The description of school social work practice is broad and inclusive of many roles and responsibilities to meet the unique needs of each school community. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) describes school social workers as "an integral link between school, home, and community in helping students achieve academic success" (n.d., para 1). They provide a variety of services, including interventions to address behavioral and mental health concerns, academic and classroom support, positive behavior support, individual and group therapy/counseling, casework, crisis intervention, and consultation with administrators, teachers, and families (SSWA, 2003; SSWA, n.d.). School social workers often work on interdisciplinary teams, participate in the assessment process for students referred to special education, act as school-community liaisons, and provide important leadership and feedback on school policies related to mental health interventions, discipline, support services, and crisis management (NASW, n.d.; SSWA, 2003; SSWA, n.d.). Factors such as the grade level of students they serve, their caseload size, and the size of their school district often influence school social workers' choice of intervention (Kelly & Stone, 2009). However, it is unclear how much school social workers' interventions are influenced by the social justice mandate of the profession (NASW, 2012; NASW, n.d.).

During my time as a school social worker, my school social work colleagues and I received a push by our respective school districts to be flexible in our roles and intervention choices in order to both meet the individual needs of our assigned school and the expectations set by our school principals. This meant that the role of a school social worker varied slightly (or at times extremely) within each school context. Although this allowed for increased responsiveness to each school's needs, I noticed that it also led to misunderstandings and constant questions around who we (school social workers) are, our abilities and expertise, the services we provide, who we serve, and other numerous factors. Often times, teachers and administrators – particularly those new to a school – were unaware of a school social worker's standard duties and when and if they should reach out to school social workers for support. Given these misunderstandings, in addition to being flexible within my role, I found it helpful to both create clear job roles and descriptions and to build relationships with administrators, teachers, and staff when possible so that I could more effectively serve the school community. Although these are important and necessary steps for a school social worker to become integrated into a school, it was unclear which of my roles and responsibilities should be prioritized, especially when placed within the larger context of social work practice and the field's commitment to social justice (NASW, 2012; NASW, n.d.).

**Racial Oppression in K-12 Schools**

Racial oppression manifests in various ways throughout the K-12 education system. Teachers who hold dominant social identities (e.g., White teachers) often do not recognize challenges that face students from historically marginalized communities (e.g., Students of Color) and are not culturally responsive in their interactions with students from different backgrounds (Ibe et al, 2018). Ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences between students (who are majority Students of Color) and educators (who are majority White) are compounded by high levels of economic and racial segregation in U.S. schools (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017; Ostrander, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The combination of low levels of funding in some districts and linguistic and cultural mismatches between students and teachers negatively impact academic outcomes (Merolla & Jackson, 2019).

As a result of oppressive policies, practices, and systems (e.g., implicit bias, bias in instruction, zero-tolerance or other exclusionary discipline practices, funding mechanisms, residential segregation, etc.) Students of Color are more likely to be retained, suspended (in-school and out-of-school), expelled, arrested or referred to law enforcement, or be pushed out of school compared to their White counterparts (Downer et al., 2016; Hayes & Ward, 2014; Merolla & Jackson, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

Attempts to improve the educational outcomes for Students of Color must confront this oppression head on. Although trained to do so, school social workers do not regularly use system change strategies in schools (Kelly et al., 2010). Instead, they spend a significant portion of their time implementing more intensive tier two and tier three interventions (i.e., small group or individual interventions) versus tier one (i.e., school wide) prevention interventions that attend to contextual and organizational issues (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelly et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2015). This focus on more intensive, individually oriented interventions is unsurprising provided that school social workers are more likely to view individual risk factors (e.g., behavior issues or poor social skills) as the source of problems experienced by students (Kelly et al., 2010). This view discounts environmental factors (e.g., structural racism) that negatively impact students in their communities and schools. In order to better prioritize some of the tasks school social workers plan to program, this study aimed to identify the roles and responsibilities school social workers should prioritize to help combat oppression in K-12 schools.

