School Social Workers' Perception of School Climate:
An Ecological System Perspective

School social workers represent an integral part of the school system and contribute to the school's mission of educating children by providing them with skills and values (Achilles, Irby, Alford, & Perreault, 2009). However, schools currently face many types of challenges, which can hinder their ability to achieve their intended goals. Implementing a school climate that promotes safety and a positive educational environment seems to be in the mind and the consciousness of many students (Hong & Eamon, 2012) and many interested citizens and professionals (Scherz & Scherz, 2014). Astor, Bhre, Fravil, & Wallace (1997) viewed schools as unsafe places; and the problem of school violence is considered a pressing national problem which has been publicized by popular media (Dobrolinsky, 2015), the American public (Conaway, 2014), and state and federal governments (Elliott, 2015). When inquiring about the role school social workers play when promoting positive climate within schools, studies have found that school social workers are the most appropriate professionals when it comes to the facilitation of safe environments and ensuring that children feel comfortable, ready, and safe to engage in learning (Ramirez, Wu, Kataoka, Yang, Peek-Asa, & Stein, 2012; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006).

School climate influences schools' safety, outcomes, and performance. Scherz & Scherz (2014) distinguish between an "open climate where direct communication, receptivity to feedback, and cohesion of faculty and closed climate represented in indirect communication, feeling threatened by feedback, and a more adversarial relationship between faculty and administration" (p. 93). Considering the different types of school climates, this study is built with the assumption that while specific school climates can enhance positive learning and educational outcomes, other climates tend to produce instability, chaos, and negative dynamics that lead to negative outcomes (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014, Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008, Jackson, & Steege, 2012, Reid, Peterson, Hughey, & Garcia-Reid, 2006). Like school teachers, social workers need to learn essential information about students, such as their demographics, family backgrounds, interests, aspirations, and the shared values in their communities (Maring, & Koblinsky, 2013). This information could be helpful for both teachers and social workers looking to create and maintain a community of learners (Striepling-Goldstein, 2004).

The need to explore school social workers' views on school climate and safety is a critical step towards facilitating their work with other systems in order to implement solutions (Astor, et al., 1997, Cawood, 2013). For example, when responding to concerns regarding school safety, a large majority of the school social workers indicated they utilize numerous services and techniques, such as "individual behavior plans (98%), parent meetings, conferences, or education (97.6%), discipline referrals (97.2%), individual counseling (96.8%), expulsion or suspension (93.6%), classroom management (92.8%), and small group counseling (92.0%)" (Cawood, 2013, p. 21). Although all of these programs were a part of the way school systems operate in the US, Slovak (2006) points out that the surgeon general report on youth violence indicated that many of these programs were found to be ineffective. Ineffective strategies include peer-led programs, redirecting youth

behavior, and strategies that focus on shifting the norm of peer groups. The reason found for the failure of these programs is that they tend to rely on punishment, threat, and coercion. On the other hand, effective school violence prevention programs are "more proactive in nature as they address multiple systems using contextual strategies which emphasize the construction of new, behaviors among all members of social networks and organizational communities" (Erickson, Mattaini, & McGuire, 2004, p. 104). Social workers who perceive violence at their schools as a big or very big problem also reported the greatest number of types of violent events. This suggests that the number and types of violent behaviors exhibited at schools is a more important factor in a social workers' perception of school climate than the amount of time that these situations consume.

To date, the vast majority of research on issues surrounding school violence has focused on students and, to a lesser extent, parents and teachers. The aim of this study was to explore the views and opinions of school social workers concerning school climate. Using the ecological system framework (Trickett & Rowe, 2012), this study will focus on factors that influence school social workers' views on specific aspects relating to school climate, such as safety measurements and other environmental factors within the school, that can lead to positive and effective dynamics. Specifically, this study presents two questions: 1) how do social workers view the existing measurements, regulations, and activities implemented in schools to promote positive and effective climate, and 2) what are the factors that seem to influence the school social workers' views on the quality of school climate and developmental plans implemented in schools.

