had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 10 years. The highest level of education she achieved was a master's degree. Mary recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to choose to become a social worker:

I have reflected upon that a lot and I am sure that the reason why I wanted to become a social worker is because I am the child of Holocaust survivors. So I've always felt that . . . has had a huge impact on my life. It's not that I've always felt that it's had a huge impact on my life; it actually did have a huge impact on my life. And I think that's what has driven me to become a social worker. My parents were immigrants. I think that affected me as a child, as well.

Mary described her successes in the field as, "success is getting a student to believe in themselves and teaching them to dream. Success is making a difference, one student at a time."

**Zoe.** Zoe had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 5 1/2 years. The highest level of education she had achieved was a master's degree. Zoe recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to choose to become a social worker:

Well, I think for me it was always just something personal. Like I always enjoyed working with people and when I was younger I had the opportunity to grow up in areas that had a lot of diversity and my parents exposed me to different experiences that led me to really think that it would be beneficial for me to work with people. It was kind of like I was drawn to that. We did community service

when I was younger and it's like things just started to fall into place.

Zoe described her successes in the field as “something that would make me feel like it worked itself out and also when we graduate kids.”

**Diana.** Diana had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 13.4 years. The highest level of education she had achieved was a master's degree. Diana recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to choose to become a social worker:

I always wanted to be a social worker, as a young girl. I grew up in a very difficult situation, with my parents, of which both where my mother in fact was drug addicted to very hard drugs . . . They divorced when I was young, we were low income and just experienced all of that, which I can relate to as far as helping others. I always wanted to help others because I went through similar situations that I see my kids going through now, that I'm recently working with.

Diana described her successes in the field as “watching students grow and achieve their goals. When I see students overcome societal norms that are held over them.”

**Martha.** Martha had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 5 years. The highest level of education she had achieved was a master's degree. Martha recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to choose to become a social worker: “I always wanted to do something in the field of psychology. I was actually in school going for my Psy D and a professor told me about the social work degree.” Martha described her successes in the field as “if I can make a connection and have a supportive relationship with students.”

**Ciara.** Ciara had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 10 years. The highest level of education she had achieved was a master's degree.



Ciara recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to choose to become a social worker.

I think it was my freshman year, in high school. I had no idea what I wanted to do and one of my teachers was a psychology teacher. I went to school in Peru, South America, and my psychology teacher, Margarita Tabor, the first day of class, she just talked about how psychologists learn human behavior and I thought that was kind of what I would like to do and it just caught my attention. Since then, that's what sparked me to become a social worker.

Ciara described her successes in the field as "when they [students] obtain a level of maturity and make right decisions."

**Dana.** Dana had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 12 years. The highest level of education she had achieved was a master's degree. Dana recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to choose to become a social worker:

Well, I would like to say that while I was in middle school, which happens to be the same district in which I work in currently, I had a desire to participate with students in some arena. Because I get along really well with children and of course that has always been my thriving desire to work with them, so of course once the opportunity presented itself, I felt the need to grasp such an opportunity.

Dana described her successes in the field as "seeing kids receive the information you give them and hearing them say, 'thank you'."

**Lindsey.** Lindsey had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 14 years. The highest level of education she had achieved was a master's degree in social work. Lindsey recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to

choose to become a social worker:

I feel sometimes when you see certain things in your life, for example, my family had a lot of trauma, I would say. Before I was even born my mom went through a lot of things and then when I grew up, my family was going through a lot of things, particularly a sibling of mine, so we had a lot of rocky roads. My nephew had a lot of problems in school when he was younger and I started just to look into school social work and becoming a social worker to see if I could help people or make a difference in someone's life, because along the way I felt that people helped us, or tried to help us.

Lindsey described her successes in the field as, "When students are successful. When we see students making progress and achieving goals (academic, social or emotional goals)."

**Cathy.** Cathy had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 15 years. The highest level of education she had achieved was a master's degree (Plus). Cathy recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to choose to become a social worker:

Well, I grew up in Brooklyn, so I was exposed to a lot of different environments, drugs, crime, single-family, one parent households, friends and things of that nature so that led me to have an interest in social work, criminal justice and to want to know more and to understand more about how that happens and how certain people get themselves in certain situations and how they make decisions and on what basis they do that.

Cathy described her successes in the field as "to be able to refer to outside agencies. To be able to do outreach."

**Nia.** Nia had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 5

years. The highest level of education she had achieved was a bachelor's degree. Nia recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to choose to become a social worker:

Well, I've always felt like I wanted to help people, that has always just been my drive or my calling, I've always known that. Social work is pretty personal for me, I have an aunt with disabilities and she raised a child who you know, had a lot of depression and then a lot of you know need for services, so you know, it's kind of personal for me . . . I love children and I've always just had you know a natural "want" to help them.

Nia described her successes in the field as "being able to see students through all of their hardships. Seeing them strive, learn, and graduate."

**Madison.** Madison had been practicing as a social worker in the school district for the past 14 1/2 years. The highest level of education she had achieved was a master's degree. Madison recalled the following when asked what she believed led her to choose to become a social worker:

I grew up in Lakewood, so I grew up in a single-family home (I was raised by my mom only). I had no contact at all with my father. I never even knew him until I was like 13, until my mom introduced me to him. I saw the struggles my mom went through with work, you know like just making ends meet, trying to buy clothes for us and food for us. I come from a family of four and I'm the baby, so I saw the struggles my mom made. I remember vividly, as a little kid, going to the welfare office and waiting on line and we would go from there and she would get her little package of food stamps, it was like in a booklet and from there we would go like to the food pantry. I think that kind of like inspired me to do more for

others.

Madison described her successes in the field as “being a positive role model to students.”

After reviewing the 10 social worker interviews, the researcher was able to gather intimate details about each social worker’s experiences working with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a public school setting. Data from all of the interviews identified four emergent themes:

1. Lack of resources as a limitation to student support.
2. Sustained relationship as a tool for student self-regulation.
3. Making a difference through emotional support.
4. Commitment to the field promotes success.

### **Lack of Resources as a Limitation to Student Support**

One of the most common themes discovered from the interviews was the lack of resources available to assist these social workers with providing services to their students. Despite the many services these social workers were able to provide to students, they also felt the burden the lack of resources played in limiting the support they were able to provide to their students. The participants expressed they were often faced with multiple barriers that prevented them from adequately providing social work services within the school setting. Some of these barriers were as follows: limited funding, lack of programming, factors beyond the social worker’s control, parental blocks, school social work vs. social work outside of schools, the social worker role, and barriers in the school setting. The participants believed the lack of resources hindered them, while putting up barriers that made it difficult for them to provide the necessary services their students required sometimes on a daily basis.