**Methods**

This study uses a subset of data from a larger qualitative study of 25 educators with anti-oppressive orientations. For the purposes of this study, anti-oppressive work was defined as work that resists or combats oppression (Kumashiro, 2020).

University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received prior to the start of the research study. Data was collected between November 2016 and January 2018. All participants met the following inclusion criteria: 1) adult, age 18 or older, 2) had experience working in the k-12 education setting (no limitation on discipline or role), and 3) self-reported that they engage in anti-oppressive practice. My recent experience working as a school social worker enabled me to identify eight initial participants engaged in anti-oppressive work. From there, snowball sampling was used to identify an additional 17 participants that met the inclusion criteria.

**Data Collection Procedures and Sample**

The guiding research question for this study is: How can school social workers help to combat oppression in K-12 schools? Subsequently, only the transcripts of 11 of the original 25 participants who specifically discussed the role of school social workers in their interviews were included in data analysis.

Participants held a variety of roles within K-12 schools, including administrator, school social worker, general education teacher, and special education teacher, allowing for a multi-disciplinary perspective. Participants were racially/ethnically diverse; however, they were nearly all female (n=10) and heterosexual (n=10). See table 1 for the specific demographic information.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

| Pseudonym | Age | Years working in K-12 education | Most recent role in K-12 education | Race | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Luna | 33 | 8 | Administrator Principal | African American | Female |
| Katie | 36 | 10 | School Social Worker | White | Female |
| Corinne | 38 | 5 | Teacher | White | Female |
| Jake | 28 | 5 | Teacher & Instructional Coach | African American | Male |
| Julia | 30 | 4 | School Social Worker | White | Female |
| Kira | 27 | 1 | Teacher | Latina | Female |
| Selma | 28 | 5 | Teacher | White | Female |
| Cora | 30 | 6 | SPED Teacher | African American | Female |
| Veronica | 29 | 3 | Teacher | Latina | Female |
| Luisa | 29 | 4 | Teacher | Latina | Female |

| Maura | 41 | 13 | School social worker | White | Female |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**Data Analysis**

Transcripts from the original 25 individual participant interviews were uploaded to Atlas.ti (v. 8.4.3), qualitative data analysis software, to manage the data. A flexible coding approach was applied for the purposes of data analysis (Deterding & Waters, 2018). This process included three cycles of coding and ongoing memo writing.

In the first coding cycle, broad codes (index codes) that reflected the key concepts and interview questions were applied to the text (Deterding & Waters, 2018). Example index codes include *anti-oppressive practice example*, *example of oppression,* and *recommendations*. In the second cycle of coding, more focused, fine-grained codes (analytic codes) were applied to the text (Deterding & Waters, 2018). Example analytic codes include: *empowering students* and *challenging oppression*. In the third cycle of coding, text that: 1) related to school social workers and 2) was previously coded as *anti-oppressive practice example* or *recommendations* was separated and additional analytic codes were applied. This process further differentiated the recommended anti-oppressive practices specific to school social workers from practices specific to teachers and administrators. Example codes include: *leadership role, structural changes, getting actively involved in classes and schools*, etc. The memos written throughout the analysis process supported the identification of conceptual themes and emerging relationships between concepts (Deterding & Waters, 2018).

**Results**

Participant narratives suggest different roles and approaches school social workers should include (and prioritize) in their practice to help combat oppression in K-12 schools. These practices include: providing leadership in social justice work and anti-oppressive practice (Theme 1), increasing visibility and integration on campus and in the classroom (Theme 2), and complementing student interventions with psycho-education and social-emotional support for teachers (Theme 3). Each theme is discussed below.

**Theme 1: Provide Leadership in Social Justice Work and Anti-oppressive Practice**

Participants indicated that school social workers are uniquely prepared for social justice and equity work. This is not surprising, as social justice is a core value of the social work profession and thus social workers receive specific training related to social justice, while teachers do not (CSWE, 2015; NASW, n.d.). Katie highlighted social workers' unique skills and training related to social justice work.  She earned a teaching degree and experience as a classroom teacher before entering an MSW program to transition to become a school social worker. Katie

expressed dismay that teachers did not receive the same level of training on issues related to power, privilege, and oppression as their social work counterparts. Upon taking coursework in her MSW program, Katie stated "I was shocked. Like, why don't they teach this in schools [of education]. And they were like, 'Oh, well they expect social workers to teach everybody.' And I'm like, 'How could we possibly do that?' You know, but it just blows my mind."