Literature Review

Since schools exist within the general ecology of society, there is a need to consider environmental factors in relation to school safety. School climate was defined by Bradshaw et al. (2014) as "the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students, teachers, and administrators and set the parameters of acceptable behaviors and norms for the school" (p. 593). Osher, VanAcker, Morrison, Gable, Dwyer, and Quinn (2004) identified a number of relevant environmental factors that may disrupt school climate, such as vandalism to the school, bullying behavior, crowded and chaotic hallways during transitions, student behavior, low extra-mural participation, and the presence of strong social cliques. Astor et al. (1997) viewed schools as unsafe places. Additionally, evidence of school violence was considered a pressing national problem, which has been publicized by the media (Dobrolinsky, 2015), the American public (Conaway, 2014), and state and federal governments (Elliott, 2015). Although research clearly shows that aggression within the school has important implications for youth development and academic success, most of this research has focused on physically and verbally harmful behaviors (e.g., hitting, pushing, name calling). Additionally, research shows that youth who are exposed to high levels of aggressive behavior are at risk for a host of negative outcomes, such as increased aggression and delinquency, substance use, anxiety and stress, negative attitudes towards school, decreased attendance, avoidance, and posttraumatic stress (Farrell and Sullivan, 2004, Hong & Eamon, 2012).

A limited number of studies have addressed social workers' views of school safety and school violence. Available studies on that topic seem to focus on

awareness and perception of school violence (Astor, Bhre, Fravil, & Wallace 1997), participation in violence prevention programs and activities (Slovak, 2006), and types of strategies applied to address safety (Cawood, 2013). It is believed that the experience of social workers working directly with students in a variety of social intervention programs qualify them to design and implement adequate interventions to reduce and prevent school violence (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013). In general, school social workers' perception of school climate is greatly influenced by two factors: 1) community setting of the school and 2) the presence of multiple forms of violence, including physical assaults and potentially lethal events (Astor, et al., 1997).

School social workers have adopted both the system perspective and the strength perspective as the bases for prevention and intervention in regards to school violence and school safety (Slovak, 2006). Smith and Sandhu (2004) indicate that the use of prevention and intervention programs should occur across multiple systems, including families, the school, and interested community organizations. Furthermore, based on the ecological perspective, which considers schools as social systems, it is important to understand the perception of school social workers of school climate and the factors that influences such climate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This involves school staff, families, support groups, and other relevant groups, such as the students, the community, economic, political, and cultural factors (Benbenishty, Astor, & Estrada, 2008). The role of the school social worker in promoting a positive school climate can also be seen in collaboration with other entities within the society in order to improve the quality of the children's environment (Allen-Meares, Washington, Welsh, 2000). Although a limited number of studies (Astor, 1995; and Cawood, 2013) have assessed the views of school social workers towards school climate, there still is a need to re-assess the social workers' perspectives in a more comprehensive way by considering all of the factors related to school environment and school safety.

Social Workers' Views on School Safety

School environment and safety continue to be critical and demanding topics that represent a challenge to educators (Gregg, 2000), policy makers (Astor, et al., 1997), and organizations and communities (Farrell, Meyer, Kung, & Sullivan, 2001). However, the topic was always a topic of debate and discussion among social workers. For example, earlier research on social workers' perceptions of school violence and safety has highlighted important issues that needed further investigation. Astor et al. (1997) indicated that school social workers can play the role of leaders in the campaign to reduce interpersonal violence in the school setting. Similarly, Huxtable (1998) supported the advocacy role that school social workers assume, promoting prevention within the school. Another argument for school prevention against violence was also viewed by Flannery and his colleagues (2003), who believed that violent behavior occurs along a developmental continuum of severity, which can start at an early age and manifest itself as hitting and kicking, to more advanced violence such as rape and drug-related behavior.

School social workers' awareness of school climate and the need to promote school safety were assessed in order to determine the social workers' knowledge of the seriousness of the issue. These types of studies were based on the assumption that social workers in school settings will not be able to address the problems

without understanding their nature, volume, and impact on the children and the schools. For example, Astor et. al. (1997) raised important questions relevant to the views of school social workers on school violence, such as "how do social workers perceive the issue of school violence and when do they consider violence a serious problem in the school setting?" (1997, p. 57). The answers to such questions lead the author to conclude that it "is partly the result of theoretical orientations, interventions, intervention strategies, and explanations of violence prevalent in American popular culture. Frequently, the causes of school violence are attributed to the individual, community, or family, not the school organization" (1997, p. 66).