One of the frequent areas the social workers discussed in the interviews regarding

the lack of resources being a limitation to student support was the limited funding within the district. In relation to the limited funding, Zoe expressed that if more funding was available it would give the social workers the ability to provide services to students at a greater level. Zoe believed more funding for grants, more programming, as well as more staff would have a significant impact on the services social workers provided at her school. Zoe stated,

I mean we have been able to do some things, we definitely have, we run a lot of groups but there's always more, so that would be nice . . . More programming and we need more staff. It's like we do so much programming, but honestly, like we need more staff at this point. So you know, yeah I guess more money could do more programming, but then I'd hope we could get a little bit more staff personally.

Dana expressed similar sentiments because she too felt there was a lack of resources available to her students; therefore, she was not able to provide them with all of the supports from which they could benefit. Nia expressed that the lack of resources made her job difficult at times. Lindsey also expressed the need for more funding, as well as shared her own ideas on how the extra funds could be utilized to benefit her students.

Lindsey stated,

Funding always seems to be an issue. I feel like it would be more positive for the students if there was more money, of course (more incentives, more programs, more celebrations when they, you know, reach success, but particularly more programs).

Lindsey expressed that she felt the student success for the special needs populations was not always celebrated compared to other students. She also expressed

that she would like to see incentives that were more positive implemented to provide behavioral supports to students. Cathy also confirmed the lack of resources as a limitation to the services she provided to her students. Cathy expressed, “I hate to say that I think the funding is very limited.” It should be noted that at one instance during the interview regarding her negative experiences in the district, Cathy expressed, “there’s not a lot of negative; all administrative negativity. The students and environment are all positive from my experience.” At another instance during the interview she expressed, “There are no outside resources, no outreach programs, and no outside activities.” Cathy also expressed she felt limited when it came to making referrals for students. Due to these limited resources, Cathy stated, “There are not many opportunities to deter students from going on the negative road.” Madison’s sentiments were similar to that of Lindsey’s as she expressed if more funding was available, specific programs could be set up to reward students for their positive behaviors. Madison stated,

I would love to set up like a positive rewards program for them, like if they do really good in school then we can go and do something special like on Fridays, like go to the park and have, you know, some fun time or go to the movies and like some kind of reward system, I don’t think we see that in here, I mean I know they do it with the regular ed. students, but I’ve never seen them do it with the special ed. students, with the behavioral kids.

The limited funding was not the only issue these social workers expressed as a hindrance to the services they provided to students. Some of the social workers expressed they dealt with obstacles that were outside of the social workers control within the school setting. Dana expressed limited resources within the community and limited parent involvement and follow through as barriers that were outside of her control as a social

worker. Dana felt that was a challenge to her providing the best services to her students.

Nia stated

The negatives are just you know, the barriers . . . there's things that we just can't help; you know like we deal with a lot of deportation issues, we deal with a lot of mental health issues, and sometimes, the lack of resources is difficult. You know some of the parents are still of that old fashioned thinking, so kind of trying to change their perspective or way of thinking in helping the child.

Nia shared that she understood how some of her Hispanic families were hesitant about asking for help or requesting services be provided to their child. Nia stated, "You know a lot of Hispanic families (and me being Hispanic myself, I know this), they're very prideful you know they don't like to ask for help, so just breaking those barriers."

Nia expressed that she herself grew up in a Hispanic household so she understood the pride that existed in these families in regards to asking for help. Nia felt that at times the cultural issues played a huge part in the lack of parent involvement and resistance to services being sought from the social workers. This often made her job difficult because although students may need services, without parent involvement, the services can only go so far.

Zoe described the fact that she worked with so many students who were undocumented the area she felt was lacking resources. At times, Zoe felt stuck and unsure of what services to provide for her undocumented students. She felt it became very challenging trying to provide services and opportunities for these students. Zoe also expressed another barrier she encountered was that she wanted to work more with the families. She felt there was such a need and social workers cannot always meet that entire need during the course of the school day. Martha expressed similar sentiments when she

stated, “We are limited to working with the students and don’t get to expand to the family level.” Nia, Zoe, and Martha echoed this sentiment because although they did provide their students with services, they felt having services extend into the home with the students’ families would be a great benefit.

The social workers also expressed noted differences between the services they provided within the school setting compared to social workers who worked outside of the school setting. Zoe stated,

As a social worker sometimes, and as a school social worker, there’s only like a certain amount that you can do for these kids, there just really is. I think in the field itself, but definitely in a school setting . . . I mean we meet with the kids for 45 minutes you know so it’s different, it’s a different kind of setting, and I think as far as therapy in itself too, it’s very different in the school setting.

Zoe felt limited with the services she could personally provide because so many of her students faced issues outside of the school environment. Diana expressed similar sentiments because she felt there were various limitations put on school social workers due to the fact the services were provided within the school setting. Diana stated, “There are a lot of things that social workers can maybe do with kids in other settings that we can’t do in the school system because we are not allowed to do it.” Martha felt that because the school is an academic setting, sometimes limitations may be placed on what supports and services the social worker should actually be providing to students. Martha stated, “Sometimes the social worker’s role is mired down to academic plans that don’t address mental health, this is a barrier.” Ciara believed there were various social and environmental issues that often plagued the students she worked with daily. Ciara indicated,



poverty for the kids; a lot of our kids really have to work, so it's a challenge for them sometimes to continue. I mean we're talking to them about making sure they come to school (attendance), but you know they really have it hard. I'm not talking about all, but a lot of the kids that I see, so that's a challenge for me trying to help them graduate. Or positive talk about attendance and on the other hand the reality is they work until 11:00 p.m., so the next day they are tired. They are tired and they are falling asleep and then it's the behaviors because they are tired.

Dana felt that the politics she often encountered in the school setting was another area that caused limitations to the social work role. Dana expressed that the political arena in the district often took precedence over meeting the needs of students (especially those students with emotional or behavioral disabilities), which made it difficult for her to adequately perform her job duties. Dana stated, "There's a lot of politics, so a lot of things that you would want to do or would want to say or want to provide them with and you're not able to because of limitations within the district." Dana also expressed that she felt she did not get enough support from her administrators for the recommendations they make at times regarding her students. Dana expressed "lack of support regarding ideas or recommendations from administration." She felt she would receive instruction from administration to do certain things, only to be left on her own without the proper support to back her up. Madison also expressed similar sentiments as she felt a lack of support from administrators in the school setting at times also was an obstacle for her. Madison stated, "Directors, supervisors, you know, higher ups, sometimes, we don't get the support from them that we would like, so that perceives as an extreme challenge for us." Due to the fact the social workers are within the school setting, others outside of the field may have other ideas of what the social worker's job duties should entail. This only adds

to the tremendous amount of pressure and scrutiny these social workers already face while trying to stay on top of the many responsibilities they have.

Martha stated, “Social workers can be overburdened with gigantic caseloads, yet so much more is needed (i.e., students with disabilities, etc.).” The high number of students on the caseload shows the need for social work services and resources, but it also shows the likelihood that the social workers may not be able to provide the necessary services to the best of their ability. Besides the high numbers of students on the social worker caseload, some of the social workers complained about the inordinate amount of paperwork they had to complete, which often became a barrier to them providing services. Mary stated,

There is so much focus on the secretarial, the clerical parts of the job and that sometimes takes over. I become so hyper focused on that because I know it’s so important from a legal point of view that I have to pay so much attention to that, that I don’t get enough time to pay attention to the human element.