Participants agreed that a gap in many teacher education programs is the lack of emphasis on social justice and anti-oppressive practices. Corinne (a teacher) stated, "I feel like there needs to be a way stronger emphasis in social justice for teachers." Another teacher, Selma, shared a similar sentiment: "I think that there needs to be an emphasis in teacher training programs. Like, every teacher training program needs to have ongoing work with anti-oppressive training, diversity training regardless of whether or not you're going to be working in a school that is diverse. Like, everybody just needs to be a part of it."

For these reasons, it is imperative that school social workers be actively involved in equity work that takes place within their schools and districts. Maura (a school social worker) stated, "I think particularly social workers should be leading with our skills and training. Like I say to my [school social work] students, if you're not on the equity team in your school you need to get on it immediately because this is the type of work you need to be doing."

In addition to participating in their school's equity team, school social workers should also consider offering professional development (through formal all-staff meetings or informal grade level or individual meetings with teachers and staff). Participants agreed that rather than providing one-time trainings, school social workers should be a constant presence at professional development trainings and the day-to-day operations of the school. Selma stated:

> I think that social workers need to be super integrated into the fabric of the school and have influence over trainings. And I think that they need to have – you can't just do diversity training once. Like, it's constant right? Disrupting privilege is not just something that happens one time, like, "Oh, my privilege has been disrupted. I get it now." You have to constantly work.

In addition, participants indicated that social workers should take on a collaborative role in schools when it comes to social justice work and re-thinking oppressive practices like discipline. Selma explained that a school social worker in her district began an initiative with the support of their administrators related to restorative practices where:

> …every summer the whole entire staff, admin, teachers, psychologists, social worker, RP [Restorative Practices] coordinators meet at the school social worker's house every Monday for bar-b-que and they go through their disciplinary handbook and they rewrite it every summer. And they all said it's amazing how collaborative it is and also how everybody is heard. And it's like, that's what it needs to be in schools. You need to have a staff that is willing to work together in every aspect, not just in curriculums and standardized testing, but also like, it needs to all be about the students.

Ultimately, this study's participants agreed that school social workers should be actively involved in creating anti-oppressive structures, policies, practices.

### Continued Learning to Support Leadership in Social Justice and Anti-oppressive Practice

In order to effectively engage in advocacy for systems level changes, it is necessary for school social workers to gain expertise on specific systems, policies, and practices within the K-12 education system. Selma highlighted a need for school social work classes to move away from micro level therapy and instead focus on "historical frameworks for public education," "indigenous methodologies, "deconstructing the public education system, and what role a social worker could play." Other participants also highlighted the need to focus on systems and systems change strategies.

Cora (a SPED teacher) indicated that it would be beneficial for school social workers to take a class specific to disabilities (e.g., the qualification process, history of the over-qualification of students from historically marginalized communities, etc.), non-punitive discipline practice, and the impact of grade retention. Cora stated that this type of information would provide school social workers with "a much more well-rounded picture" so that they could more effectively advocate for students. In addition, Veronica (a teacher) recommended that school social workers "become informed as to how to address internalized oppression." Veronica explained that this knowledge is integral to a student's "social, emotional health and as a way of holding that child's human dignity." Veronica stated:

> That's something that I have not seen. The social worker at my last school tried to help me with that, but it made her very nervous. So, she was very subtle. She was touching on the surface. She was more of a person that would facilitate a conversation and not actually address the issue with kids.

Maura (a school social worker) explained that although school social workers are often tasked with providing direct services to students through

individual or group interventions, it is imperative that school social workers "resist the tendency in education to see most issues as being at the individual level, [as] individual student problems, and really try to keep more of our ecological, social, and political focus that we bring as social workers as were discussing needs in the school."