School Resources and Exposure to Risk

There has been a continuous discussion on the environmental factors that seem to impact school climate and safety (Cicchetti, Toth, & Maughan, 2000). Addressing issues and concerns, which are mainly produced in the community where the school is located, tends to explain how social workers adopt a broad perspective when discussing school safety and school violence. Since social workers are a part of multiple systems, it seems that they are the most qualified professionals when it comes to studying, understanding, and assessing the environment within the context of developing and implementing preventions and intervention programs and activities (Patton, 2011). Although many programs, activities, and initiatives have been designed and implemented to produce and enhance safety in schools, they have not been systematically developed, implemented, or evaluated, which made it difficult to measure their validity and outcomes (Striepling-Goldstein, 2004).

The Safe School Act U.S. Congress H.R.2455 has required that each school forms a safe school committee with a minimum of six members, made up of an equal numbers of parents, students, and teachers. Accordingly, school districts across the U.S. have developed specific policies and measures to ensure school safety. For example, Cawood (2013) has listed a number of services implemented by school social workers that vary from social interventions. These services include individual behavior plans, more strict and punitive interventions, such as the use of security guards and metal detectors, and expulsion and suspension. However, the adequacy and the effectiveness of these measures was not empirically assessed.

Social Workers' Exposure to School Violence: An Ecological Perspective

School social workers work involve addressing the needs of students, identify problematic behaviors, and collaborating with many systems to develop intervention strategies that intend to educate students on minimizing the impact of school violence and promote safety (Kaya, Bilgin, & Singer, 2012). The social worker may be interested in learning about children who are in the extreme levels of functioning, as they may need to prevent them from moving to more complex and advanced levels of deterioration and dysfunction. Kelly, Berzin, Alvarze, Shaffer, & O'Brien (2010) asserted that school social workers must have a solid understanding of the environments that make up the child's ecological system, such as school, community, and family. Accordingly, depending on their level of preparedness, school social workers can utilize preventive strategies that help reduce children's reactions to crisis by focusing on children's feelings and by introduce more constructive and positive activities (Werner, 2015).

Since school violence and safety are complex problems (Sugimoto-Matsuda, Hishinuma, Momohara, Rehuher, Soli, Bautista, & Chang, 2012) that require a comprehensive understanding of their dimensions, it is imperative for social workers to address these issues with new and creative strategies. For example, research on relational aggression has focused on the environment as a point to start with when dealing with these issues. Considering that, an ecological system perspective may be appropriate when identifying important parameters that social workers should acknowledge as a base for addressing the topic of school safety, such as demographic, cultural, historical, economic, and community characteristics (Osher, VanAcker, Morrison, Gable, Dwyer, & Quinn, 2004). When a school acts like an organization, the social worker is considered an integral part of the system and it is his or her task is to support the system in achieving specific "outputs," or outcomes represented in providing adequate environment that leads to students' growth. Therefore, meeting children's needs is a critical task for the school, as it is a system that involves other social systems, i.e. families, agencies, organizations, and communities.

The term "Organizational Health" indicates that in order to maintain a healthy school climate, a number of subsystems, i.e. parents, teachers, administrators, students, community members, legislators, and other groups, should be a part of such efforts (Scherz & Scherz, 2014). Accordingly, schools develop what can be described as school culture. Bluestein (2001) believes that school culture can produce certain dynamics, which reflect the school's physical environment, interactions among students and staff, and positive behaviors of the social systems involved in the school's life.

According to system theory, students enrolled in the school are considered an input to the school system where they are continuously and internally influenced by the various aspects of the school's climate, including class curricula, knowledge, and values, and externally by the nature of communication and interaction that exists within their own families, as well as the types and the characteristics of the communities they relate to and are exposed to. Specifically, communication and interaction as important for the school system and they should be open, positive and constructive (Erickson, Mattaini, & McGuire, 2004).