Diana added to this by stating,

I feel like the district is concerned more about paperwork than they are with what we do as social workers. They don’t understand, it’s all about “did you document?” you know “did you get the paperwork filled out,” “are things done on time,” but they don’t realize that we are dealing with human beings. So that’s a little disheartening, to always be around paperwork and things like this and numbers and budgets.

Lindsey expressed similar sentiments as Mary and Diana because she expressed that one of the greatest obstacles she encountered was the inordinate amount of paperwork she was now responsible for completing. Ultimately, Lindsey felt the time she

spent attending to the clerical parts of her job could be spent implementing services to students.

As we see, school social workers often take on numerous tasks while making sure things occur in ways that will be beneficial to their students. Nia concluded, “It’s like a lot of responsibility on the school social worker to make sure that things happen the right way and sometimes it doesn’t happen like that.” Madison went on to express that at times, barriers come in the form of teachers and other staff members. Madison stated, “I think the most difficult part of working in the school system is sometimes administration or teaching staff don’t always see your point of view.” Madison felt that due to feeling frustrated at times, teachers gave up on certain students. Madison also went on to state,

And you still want to be like that (I want to say) “Rah, Rah cheerleader,” you know pushing them, but when you come across I guess so many blocks from other people, you feel kind of like alone, like you’re the only one rowing the boat, cheering that person on. You’re the only sideline cheerleader.

### **Sustained Relationship as a Tool for Student Self-regulation**

Eight out of 10 participants expressed they felt developing a relationship with their students was a measure of success for them. The relationships the social workers were able to establish with their students were instrumental in assisting students with ways to cope with their issues and ultimately address problem behaviors. These relationships were also instrumental to helping students achieve their goals and make progress in school, thus helping them become successful later on in life. Martha stated, “Connections and supportive relationships helped the students function and regulate themselves, for them to be able to perform to the best of their abilities; then we’ve done our job.” For these social workers, developing relationships with their students was

essential to establishing good rapport and trust with them.

Mary expressed that what was important to her about being a social worker was “making those connections and feeling like you are making contact with somebody.” It often takes some time for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities to develop trusting relationships with others. Nia expressed there were times when she encountered challenges while trying to establish a rapport with certain students. Nia felt she was not able to reach a certain student to get him or her to open up about whatever issues he or she may have been experiencing at the time. Nia stated, “Challenges . . . maybe not being able to reach a certain student or maybe not being able to connect with them because they are so closed. I think it’s difficult for them to open up.” Many of the students of these social workers had often experienced trauma, as well as disappointments due to the circumstances they faced. Once these students establish relationships with key adults in their life, especially their social worker, it should not be taken lightly. Mary indicated, “If we can get a student to believe in herself or himself, that he can succeed, he can have a life that he wants to have, that there are opportunities, then that’s success.” Zoe gave an example of how having a relationship with students was successful when her students would come back to the school to visit her and give detailed updates on how they were doing after graduation. Zoe stated,

We’ve had many students come back and not just come back, but graduate and we see how programming has really helped them . . . On the larger, I guess on the macro level, it’s just seeing how our programs benefit in the long run.

Ciara explained the following:

I love when the kids come back or give me a call after they graduate and tell me how they are doing or they have questions or you know, they, they still need, you

know, need resources, so I think for me that is an accomplishment because it feels like there was a connection there. I think that's priceless.

Dana expressed similar sentiments as Ciara. Dana expressed that developing a relationship with her students was a vital aspect of her social work role. Dana went on to express that school social workers afford students many opportunities to voice their feelings about issues that are confidential, thus providing them with an opportunity to feel as though they are gaining a relationship with someone who is concerned with what is going on with them. Dana also believed that when she developed a relationship with her students, it made it easier for them to take her recommendations on how to deal with their situations and the concerns they may have. Dana stated, "Being able to see kids receive whatever information you're giving them and be willing to actually accept it and use whatever supports, you're giving them" was important for her. Cathy went on to reflect on what she believed the social worker's role meant to her by stating,

They (social workers) develop relationships with the people that they service, are able to do outreach, able to refer them to outside agencies that can help with any of their problems (housing, parenting, crime, medical) whatever situations that they need. That's what I see.

Cathy also expressed that she felt the relationship she developed with her students provided her the opportunity to share information with her students that was instrumental to their social/emotional development. Cathy stated,

I am able to share information with students; I am able to help them think before acting. I am able to give them skills (basic skills, behavior skills, coping skills, how to think positive) on how to change their lives based on their environments.

Nia believed that students benefit in many ways from establishment of a

relationship with social workers. Nia expressed that her relationship with her students was indicative of a social worker who wanted to see her students succeed. When Nia was with her students, she stated she was often “challenging them to push themselves, to ask for help, to ask questions, and to trust in their teachers and their counselors because we are here to help them.” Madison expressed that she tries to be available always for her students whether they need to come to her office to talk or if they just want to stop by her office simply to check in with her. Madison expressed she tries to always get to know her students on a more personal level. Madison made it a point to get to know key details about her students about which others may not devote the necessary time to find out. Madison indicated,

Some of the successful things I’ve seen social workers do in the school setting is being a positive role model to students, having their door open at all times, talking with them on a personal level, as well as, an academic level. By just getting to know them more on a personal level, I think social workers have more of a success with the student.

Madison shared that she also made it a point to visit the student’s home to make a connection with his or her family.

### **Making a Difference Through Emotional Support**

Nine out of 10 participants felt that making a difference through providing emotional support was significant to student success. Students who have emotional and behavioral disabilities often have difficulty dealing with their emotions in healthy ways. These students often have difficulty functioning in classrooms, issues getting along with peers in social situations, as well as various other issues in the school setting during the school day. As a result, these students may end up in the social worker’s office to discuss

their behaviors and develop healthy ways to address their behaviors. The social workers interviewed were able to share some ways their students were able gain emotional support through the services they provided. These social workers also made an impact in the students' lives by being a source of support as they made progress toward achieving their goals. The social workers discussed what they believed making a difference meant to the services they provided to students.

Mary expressed that one way of making a difference for her was when she tried to get her students to believe in themselves, as this was what she felt helped students to progress and achieve their goals. Mary stated,

If we could get kids to believe in themselves; that they are not stuck, that the future is bright, that things can be the way that they want them to be, that they can dream, and they can work towards their dreams, that's success and that we can teach them to dream. We can teach them to think outside the box, beyond what they see, beyond what they know that the world is big.

Mary went on to express that she also provided emotional support to her students by being available to her students. Mary explained,

The most important thing is to give them a chance to talk. Is to be there when they need to talk, and listen. And let them know that you understand what they are saying, that you understand their feelings and you understand their experience. Lots of times with teenagers they don't get that. They don't get that from their families, their parents, any authority figures, and they need it.