**Theme 2: Increase Visibility and Integration on Campus and in Classrooms**

It is important for school social workers to be highly visible and integrated into their school communities. School social workers can do this in a variety of ways. Cora indicated that social workers are most successful when they are visible on campus and in classrooms. She stated:

> I think being in the classroom more, social workers and psych[ologist]s, just being in the classroom a lot more and being around the school a lot more. I've had the pleasure of working with a lot of social workers and psych[ologist]s who have done that, but also had social workers and psych[ologit]s who stay in their offices and who have people come meet them there. There's not much active involvement in what is happening in the school day-by-day or what instruction looks like, or what the needs are of students in classrooms, or just things like that.

Part of being integrated into a school is having strong relationships with teachers, administrators and staff. For instance, participants described a need for school social workers to build relationships with teachers to be more present in the classroom and provide much needed classroom level interventions. Katie (a school social worker) discussed the importance of having strong relationships with teachers so that she can provide classroom interventions to increase access to students as well as their access to social-emotinoal laerning. She explained that when "teachers [are] open to having me go in to do those classroom interventions," she is able to work with students that might otherwise not be served.

In addition, participants shared an expectation for school social workers and other helping professionals (i.e., school psychologists and nurses) to hold anti-oppressive practice in the foreground of their minds when engaging with the school community. For example, Kira (a teacher) shared that she would like her school social worker to run a school-wide weekly meeting to talk about anti-oppressive practice.

> I think she's [the school social worker is] doing a really good job right now of taking care of just personal issues that students have and I'm kind of torn about this. I feel like she could do a better job school-wide in supporting these issues. Maybe like once a week[ly], morning meeting

talking about anti-oppression and what to do against it or how to identify it.

Kira describes a common dynamic where school social workers are often consumed with tier two (small group) and tier three (individual) interventions instead of much needed tier 1 (whole school) interventions.

In terms of increased visibility, Corrine suggested that both students and families could better access needed services at on-site community health centers or engagement centers. This recommendation would not only increase access to direct-care services (i.e., health, food, and other resources), but would also strengthen the school-community connection. Corinne suggested that school social workers work from these health centers or hubs within the school to increase their visibility and access to students and their families. Corinne stated:

> It would be smart to have more [trauma informed care] everywhere, more satellite… health centers that are part of the schools and that work with the school, [where] the kids and family members can go to get any kind of health services. I think that will help where there are social workers there and maybe [a] therapist, but also maybe a nurse and also more like a community engagement center.

Although many schools do not have health centers or community engagement centers, Corinne's commentary speaks to the need for increased school-community connections as well as the need for increased visibility of and access to school social workers. This increased access could also be achieved by placing school social workers' offices in highly visible areas of the building versus in secluded areas. It is equally important for school social workers to have a heavy presence during day-to-day school activities (morning meetings, passing times, lunch, full class or whole school activities and interventions, etc.), rather than being siloed in their office for individual or group interventions.

**Theme 3: Complement Student Interventions with Psycho-education and Social-emotional Support for Teachers**

Participants indicated that the provision of social-emotional supports (e.g., social-emotional curriculums) and trauma informed care is not only an integral part of school social work practice, but also connected to anti-oppressive practice. Katie (a school social worker) stated, "I really feel that that [social-emotional learning] needs to be a priority. Even basic social and emotional stuff isn't given a priority in school when that is so important. [It] is a basis of compassion and empathy and such a base to anti-oppression work."

Participants agreed that although direct services to students (at the individual, group, and classroom level) are indispensable, teachers are also in

need of training and support. Selma suggested that direct student interventions should be complemented with explicit training for the staff to increase effectiveness. She spoke to its benefits, noting the importance of "training staff about what that [small group social-emotional intervention with students] means. It's so beneficial to have someone who is able to explain to staff and to kids too. There's so much power in knowing how your brain works." This type of education can improve continuity of care, teacher-student interactions, and student engagement by providing teachers the necessary information to better serve students while supporting the interventions provided by the school social worker.