This comprehensive and holistic view of school climates encourages school social workers to understand and identify the areas of limitation that may need his or her efforts, as well as areas of strength, allowing them to maintain high quality environment. Children learn within the school environment through various formal and informal means. Their reactions to interpersonal challenges can also be influenced by the school activities, communicating with classmates, teachers, and staff, and existing teaching styles and available resources (Koiv, 2014). Based on the system perspective, students also can be considered "proposed output," since the purpose of schools is to prepare children for the future by educating them with basic knowledge and helping them to understand values. Additionally, from a human development point of view, children's growth is determined by emotional, cognitive, biological and behavioral aspects (Zastrow, & Kirst-Ashman, 2013).

Schools' Measures to Ensure a Safe School Environment

To address schools' concerns in regards to safety, it may be helpful to identify the characteristics of effective schools. Braaten (2004) believes that the existence of common sense of the school's purpose among staff concerning the vision, mission, or philosophy of the school directs all the efforts towards clearly defined goals intended for ongoing school improvement activities. Such efforts are believed to be translated into various systemic measures and initiatives in order to ensure safety and reduce violence. This sometimes makes the response and measures implemented in schools for safety unclear, and they can lack predicted outcomes.

In most cases, social workers, who are part of the school system, deal directly with the families of children in various aspects. Scherz & Scherz (2014) stated that "in families where children are struggling, a cohesive family unit with clear boundaries, good communication, respect, and caring can help defuse problems, or at least manage them before they blossom into something bigger" (p. 77). Striepling-Goldstein (2004) acknowledges that a "calm and facilitative environment, however, is difficult to both initiate and maintain if the rest of the 'system,' of which the classroom is a part, is unsupportive" (p. 23). The school social worker's role goes beyond addressing differences among children in such variables to being more of an educator and mediator to both the child and the family on what is the meaning of learning, what the school's expectations are, and how the school can operate as a social system. Social workers can face many challenges when families do not operate in clear or meaningful ways when preparing their children for interaction with the school system (Nickerson & Martens, 2008). The emphasis on collaboration between schools and homes was introduced by Christenson & Sheridan (2001) in which the schools' staff and administrators should engage with families in an effective interface to help children grow and progress in their lives.

Methodology

The population in this study is school social workers who attended the 45th annual conference of the Illinois Association of School Social Workers (IASSW) in Normal, Illinois in October of 2015. Following the approval of the conference organizers, the 450 social workers who attended the conference were asked to voluntarily participate in the study. A total of 315 of the conference participants (70%) agreed, and they responded to items in the study instrument. This study is exploratory, and it utilized a survey design to test a study model that integrates a number of variables intended to explain factors related to school climate.

Descriptive statistics were used to identify characteristics of the participating school social workers in this study. For example, participating social workers consisted of 29 males (9.5%) and 273 females (89.5%), with 3 missing information (1.0%). In terms of years of experience, the mean was 7.6 years with an SD of 8.6. The age of participating school social workers ranged from 23 to 66 years old, with a mean of 34.6 and an SD of 10.9. In regards to the school social workers' involvement with parents and the students, the result shows that 40 workers (13.1%) have a high level, 138 (30.9%) are frequent, 94 (30.8%) are moderate, 29 (9.5%) are occasional, and only 3 (1%) believe that their involvement with parents is low. Additionally, involvement between the school social workers and students was divided into 244 (80%) high, 43 (14.1%) frequent, 13 (4.3%)

moderate, 3 (1%) occasional, and only 1 worker described his or her involvement with students as low.

The study instrument was compiled by using a number of standardized scales adopted from concerned organizations and associations that work in the field of school violence and school safety. The final instrument utilized in this study consisted of 54 items, which include one dependent and six independent variables, in addition to demographic variables.

The following variables were defined as follows:

1. School Climate and Risk Factors: This dependent domain was defined as "the patterns of students', parents' and school personal's experience of school life and reflects norm, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practice, and organizational structures" (National School Climate Center, 2015, p.1). A total of nine items were adopted to reflect the staff's perception of the school's conditions, which include the availability of service opportunities, new instructional methods, actions to deter bullying behavior, administration trust in the staff's professional judgements, and availability of supportive activities within the school (Perkins, 2006).