Zoe expressed similar sentiments regarding how she provided emotional support to her students. Zoe stated,

I try to look at every case like individually for itself. I give them a forum where

they have the opportunity to just speak and talk and discuss what's on their minds; and I just try to listen and just give them that forum and learn from them. You know every time a student comes in here, it's like a new opportunity for me to learn and grow from them, and I value that to a pretty high regard.

Diana felt the services she provided to her students would help them in the future when they were out of high school. Diana felt hopeful that her students would take what she was giving them and use it to pull on their inner strengths. This would help them to overcome their current obstacles, thus not letting those obstacles stop them from being successful later in life. Diana indicated,

I just feel that everybody needs a chance and everybody can make a difference and I want to be the one that can help the kids through that and families, as well. Let them know (reassure that) you do care about them and that whatever needs to be done that you can do for them that you will do. Most of our students here are told that someone is going to help them and they don't normally follow through with help or they're not available when the child needs to see them and it's a letdown. So just being constant for them and I think involving you within the family unit is a very important piece, as far as, the emotional piece; that goes with it.

Ciara felt she was making a difference in the lives of her students because she was able to work with kids, get to know them, and get a chance to know their story. She explained,

I think, you know, the level of understanding of where they're at, at the moment, a lot of prompting questions, listening (I do a lot of active listening), but at the same time, you know just sparking conversation about their strengths and what



has helped them come through hardships. Finding the support systems that they have or that they have had in the past and connecting them to those support systems.

Ciara expressed that she saw herself as a front seat passenger and the client was the driver:

They're driving the car and they are taking me places. I feel like, ok, in order for me to get to know your story, I feel like I'm in a car and they drive me, take me where you need to take me.

Dana expressed that to provide emotional supports, she reflected on the ways social workers had to overcome hardships in their own personal lives to help pull her students through their hardships. Dana stated,

Well, a lot of times, they too, have been through some situation themselves, and they are able to trouble through, get through the trouble, have an opportunity to have supports for themselves. A lot of times, they are able to push that into another student or at least let them know what is out there for them so that they are able to surpass whatever struggles that they are encountering themselves.

Dana felt actively listening to her students was a vital component of providing emotional support, as well as allowing them to voice their thoughts and feelings. Often, students with emotional and behavioral disabilities have trouble expressing their emotions in healthy, safe ways. Dana expressed this was crucial when she worked with her students with emotional or behavioral issues. Dana continued,

Allowing them to know that whatever it is they're feeling, it may not be their biggest problem is the way in which they handle their problems, we all have problems, but it's the way in which we handle it, so more or less letting them

know that emotions are something that's natural, but it's the way in which you deal with them and the way in which you are able to work through whatever that problem may be.

Lindsey expressed that she felt successful working with her students who had emotional and behavioral disabilities and she felt her services made a difference. Lindsey stated,

I feel that particular population has a great potential to be helped, to be serviced, to be, brought up in a positive way [pause]. I just feel it's a population that you can help and you can make a difference . . . When we see students making progress and achieving goals, whether it's academic or social/emotional goals then we feel successful.

Cathy expressed that she often provided her students with the necessary skills that would help them on a social/emotional level, thus helping them to be more successful later in life. Cathy felt she was able to share information with her students that would help them think before acting. Cathy indicated,

I am able to give them skills as far as, "treat people like you want to be treated," you know just basic skills (behavior skills, coping skills, how to think positive) how to change their lives based on their environment.

Nia felt that by being there to assist her students overcome the obstacles they faced provided emotional support to her students. Nia expressed she was there to help her students face their hardships and then she was able to see them strive, see them learn, and eventually, see them start thinking about things they maybe would not have thought of before. Nia felt she was able to work with the kids, see the changes they were making, and how they were progressing. Nia felt that seeing her students change their way of

thinking or the way they saw things ultimately was success to her. Nia expressed.

You know being teenagers, I feel like it's the most difficult time in their life, that's when they are developing, they are picking their paths and where they are supposed to be going, and so they need the most support at this time. I try to get to know them, as best I can, and get to know if they do have a diagnosis or something like that. I do try to research it or talk to their CST or guidance counselor or teacher and see how that, or family, you know, parent/guardian, and try to see how I can best assist them. Definitely by listening to them and just being a supportive person, a person they can come to and talk to, and any resources that I can provide for them.

Nia expressed that she made it a point to have a personal relationship with each of her students. Nia stated, "I look forward to seeing their growth a lot of the times, I wish sometimes I could do more than what I do; It's never enough sometimes."

Madison felt that the positive she experienced was the fact that she hoped she could make a significant impact in any student's life. Madison indicated explained,

I try to make this a really big point with behavior children, to always be available for them because you don't always know when they're going to have a breakdown, but when they do, it's usually something big and as a social worker you really need to be attentive to their needs. I also try to know the student on the personal level. I like to make home visits and introduce myself to the family and kind of get like a feel of the environment the child lives in. It kind of like helps me get a better picture of the family dynamics.

Madison expressed that she tends to feel sympathetic towards the students with whom she works because, as she stated,

just like myself, a lot of them come from poverty and they grow up with what they know and what's shown to them . . . you know at the end of the day, as much as you want to help or you do help the child they're still going home to that same environment.

Nevertheless, Madison remained hopeful that she could make the kind of impact in her students' lives that would help them achieve their goals, especially graduating.

### **Commitment to the Field Fuels School Social Worker Success**

Seven out of 10 social workers expressed their commitment to the field was the very thing that promoted success for them. School social workers often encountered multiple problems, often on a daily basis with their students. Some of the problems these social workers dealt with may seem like they never would go away or like they would never get better. Nevertheless, these social workers did not give up, but instead, they came up with new ways to help their students become successful as they pursued their goals. Martha expressed social workers in this way: "Our ability to be able to work with these students, even though we don't necessarily see anything changing for the better, we're willing to live another day and keep fighting for change and for a better quality of life." Despite the challenges these social workers faced, they were still able to make a commitment to continue as a school social worker. The resilience these social workers exemplified seemed linked to the successful outcomes they had seen with the students they have worked with in the past, as well as those they were working with at the time of this study. Their perseverance and desire to continue in the social work field was the very thing that gave them the ability to counter any limitations they came across while performing their social work duties.

Diana expressed, "So I feel that by working with these kinds of students, and just

to see that they can overcome and adapt and be something (and I've seen that throughout the years here), that's a success in itself." These social workers truly believed their students were capable of making progress, achieving their goals, and becoming successful. Social workers are advocates for growth and change. Ciara and Nia expressed similar sentiments as they both felt that in working with their students, they got to see the changes as they developed and grew. For the social workers, to see their students grow and develop into successful young men and women, every obstacle they encounter on the job is worth it.