In addition, participants indicated that school social workers can bolster anti-oppressive work currently taking place in their school by providing support to teachers who are already engaged in anti-oppressive practice and those who would like to build those skills. Maura (a school social worker) detailed why:

> I think for teachers who are already bought into this [anti-oppressive work]…social workers can be an emotional support…Classroom teachers are very overwhelmed, so a role as a social worker, supporting the teacher's perspective on things and providing resources, or offering to co-lead things with them [would help]. I think teachers will often come to the social workers for help on the social-emotional things in the classroom, but if they're able to be seen as someone that can help you have those complicated conversations against racial micro-aggressions in the classroom… I think that's a great way that social workers could say "I'm happy to be with you in having these tough conversations and navigate with them with you." Offering that to everyone, even if people haven't bought in yet, to say "You know I'd be happy to lead something first to model how it can go in the classroom."

Kira (a teacher) specifically addressed the additional work Teachers of Color take on compared to their White counterparts, as well as their need for additional support:

> There should also be some sort of counseling for us -- the Teachers of Color. There's only four of us and then the social worker, she's a Black woman. So, there's five Staff [of Color], when we have 600 students. It's a lot to take on [supporting Students of Color] and I think if…we're going to be helping our kids there should be support and there should be maybe counseling [to handle the secondary trauma, additional pressure, and responsibilities of being a Teacher of Color]. As much as admin wants to help and as much as other teachers are open to listening to the kids and

doing anti-oppressive work, I feel because we identify with the kids, the few Teachers of Color, it just takes a really heavy toll on us.

Kira acknowledged that Teachers of Color take on a disproportionate amount of work (i.e., time and emotional labor) supporting Students of Color compared to their White counterparts, especially in times of increased racist and nativist rhetoric and trauma. Research indicates that the support Teachers of Color provide to Students of Color is extremely important to academic success (Gershenson et al., 2018). Additional assistance provided by school social workers is one way to mitigate the increased work that inherently rests on the shoulders of Teachers of Color.

**Discussion**

School social workers are often asked to wear many "hats" on any given day based on a school's needs as well as the larger sociocultural context of the world (Kelly & Stone, 2009)**.** Unfortunately, one of those "hats" often does not include leadership responsibilities (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelly & Stone, 2009). For this reason, the first theme's urging of social workers to take leadership roles around social justice and equity work is most arresting. Given the gap in current teacher trainings and the unique expertise school social workers have related to social justice work, it is imperative that school social workers begin to take on leadership roles, including leading equity teams and participating in the daily functioning schools (e.g., teacher team meetings, SPED meetings, discipline policies and practices, family meetings, etc.). In order to do this, school social workers must simultaneously increase their knowledge base and understanding of systems, policies, and practices in the K-12 education system that negatively impact students from historically marginalized communities.

Participants indicated a need for school social workers to be better educated when it comes to special education, restorative practices and alternatives to suspensions, and the negative impact of grade retention. This would better position school social workers to advocate for their students and become more integrated in the decision-making processes that can make or break a student's academic experience. As previous research has indicated (see Kelly et al., 2010), Theme 1 also highlights the need for school social workers to utilize a systems and person-in-environment perspective rather than an individualized perspective for identifying problems and interventions.

Prioritizing tier two  (e.g., small group) and tier three (e.g., suicide risk reviews and individual counseling) interventions pulls school social workers into their offices and away from the context of the regular school day (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelly et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2015). This makes the second theme's urging of school social workers to increase their visibility and become more integrated in schools and classrooms so salient. This does not advocate that school

social workers eliminate tier two and tier three supports from their repertoire. Indeed, such interventions were identified as integral parts of school social work practice. However, these services should be provided in concert with tier one, school-wide interventions. School social workers can impact the larger school system in a variety of ways: facilitating professional development trainings, engaging in the school equity team, providing classroom or whole-school interventions, etc. Each of these interventions increases the school social worker's visibility and integration within the school.