2. Exposure to Violence: This domain is defined as the frequency of times a school social worker has experienced a violent event or shared information related to specific topics on school safety with students, parents, and staff within the last year. A composed scale was developed, which consists of 10 events in which the worker answered "yes" or "no," indicating the level of participation in these events. For example, "I was a victim of violence," "I know a friend who has been a victim of violence," and "I discuss violence with children."

3. Applying School Safety Procedures: This variable is defined as the level to which the school social worker is familiar with the process, instructions, and guidelines developed by the school to apply school safety. This subscale was adopted from the School Safety Survey by Sprague, Colvin, & Irvin (2002), and it includes a total of four items, which express how the worker participates in developing guidelines and instructions, and how he or she works with the administration to address school violence and safety. Statements in the scale are measured on a 5-point range, from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

4. School Safety Measures: This dependent variable refers to the types of actions and activities implemented by the school with the intent to deter violence and enhance safety within the school environment. A total of 25 items were selected from the School Survey Crime and Safety Principle Questionnaire (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The 10 items show the specific rules and activities used in the school as part of school safety measures, i.e. visitor signings, dress code, security cameras, prevention curriculum, electronic notifications, access to social networking, behavioral modification, and regulations on shooting, natural disasters, and bomb threats. The workers responded "yes" or "no" to the availability of such measures within the school.

5. Availability of Resources: This domain is adopted from the School Survey Crime and Safety Principle Questionnaire (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The subscale includes a number of resources that may exist and be used by the schools to enhance and facilitate school safety. The school social worker responds "yes" or "no" to indicate the actual availability of each resource within the school. Examples of these resources include training on classroom management, training for discipline violence, plans for supervising students, and responses to conflicts and problem solving.

6. Environmental Limitations: This domain of eight items was adopted from the School Survey Crime and Safety principle questionnaire (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The domain refers to an actual lack of specific policy, as well as behaviors and attitudes that may negatively influence the promotion of school safety. Each item was prepared as a statement with three scale options, ranging from "1 = no limitation" to "3 = major limitation." Examples of these limitations include inadequate placement to disruptive students, parents' complaints, lack of teachers' support, inadequate funds, and fear of litigation.

7. Communication on School Concerns: This domain consists of three items reflecting the level of school social workers' participation in discussions with students, colleagues, and parents about safety concerns and ways to deal with issues related to reactions to threats to school environment. The scale includes three choices, ranging from 1 = "no, I do not participate in," 2 = "not sure," and 3 = "yes, I participate in."