Some of the participants also expressed they had a drive to continue in the field because they felt a sense of fulfillment while performing their social work duties. The social workers believed there was a need for role in the lives of youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. These social workers were instrumental in many aspects of their students' lives, including providing counseling, being available to them, assisting them with transition planning, developing future goals, helping them gain skills (academic, transition, coping, and social/emotional skills), obtaining resources (inside and outside of school), life skills, and achieving goals, particularly graduation. These social workers felt they not only taught their students life lessons, they were also able to connect with them and learn a lot from their students, as well. Mary expressed that she felt really fulfilled and gratified in being able to connect to her students. Zoe stated, "I've learned a lot and it's exciting and rewarding. I mean it's very rewarding." During those often-challenging moments experienced by the social workers, they were able to reflect back on some positive moments they had with students and use that as motivation to continue in the field. Diana and Lindsey both expressed similar sentiments by stating, "Working with the kids (adolescents) is an amazing experience . . . There's never a dull moment, it's

different each day and it's always exciting and rewarding."

Lindsey expressed that she felt her colleagues were good staff members and caring people. This, too, is important, as these social workers felt they had support from other social workers and support staff. Lindsey also felt she definitely had some success stories along the way as a school social worker. Lindsey stated, "We as success stories do help people and support people, so it's great." Dana expressed she felt her position allowed her to also be exposed to a wide variety of students, who have multiple issues, both in the general education setting, as well as, in the special education setting. This gave her a sense of fulfillment because she was not limited to the types of students on whom she could have a positive impact during the school day.

All of the social workers agreed they were grateful for having the opportunity to work with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, as it was truly a rewarding experience. Diana stated, "I feel very rewarded and blessed, to have the opportunity to work with such great kids. Just very touched and really blessed that I can be involved in their lives and hopefully direct them on the right path." Dana expressed similar sentiments when she expressed "she had a lot of gratitude for having the opportunity to pour into these kids, because a lot of them may not have such an opportunity." These social workers were committed to do this work but, despite the challenges, they had survived and desired to continue making a difference in the lives of the youth they served daily.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to broaden the understanding of the school social worker's experiences of working with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a public high school. The researcher sought to explain the lived experiences of these social workers in an effort to describe and understand their roles working within the school setting. The researcher chose the IPA approach because the study was looking at the experiential nature of this phenomenon for each school social worker who participated in the study. Smith et al. (2012) noted, "IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with exploring experience in its own terms" (p. 1).

The social workers who participated in this study shared their reflections, lived experiences, and recollections during face-to-face, semistructured interviews at locations they each chose. Each participant interviewed was a school social worker who worked at the study site with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. According to Smith et al. (2012), "IPA researchers are especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experiences takes on particular significance for people" (p. 1). These social workers all realized and were able to express that although they encountered many challenges while performing their social work duties, there was a great need for them to continue providing their services to students.

The focus of this research study was to gather each participant's lived experiences and reveal the similarities and differences between them all as they worked with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Although the participants shared their similarities and differences, the researcher was able to uncover common themes that

emerged from the interviews. The four emergent themes were (a) lack of resources as a limitation to student support, (b) sustained relationship as a tool for student self-regulation, (c) make a difference through emotional support, and (d) commitment to the field promotes success.

### **Lack of Resources Limits Student Support**

The current study showed that the most common lived experiences among all of the school social workers were the lack of resources. The lack of resources served as a limitation to the supports these social workers provided for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The lack of resources the social workers discussed in the study included the following: lack of funding, limited programming, lack of incentives for emotional and behavior disabled students, limited parental involvement and follow-through, limited resources for undocumented students, politics, and limited support from administrators.

These social workers also gave insight into how the excessive amount of paperwork and the high number of students on their caseload made it very difficult for them to do their job efficiently, as well as be available for the students with whom they worked. These findings were consistent with the research findings. According to Adamson et al. (2012), “Workplace adversities also stem from agency pressures and are reflected by burgeoning caseloads, limited resources, poor organizational culture and constantly changing social policies” (p. 525). These limitations often placed various constraints on these social workers that made it difficult for them to perform their social work duties. Leyba (2009) noted, “A school social worker can have so many duties that it seems difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish them all in a given day” (p. 219).

The social workers also expressed they felt there were significant differences



between the services they provided within the school setting versus outside of the school setting. Social work services performed outside of the school setting often extended to the family, while in some instances, services were provided at the student's home. This allowed the social worker to establish a rapport with the student's family members, while giving the social worker a glimpse into the family dynamics. Services provided within the school setting were within a limited time frame and the social worker often addressed issues related to the student's academic performance, school behaviors, or discipline referrals.

Providing social work services in the school setting may also place limitations on the social worker's ability to address adequately significant mental health issues that many students (both special education and general education) may have during the school day. Leyba (2009) acknowledged, "Social work sessions do provide critical help for a range of students with challenges. However, without certain procedures in place, social workers can become overwhelmed by the numbers of students they need to see in a given week" (p. 221). It is easy to see how the daily demands often placed on these social workers could potentially lead to social worker burn out, although none of the social workers expressed feeling "burnt out."

Some of the social workers seemed to be under the impression that some administrators and staff members had a limited knowledge of what the social workers' role was during the course of the school day. The findings also suggested that it is important to clarify the roles of school social workers so that these students with emotional and behavioral disabilities receive the appropriate services they may need during the school day. Leyba (2009) also emphasized, "Ideally, administrators would support school social workers in their efforts to create manageable caseloads and

prioritize responsibilities. Although some administrators provide such supportive leadership, school social workers are often left to shape their roles on their own” (p. 219).

Each of the 10 participants expressed how the lack of resources often hindered the services they were able to provide to students. Although many services and resources are available in schools to assist students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, the services are often delayed or not implemented due to the politics that so often plague school districts or the fact that some school-based interventions simply cannot address all of the needs of every child. Leyba (2009) further emphasized,

Overload can set in when a school social worker has too much to do and not enough time to do it . . . To remain effective, efficient, and healthy, school social workers must be able to combat overload and work toward balance in their roles. (p. 219)

The development of in-school intervention resources, increased family and school communication, after-school programs, and the availability for specific professional development trainings related to student needs are some immediate goals for school officials to consider. The school board, school administration, school staff, and families must work together, in a more collaborative manner, with the school social workers to assure the greatest level of support is provided to the emotionally challenged student.

### **Sustained Relationships With Students**

It is key when working with students with emotional and behavior disabilities that the social worker makes a connection with his or her students, thus helping to build a rapport and establish trust with students. These are vital steps necessary to sustaining a productive relationship with students with emotional and behavior disabilities. Research also showed the importance of feelings of secure relationships for emotionally disturbed

adolescents in special education (Bartick-Ericson, 2006). These relationships have a huge impact in the lives of the youth in regards to shaping positive school experiences that, in turn, may transfer outside of school. Eight of the 10 participants expressed sustaining a good relationship with their students was a measure of success for them. Although social workers believe establishing a relationship with their students is ideal, their reasoning for the importance of sustaining these relationships may vary. Some social workers believe the relationship helps students develop coping skills that will help them address problem behaviors.