Participants' narratives suggest that schools might be best served by school social workers who broaden the scope of their perceived clients from students and their families to include teachers as well. Although the need for social-emotional support for students (social-emotional curriculums at tier 1 level, small group support at the tier 2 level, and individual counseling at the tier 3 level) was discussed by participants, they also described a need for training teachers about social-emotional interventions as well as the need to increase support for those engaged in anti-oppressive practice (particularly Teachers of Color) to mitigate the stress of their additional workloads. This does not dismiss the continued need for both individual and small group interventions for students. However, it does recognize that direct student interventions are strengthened by providing support to teachers. These types of social worker-teacher interventions can strengthen the work already being done with students and positively impact teachers' well-being and improve teacher retention, which will ultimately improve the overall school climate.

## Limitations

The results of this study should be considered within the context of limitations in the available data. The intention of the larger research study was not specific to school social workers, but rather anti-oppressive practices of educators in K-12 education (regardless of their specific discipline). The question of how school social workers combat oppression in K-12 schools developed inductively through analytic coding (Deterding & Waters, 2018) of all completed interviews. Indeed, only 11 of the 25 original participants provided responses related to the role school social workers do or should play in combatting oppression in K-12 schools. Thus, this paper represents a preliminary exploration of the roles and responsibilities school social workers should consider prioritizing to more effectively combat oppression in K-12 schools.

Although the 11 participants' responses provided some critical insights into the needs of schools and the roles of school social workers in combatting oppression, it is also necessary to acknowledge that 14 of the original 25 participants did not engage in substantive discussions related to the research question. This highlights a problem faced by many school social workers – various teachers, administrators, and support staff might be disconnected from the

work school social workers engage in or are unaware of how school social workers can serve them, their students or their students' families. Notably missing from the findings is a discussion of the school social workers' role as a school-community liaison. This omission might be related to the small number of participants (n=11) that discussed the role of the school social worker or it could stem from the different hiring practices of schools. For example, some schools have family liaisons who are responsible engaging with families and the larger community while school social workers are responsible for providing direct student intervention.

**Future Research and Learning**

These limitations underscore the need for continued research, not just from the perspective of school social workers, but for research that investigates the perspectives of school social workers held by teachers, administrators, para-professionals, and other school staff. Identifying educators' understandings and misunderstandings about school social workers' area of expertise, their roles and responsibilities, and each school's needs can help school social workers make decisions (in collaboration with their administrators) about where to focus their time and how to best utilize their expertise. Many public schools are underfunded and under-resourced. Unfortunately, schools continue to face budget cuts that can impact the jobs and roles of school social workers (Big Table Phase COVID-19 response letter, 2020; SSWA, 2003). Identifying the importance of school social workers, as well as activities that produce the largest impact, can help prioritize school social workers' jobs at a time when K-12 education budgets are shrinking.

These findings also have implications for social work education programs, particularly school social work courses. Prolonged time and attention related to anti-oppressive interventions at micro (student and/or teacher), mezzo (classroom), and macro (school or district) levels are needed in school social work courses. This includes content related to historical and contemporary structural oppression, disproportionalities and disparities in the K-12 education system, systems change strategies, and interventions to address racial trauma and trauma related to other forms of oppression. In addition, courses should discuss strategies to increase social workers' engagement and visibility in classrooms and the school building, the process of building and facilitating equity teams, steps for building positive (anti-oppressive) school culture, and anti-oppressive policies and practices related to discipline, special education, and grade retention.

**Conclusion**

It is a daunting task for school social workers to balance their many scheduled and emergent demands. For this reason, it is extremely important for school social workers to prioritize their roles, responsibilities, and interventions for optimal impact. In order to be most effective for their students, colleagues and larger school communities, school social workers should prioritize interventions that that

address the root cause of problems (i.e., systemic racism and other forms of oppression) faced by students, families, and their larger school community. Although a preliminary study in this substantive area, this research study provides an essential point of entry for much needed discussion and research related to the prioritization of interventions that align with the profession's social justice aims.

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