Study Model

A model for the variables that influence the dependent variable were developed to determine the various relationships between independent variables and the study-dependent variable "school climate." For example, based on the model, it was expected that resources available from the participants' districts would influence school climate through the type of communication that takes place between the social workers, children, and the children's parents. Similarly, the model predicts that social workers' exposure to school violence will influence the school climate in both a direct way and in an indirect way, through communication with children and parents. The variable "school measures for safety" is expected to influence school climate in a direct way and also in an indirect manner through "communication," which serves as an intermediate variable. Environmental limitations were viewed within schools in terms of policies, behaviors, and attitudes that could promote positive environment. Accordingly, this sub-scale is expected to influence the level of school climate. However, these environmental limitations would have impacts on both social workers' communication with children and the nature of school measures that are prepared and implemented in schools.
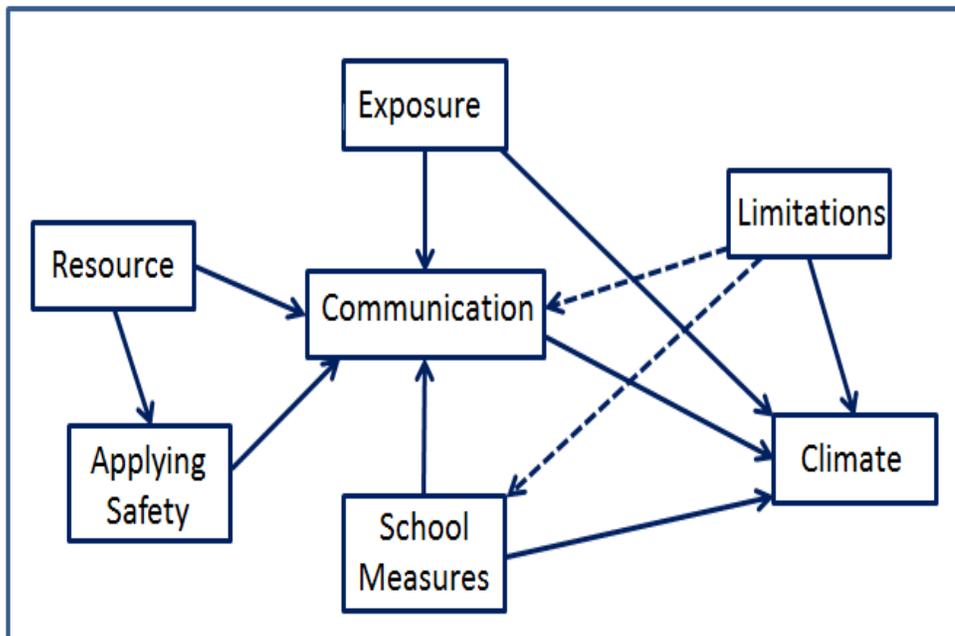
Figure 1: Proposed Model

Data Analysis

Path analysis was used to test the study model and determine the inter-impact of the study variables on school climate. The study data met the three assumptions for path analysis, which are 1) linearity of relationship between variables, 2) causal closure, which requires that all direct influences of one variable on another must be included in the path diagram, and 3) unitary variables, which require that variables composed in components must not behave in different ways with different variables (Wright, 1968). However, this last requirement is not applicable to the present study model. In applying path analysis, AMOS 23 SPSS-X statistical package was used to test the initial study model and identify the direct and indirect effects on the study dependent variables as an outcome.

Due to the low probability of the sub scale Applying Safety measure (r = .43), the model was revised and the variable was eliminated. The other six sub-scales had reliability Alpha from .68 to .84. Correlational analysis (Table 1) has identified a number of significant associations among the study variables that reflect the strengths and inter-influence of these selected variables. For example, school climate significantly associates with exposure (r. = .293, P. = .000), communication (r. = .12, P.= 04), school measures (r. = . 22, P. = .000), resources (r. = 23, P. = .000), and limitations (r. = .99, P. = .000). Exposure to school violence is significantly correlates with climate (r. = .29, P. = .000), communication (r. = .29, P. = .000), and environmental limitations (r. = .29, P. = .000). Finally, environmental limitations correlates significantly with climate (r. = .99, P. = .000), exposure (r. = .29, P. = .000), measures (r. = -.22, P. 000), and resources (r. = -.24, P. 000).

Table 1: Correlation Analysis

Variables	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Environmental Limitations	1.91	.52					
Climate	2.09	.55	.48**				
			.000				
Communication	.89	.27	-.008	.061			
			.886	.285			
Measures	.88	.23	-.192**	-.314**	.111		
			.001	.000	.53		
Resources	.51	.31	-.235**	-.197**	.092	.164**	
			.000	.001	.109	.004	
Exposure	.41	.31	.290**	.232**	.190**	-.90	-.007
			.000	.000	.001	.115	.905