Another social worker may believe that establishing a relationship with his or her students will build a connection with them that will assist them with making progress in school, achieving their goals, and graduating from high school. On the contrary, if a social worker does not establish a relationship with students with emotional and behavior disabilities, this could negatively impact the degree of success a student may have in school. As a result, the student may not seek out assistance from the social worker (or other key adults in school) to address his or her concerns, which may further exacerbate any issues that may be occurring at the time. In turn, this student may develop a negative view of school and the adults who provide school-related supports and resources, which may eventually lead to an increase in at-risk behaviors. These increased at-risk behaviors heighten the probability this student may eventually choose to drop out of high school.

School social workers in this study all expressed the desire to develop relationships with their students. These relationships went beyond simply making sure the student passed his or her classes or remained on his or her best behavior each school day. These social workers, as Madison stated, “took the time to get to know their students on a more detailed and personal level.” The findings were consistent with current research by

Pyle and Wexler (2012). Pyle and Wexler (2012), concluded, “This personalized relationship, therefore, should extend beyond addressing students’ academic and behavioral concerns to emphasizing the linkage between school and home as well as simultaneously promoting a relationship of trust and respect” (p. 285). Some social workers express the relationship provides students with an outlet for them to voice any issues and concerns they may have during the school day, thus letting them know someone cares about them. Regardless of the reasoning behind why school social workers sustain a relationship with their students, the ultimate goal is to be someone who believes in these students; one who gives them hope for a brighter future. According to Montague, Enders, Cavendish, and Castro (2011),

At-risk children, especially those who are placed in special education, most likely will need ongoing academic and behavioral supports throughout their academic careers to make the progress necessary to be independent and successful students in middle and secondary school. These supports are particularly important during critical transition periods, for example, from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school. (p. 154)

It will be imperative to the education and social work community to focus on the intervention supports or services that would be essential in assisting students during these key transition periods in high school.

### **Providing Students With Emotional Support**

Sterrett et al. (2011) noted, “The presence of significant non-parental adults may also be associated with decreased levels of negative outcomes, such as behavior problems, as well as, associated with lower levels of conduct problems, substance abuse and sexual activity” (p. 290). Each social worker in the study shared a variety of

thoughts, insights, and reflections to define the methods they utilized to provide emotional support to their students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. School social workers who provide emotional support to students make progress towards decreasing challenging behaviors. The school social workers in this study provided positive adult support to students, showing them they would be there for them physically and emotionally during the school day.

According to Sterrett et al., (2011), “This social support is, in turn, directly associated with working as a buffer against risk factors” (p. 285). Adult social support may also prove to be a significant factor at improving the student’s self-esteem, while at the same time bolstering confidence in his or her abilities. School social workers in this study also shared personal experiences of some obstacles they had to overcome with their students. This provided social workers with a means of connecting with students on a deeper level, while also giving them insight into their own stories. It also gave students hope that they too could overcome the obstacles they face.

Williams and Bryan (2013) conducted a qualitative, multicase study that identified the factors and processes that contributed to the academic success of urban, African American high school graduates from low-income, single-parent families. The participants of the study reported having at least one adult at their school (e.g., teacher, counselors, coaches, or college recruiters) who cared about them and knew them well. Findings in this study were consistent with the themes identified by Williams and Bryan (2013) and Sterrett et al. (2011). The research findings concluded,

Influential adults earned the respect and trust of participants because they (a) attempted to understand the challenges students faced, (b) advocated on behalf of students’ academic and nonacademic needs, (c) acted as parental figures, (d)

reinforced positive academic performance and student behavior, and (e) set high yet realistic expectations. (Williams & Bryan, 2013, p. 296)

The social workers in this study were able to provide their students with a supportive school-based relationship that helped them navigate their way toward successful academic and behavioral outcomes. Research showed that students with emotional issues often require numerous supports and accommodations to assist them to be successful during the school day (Bradley et al., 2008). This information will be instrumental to implementing the appropriate programs and services to meet students' needs in the general and special education settings.

### **Social Worker Commitment to the Field**

Adamson et al. (2012) emphasized, "For many participants, being resilient connected their personal motivations for being in the profession with effective practice and good outcomes for service users" (p. 538). Seven of the 10 school social workers expressed their commitment to the social work field was the very thing that fueled them to continue in the profession. Some areas each social worker discussed in the findings that drove them to continue in the field were as follows: an inner resilience as a practitioner, new strategies/interventions to help students, reflections from past success stories and positive moments, growth and change in students being advocated, social workers learning from students, support from colleagues, exposure to students with various needs, and the sense of fulfillment and gratitude while performing their social work duties.

There is an inner resilience that resides in social workers, which is evident by their uncanny spirit to "not give up" on others. This drive that social workers have is often fueled by the many positive moments and success stories they have encountered

during their years in the field. Social workers are driven to create a difference in their client's lives. School social workers desire to see their students develop and grow to be successful in all they endeavor to do. Tan et al. (2015) noted, "School social workers can also target the overall school climate by providing access to a broad range of services and advocating for students' educational needs" (p. 3). All of the social workers agreed they were grateful for having the opportunity to work with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, as it was truly a rewarding experience. Even with the ongoing issues they continued to experience, they managed to move past each barrier they faced and seek new ways to make a positive impact in their students' lives daily.

Seven of the 10 social workers expressed their insights, thoughts, and reflections on their reasoning for continuing in the social work field. Martha described her reason for continuing in the social work field as, "Social work is about connecting with a person, if you can make a connection and I enjoy making connections." Zoe's response was,

I feel like it's such a unique experience to be in this kind of field with the youth and just with families cause there is so many of those small moments, where you know you do see youth come back or you're able to just (I don't know) just kind of get involved in people's lives, like they let you in, and that's something I think very unique to any other position, than I think anybody has really.

Ciara's response was, "I desire to continue with them because I think it's rewarding . . . I think that I learned a lot working with them every day." Dana's response was,

Because there are so many of them and so many of them are lacking the supports that they need. And they need someone to pour into them and give them information that's going to help them. So that they can become the adult that they

need to be.

Lindsey's response was, "Because I feel there's always hope for youth and adolescents. And as cliché as it might sound, 'The children are the future of our world'."

Nia's response was,

Because I like seeing the progress in them, and I like to educate them and teach them . . . on how to feel better about themselves, to be able to cope with certain situations. It just comes naturally to me; it's my calling . . . that's all that I know how to do. You know, that's something that I am strong in and I know that, so with each student that I do help, it just kind of motivates me more and more to continue to do this work and make a difference in the youth's lives.

Diana's response was,

I don't think I can do anything else. I think this is our future, this is what it is and I'm just driven (I don't know why I'm driven), I'm just driven to work with these children with these challenges (laughs) oppositional defiance . . . Anger, low self-esteem, these are the kinds of kids that I think that my faith has brought me to. I don't know why, but this is what I am destined to do.