The final adjusted model, which includes five independent variables and one dependent variable, has shown correlation among the variables. The focus of the model was to determine the impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable, depict the various relations among the independent variables, and determine the intervening variables within these relationships (Baron, & Kenny, 1986).
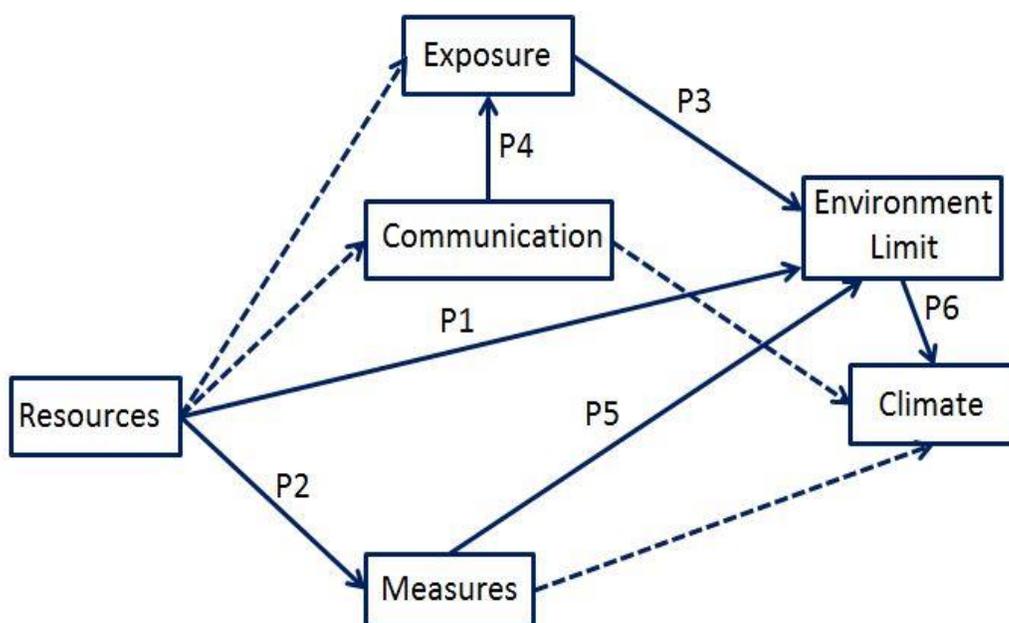

Figure 2: Final Model

In terms of impact between the independent variables and the dependent variable "School climate," the model has shown one direct effect between environmental limitations and climate (P6). However, a number of independent variables, such as exposure (p3), resources (p1) and measures (p5) impacted climate through environmental limitations, which served as an intervening variable (p6). With regards to the impacts among the independent variables, it seems that resources impacted measures (p2) and communication impacted exposure (p4). Results also show that two variables served as an intervening variable to the affect resources on school climate: measures (p5) and environmental limitations (p6).

Table 2: Path Analysis Model

Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Exposure ← Resources	.013	.065	.195	.854	
Limitations ← Exposure Mediator	.491	.089	5.517	***	P3
Resource ← Limitations Mediator	-.460	.101	-4.544	***	P1
Resources ← Measures	.117	.053	2.232	.026	P2
Communication ← Resources	.099	.053	1.868	.062	
Communication ← Exposure	.252	.047	5.404	***	P4
Measures ← Limitations Mediator	-.090	.028	-3.275	.001	P5
Climate ← Measures	.000	.012	.032	.974	
Climate ← Limitations	.992	.006	170.680	***	P6
Climate ← Communication	.008	.011	.74	.45	

Overall, the model results indicate a CFI (Comparative Fit Index) of .999, CMI/df (Comparative Mean Index over degree of freedom) 1.16, RMSEA (Root Mean Square of Approximation) of .02 (Table 3), and SRMSR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) of .02. (Table 4). Considering the exploratory nature of the study, the analysis seems robust. The attempt to adopt new and unrecognized variables to explore school climate such as resources, measures, environmental limitations, exposure, and communication was the focus of the study. Further research is needed to identify new variables and advanced processes to determine the factors that influence school climate in more precise and comprehensive ways.

Table 3: Model Fit Summary

CMIN

Model	NPAR	CMIN	DF	P	CMI/DF
PMO	16	5.820	5	.324	1.164
Saturated Model	21	.000	0		
Independent Model	6	1509.794	15	.000	100.653

Table 4: Model Fit Summary

RMSEA

Model	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90	PCLOSE
PMO	.023	.000	.086	.685
Independent Model	.573	.548	.597	.000

Results

Considering the nature of this exploratory study, the model seems to identify specific issues about factors that school social workers believe may be influencing school climates. Results are geared toward finding answers that help address these questions. For example, question one is, "How do social workers view the existing measurements, regulations, and activities implemented in schools to promote positive and effective climate?" The model's results found that school social workers believe limitations within the school do influence school climate in a direct way. However, results have also provided other, indirect influences through resources, which include financial support from school districts as vital to enhancing and empowering the school climate. The first question's results also indicated that school social workers believe that communication with students, parents, and teachers will increase their level of involvement and exposure to concerns and problems that these three constituencies may feel.