Collins (2007) said,

Many social workers find a real sense of commitment and meaning in their work, a sense of purpose, a belief that social work is a very significant part of their personal identity. Hence, there is likely to be continuing, strong motivation to want to work with and to help users. (p. 263)

Despite the adversities often faced by school social workers, they have proven to be resilient in their efforts to help students. This is evidenced by their unwavering commitment to provide support and resources to their students. Collins (2008) said,



“Hence, there is clear evidence that social workers get job satisfaction and enjoyment from their work, *despite*, the fact that this may take place within demanding and stressful organizational settings” (p. 1176). During those often-challenging moments the social workers experienced, they were able to reflect back on the success stories they had with their students and use that as motivation to continue in the field.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice and Research**

The social workers who participated in the study compared their lived experiences of working in a public high school with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The findings of the current study revealed school social workers were a population of social workers who did a tremendous amount of work for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, but their hard work and diligent efforts often went unrecognized. The participants were able to express both the positive and the negative aspects of their lived social work experiences. These social workers were also able to summarize their positive and negative experiences working with these youth. The social workers identified the following positive aspects of school social work: seeing students change their way of thinking, seeing students develop and grow, seeing students graduate, making connections with students, being a positive role model for students, giving students hope, and watching students overcome obstacles to become successful.

The social workers identified the following negative aspects of school social work: lack of resources that limited student support, limited funding, politics within the district, high student caseload, excessive paperwork, uncertainty of the social worker’s role, and limited support from administrators. The added challenges placed on school social workers, apparent in this study, will seemingly work adversely for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Compared to other students, students with

emotional and behavioral disabilities often require the most interventions, the most time, and have the potential to cost the district the most dollars as they search for appropriate programs and interventions to address their academic and social/emotional needs. Despite the negative circumstances these social workers often experienced, they were able to reflect upon the successes they had along the way. The social workers believed they were helping and supporting their students and they could see how this had been beneficial to their students, thus far.

This study is of great necessity given the number of youth in schools today diagnosed with an emotional and behavioral disability. According to Barker (1999), “School social workers are often called on to help students, families, and teachers deal with such problems as truancy; social withdrawal overaggressive behavior; rebelliousness; and the effects of special physical, emotional, and economic problems” (p. 426). The significance and relevance of this study lies in the fact these youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities will one day transition from high school and will need to be prepared to lead successful adult lives. Sheafor and Horejsi (2006) emphasized, “Social workers perform this role by preventing problems from emerging or, if they already exist, from getting worse” (p. 15). The compassion and devotion school social workers exhibit while helping youth is truly remarkable.

When student behaviors escalate and classrooms fall into a state of disorder, school social workers are often called upon to intervene and de-escalate situations with these students. Edwards et al. (2012) noted,

Many students are considered at-risk of school failure . . . focusing on the positive developmental aspects of successful students school social workers can build upon the assets that will likely inhibit or ameliorate the problematic behaviors

demonstrated by students considered at-risk. (p. 152)

These school social workers often dedicate much time and effort into helping to make a difference in the lives of their students with emotional and behavior issues. There is a great amount of gratitude and satisfaction for those who enjoy helping others in such a direct and compassionate manner, as do these school social workers.

School social workers are a unique area of social workers often called on to consult with teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators; counsel students; provide crisis intervention; develop social skills; develop character; write IEPs; create behavior plans; and be a liaison for students between home, school, and the community. These social workers believe the services they are providing have made a huge impact in their students' lives. They wholeheartedly believe in the work they do, as they provide assistance to their students daily. School districts need to begin to recognize the tireless efforts these social workers put forth to see their students make changes for their betterment. When school social workers receive the necessary supports they need, they are able to provide students with the appropriate emotional and behavioral supports. This aids in strengthening students' social and emotional development, thus helping them to improve academically in school. According to Bernat (2009), "Youth success is associated with youth having adults in their lives who care about them and set high expectations for them to succeed" (p. 251). School social workers play a pivotal role in today's public school systems. School social workers may not officially teach in the classroom setting but, in fact, they do teach. School social workers teach their students how to live life.

Based on the outcomes discovered in this research study, the following recommendations could prove helpful to school social workers working with emotional

and behavioral disabled students:

1. It will be imperative to the education and social work communities to implement intervention programs, with behavioral supports, that would be essential in assisting emotional and behavior disabled students during key transition periods in high school (i.e., as students enter the ninth grade and when students enter the 11th and 12th grades as they prepare to exit high school).

2. It would be advantageous for schools to provide professional development trainings to their staff members on the various emotional or behavioral issues special needs students deal with, as well as the appropriate supports and accommodations necessary to assist them during the school day.

3. School districts, with the assistance of school social workers, could also look into implementing incentive programs for students. This could assist with decreasing student behaviors, while also meeting students' needs in the general and special education settings.

### **Areas for Future Research Studies**

The current study is a topic that was limited in the current research literature. A scarce amount of research literature pertained to the perceived role and the lived experiences of the social workers who work with at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities in the school setting. The scarcity in research literature surrounding this topic indicated a need exists to help us gain a better understanding of how instrumental the school social worker is at providing emotional and behavioral support to at-risk special needs youth. There is also a need that exists to examine the current practices in school social work and within the education system as it pertains to youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. There is a pressing need for current data

on school social work practice to help assemble the core knowledge of this practice field and to create an agenda for future research, practice, and policy directions (Kelly et al., 2010). Current research does not adequately describe the lived experiences of school social workers who work with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Some older research does describe traditional roles showing school social workers as traditional caseworkers; liaisons between home, school, and the community; involved in assisting families with various resources with schoolwide programs; and implementing behavioral interventions.

Most current research looked at specific programs, assessments, truancy, counseling, or other types of specific interventions with which school social workers may be involved. Eccles and Roeser (2009) discussed the role of school settings in supporting adolescents' social-emotional and behavioral development through instructional, social, and organizational practices. Edwards et al. (2007) discussed how school social workers could collaborate with all school staff provide prevention and intervention to help all students.

The current study identified areas for future research studies. It would be beneficial to conduct this research with male school social workers to gather data from their lived experiences working with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. This could potentially give different findings than that of the female school social workers from the current study. Further research would also be necessary to explore the current factors that lead to burnout in school social workers. Results from this study could aide in the retention of social workers within the school setting and decrease the rates of school social worker turnover. Understanding the factors that lead to burnout in school social workers would be beneficial to current school social workers, as well as

social work students who may be interested in working in the school setting. It would be advantageous to have similar studies conducted on other school personnel who work with students in a similar capacity to that of the school social worker (i.e., school counselors and school psychologists).

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Appendix A  
Interview Protocol

## Interview Protocol

### Social Worker Interview Protocol

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this study. In the next three weeks, you will have the opportunity to share with me your personal experiences as a school social worker. I want to remind you that your identity will remain confidential. So, I want you to feel free to speak openly about your experience. Will it be okay for me to record these interviews? Once I get these interviews completely transcribed, I would like to have you review them for accuracy. Would you be willing to do that for me? Before we begin, I want to give you the opportunity to ask me any questions pertaining to this study or information you would like to learn about me.