The second question is "What are the factors that seem to influence the school social workers' views on the quality of school climate and developmental plans implemented in schools?" The study model has presented an initial answer to the nature of school climate and the views of school social workers regarding its function. For example, through a number of direct and indirect effects between the independent variables and the dependent variable "climate," it is clear that school climate represents a complex phenomenon that should be considered in its wholeness. In Figure 2, the direct effect showed between limitation, communication, and measures on school climate were also accompanied by significant indirect effects of the other independent variables, such as resources and exposure, on school climate. The model seems promising, as it identifies a number of interactions between independent variables, such as communication and

exposure, and also between exposure, measures, resources and limitation. This provides an overall perspective on how school social workers identify critical factors that seem relevant to school climate. In other words, the efforts to promote school climate, based on the workers' perceptions, should not be limited or linear, as they should address a variety of important factors.

These findings are in the elementary stage and need to be studied further to specify the connection between the social worker's actions and activities and their contribution to the facilitation and enhancement of school climate. According to Bradshaw et al. (2014), a school climate is a product of several factors, such as safety, students' motivation, and students' perception of school. Astor and colleagues (1997) indicated that social workers generally do not feel that schools are contributing to risk; instead he found that risky behavior, violence, and aggressive communication are part of the community, and they are, therefore, imposed on schools as an input.

Finally, there may be a need for social workers to develop models to address and promote positive climates within schools. Considering the drastic lack of resources and limitations in the environment, school social workers should be given time and opportunities to come up with initiatives to promote positive and effective policies that fit with the cultures and the geopolitics of their communities. These initiatives should also be based on models of evidence, which should in turn be based on practice wisdom, to ensure that they are developed based on scientific backgrounds and supported by evidence-based findings (Kuhn, Elbert, Chapman, & Epstein, 2015).

Implications for School Social Work Practice

School social workers are often called upon to participate in the debate over problems and phenomena that may impair and compromise schools' ability to function. They additionally have the professional experience, education, and skills needed to be involved with variety of social systems within the community (Cawood, 2013). This will give them the chance to present their specific views and unique positions on serious issues. School social workers, who have been considered the most suitable professionals for such a task, are supposed to guide the school to an ecological framework that addresses both internal and external systems that impact school safety.

The internal systems that influence the nature of school climates include children, staff, administration, and curriculum. External systems include other important systems, such as parents, community groups, and formal organizations. The challenge is to identify the means and strategies needed to make these systems work in order to collaboratively establish actions and activities needed to keep school environments safe.

In such a context, addressing factors that influence school climate and safety should be considered by social workers as important, both in terms of enhancing the system's capacities and the actual transference of inputs to outputs through healthy and effective actions and activities. Additionally, Braaten (2004) has acknowledged the need for schools to work collaboratively with the community and, specifically, state that "schools must choose between working collaboratively with the community and being part of the solution, or continuing to be part of the

problem" (p. 57). Finally, as Kauffman (2001) noted, schools are responsible for some students' problem behaviors, which include inappropriate expectations, inconsistent management of behaviors, educational requirements for instruction in nonfunctional or irrelevant skills, and failing to identify the consequences of undesirable models of conduct. These comprehensive tasks and responsibilities can be part of school social workers' professional efforts to enhance and improve school climates.

Limitation of the Study

This exploratory study depicts the various variables that may influence school climate from the school social workers' perspective. However, other variables need to be identified and assessed, such as the schools' experience with violence, school and community integration, and community support. The study has identified findings based on resources available to schools, but the adequacy and the effectiveness of these resources should be examined. Finally, the generalizability of the study may be limited to school social workers in the state of Illinois, since other states may adopt difference strategies in terms of resources and measures adopted to promote school safety and climate.

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