Interview One: School Social Worker Experiences (90 minutes)

Start Time of Interview:

End Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Location:

### **Demographic Questions**

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Ethnicity:
4. Highest level of education achieved:
5. How many years have you practiced as a School Social Worker?
6. How many years have you been working in your current school district?

## **Structured Interview Questions**

### **Open-ended Questions:**

1. Tell me as much as possible about the experiences (life events/circumstances) that led you to aspire to work in the field of social work.
2. Elaborate on your experiences working as a school social worker in a public school system (Please explain both the positive and negative experiences)
3. Why did you desire to work with youth with emotional or behavioral disabilities?
4. Please elaborate on what your definition of the term “resilience” is.
5. What characteristics of school social workers do you associate with the term “resilience”?

### **Specific Questions:**

1. What do you perceive as successes for school social workers in the public school setting?
2. What do you perceive as challenges for school social workers in the public school setting?
3. What do you perceive are risks for school social workers in the public school setting?
4. What job duties do you perform as a school social worker in your current position?
5. What types of supports do you provide to students with emotional or behavioral disabilities?
6. How do you provide emotional support to students with emotional or behavioral disabilities?

7. What professional feelings do you experience while performing your social work duties?
8. What personal feelings do you experience while performing your social work duties?
9. Why do you desire to continue working with youth with emotional or behavioral disabilities?

Appendix B  
Questionnaire Protocol

## Questionnaire Protocol

***\*Please read ALL instructions BEFORE proceeding\****

The first column is the activity being measured, and listed below it is one or more examples that may pertain to you. In the second column, please indicate what *percent of your time* was spent performing the stated activity from 2007 to the present. (Total percentages should reflect 100% of your time). In the third column, please indicate how *important you feel the activity is to students we serve* by circling ONE of the options provided. In the fourth column, please indicate *how competent you feel performing each activity* by circling ONE of the options provided.

We realize that separating these roles is difficult but please do the best you can. \*If you do not perform an activity please reference your time as 0% and leave the level of importance and competence blank.

Activity	Percent of Time	Level of Importance	Level of Competence
1. Provide behavioral, social and/or emotional assessment and screening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determining special education eligibility for behaviors and IEP development</li> <li>• Depression/suicide screening</li> <li>• Child abuse and neglect screening</li> <li>• Re-evaluations</li> </ul>		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
2. Provide academic assessment and screening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determining special education eligibility for academics and IEP development</li> <li>• Academic progress monitoring</li> </ul>		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
3. Provide counseling and support to students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual counseling with students</li> <li>• Group support for social skills, anger management, other</li> <li>• Direct skill instruction</li> </ul>		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
4. Consult with teachers and			

school staff on individual students or classroom issues		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
5. Provide home-school collaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home visits and phone/e-mail parents</li> <li>• Parent education and support</li> <li>• Recommending community services</li> <li>• Family counseling and mediation</li> </ul>		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
6. Provide school-community collaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interagency communication for individual students</li> <li>• Interagency partnerships</li> <li>• Coordination of student transitions</li> </ul>		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
7. Participate in group meetings with teachers/staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grade level team meetings</li> <li>• Student/teacher assistance teams</li> </ul>		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
8. Initiate systems change to improve learning and support services: policy and program planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School and agency improvement meetings</li> <li>• Committee meetings</li> <li>• Development of learning supports</li> </ul>		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
9. Receive professional development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Department and</li> </ul>		VI____	VC____

agency training • Attending conferences and workshops		I____  NVI____	C____  NVC____
10. Maintain case records and prepare reports • Initial eligibility report • IEP development and related reports • Communication with community agencies		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
11. Provide professional development • IEP training • PBS training • Olweus training • Teen screen training • other		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
12. Provide supervision to staff or interns		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____
12. Also: Other • Describe:		VI____  I____  NVI____	VC____  C____  NVC____

**Level of Satisfaction**

*Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements by circling ONE of the options provided.*



13. I have sufficient and timely access to other multi-disciplinary personnel.
- Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree*
14. There is adequate funding to maintain the programs and services I deliver.
- Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree*
15. There are adequate child and family supports and services in my district(s), school(s) and/or community(ies).
- Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree*
16. I am supported by my district, school or agency to seek out additional training regarding individual counseling, or social/emotional/behavioral instruction.
- Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree*
17. I am supported by my district, school or agency to seek out additional training regarding academic assessment or interventions.
- Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree*
18. I have been provided adequate training to implement programs/services I am expected to deliver.
- Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree*
20. I regularly use scientifically researched and evidenced based practices to guide my interventions with students, families and staff.
- Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree*
21. My interaction with co-workers is positive.
- Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree*
22. My interaction with school personnel is positive.
- Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree*

23. Overall, I am satisfied with my job.

*Strongly agree*

*Agree*

*Disagree*

*Strongly disagree*

24. I would like more training in:

25. One thing I wish I could change about my job:

### **Demographics**

*As a reminder, this information is anonymous and will be reported in aggregate form.*

26. For which AEA/District do you work?

27. Gender:

28. Age:

29. Highest Education achieved:

30. How many social workers in your agency/school?

31. How many years have you practiced as a School Social Worker?

32. Is your assignment urban, suburban, rural, or a combination?

33. Do you serve primarily elementary, middle school, high school, or all?

*Note.* From Preparing School Social Work for the Future: An Update of School Social Worker's Tasks in Iowa, by C. A. Peckover, M. L. Vasquez, S. L. Van Housen, J. A. Saunders, and L. Allen, 2013, *Children and Schools*, 35, 9-17. Reprinted with permission.

## Appendix C

### Participant Recruitment E-Mail

Good Morning,

I am not sure that you are aware that I am currently in the process of completing the final stages toward my Doctorate in Educational Leadership through Nova Southeastern University. My dissertation topic is as follows: **“Social Worker Experiences Serving At-Risk Youth With Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities”**. Once my Dissertation Proposal is approved, I will need to begin the data collection phase of my research study. I am writing this email to you because my data collection will require that I interview social workers who are currently employed by the Lakewood Child Study Team and who have worked at Lakewood High School serving the needs of those students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. These interviews will be approximately 60 minutes long and they will be conducted after work hours. The interviews will help me to gather information from the social worker’s perspective on why they choose to work with the at-risk youth with emotional and behavior disabilities. For a more detailed description of my study or if you feel you might be interested in participating in my study, please contact me at your earliest convenience at (732) 290-8080 or via email at [riesesher@hotmail.com](mailto:riesesher@hotmail.com).

Please be advised that the completion of my dissertation will in no way interfere with your Child Study Team obligations during the school day, as I will be conducting my research after school hours. I appreciate your consideration to participate in my study, which will in turn allow me to complete my educational goals.

Sincerely yours,  
Sherriese Anderson

