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Ethical Dilemmas for Social Workers Utilizing NASW Code of Ethics in

Rural K-12 Public Schools

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study's purpose is to explore the ethical dilemmas unique to social workers who serve clients in rural k-12 public schools while adhering to the Code of Ethics as determined by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). It examines how social workers practicing in the school setting use a Code of Ethics specific to the social work profession, which varies in its core values and ethical standards when compared to the Code of Ethics For Minnesota Teachers used by teachers, principals and administrators who make up the professional majority in the host setting. Research shows that it is common for school social workers to not have clearly defined roles and responsibilities within the host setting and with this lack of definition, it leads to misunderstanding of ethical standards and expectations among their professional colleagues.

The participants for this study comprise of school social workers currently employed in rural school districts. These participants felt that there are ethical dilemmas unique to their placement within the rural community. The ethical dilemmas addressed in this study include dual relationships, client confidentiality and gift giving.

Through participants statements it was found that living within the same rural community that holding employment in can limit personal community involvement; as clients and/or relatives to clients are potential neighbors as well. Another theme that emerged through the interviews include school social worker's need for a director over their department within the district office, so as to address ethical inquires and relay communication among social workers district wide. Also provided in this study are recommendations for further research on these experiences as means to creating more educational opportunities for current social work professionals who practice in rural communities and graduates entering the social work profession.

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I dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Evelyn, to whom I would not have continued to

push myself to do better in life without. It is true and attainable, you can be whatever you

want to be in life, as long as you are willing to work hard for it. So set your goals high and

never let life's obstacles get in the way of your dreams.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Social workers in rural k-12 public school settings work closely with students, parents, teachers and community resources. It is critical there be a clear understanding of the ethical responsibilities social workers hold while in their school positions. As social workers enter school settings it becomes increasingly important to implement ethical decision making to ensure that the values and missions of the profession are upheld. Understanding the social work Code of Ethics assists social workers in maneuvering through the everyday dilemmas confronted by school social workers in rural school settings.

This research study attempts to explore the challenges that school social workers face in their ethical decision making as it relates to the social work Code of Ethics. The school setting has unique challenges as the decision making process and mission of the school system are created and controlled by interdisciplinary professionals who are not all professional social workers and adhere to their own discipline's Code of Ethics. Through my personal internship experiences in a school setting I have been confronted with some of the various ethical dilemmas that school social workers encounter. These interactions include acceptance of gifts from clients, dual relationships and certain decision making processes. It is this internship experience that has led me to believe that more attention should be given to ethical decision making practice of social workers in rural public school settings. Through the research conducted I hope to provide an opportunity for the reader to understand school social workers' roles and conflicts of interest as well as how to apply the code of ethics as set by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in rural public school settings.

Ethical decision making for any professional is a process. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008), ethical responsibilities flow from all human relationships, from the personal and familial to the social and professional. When making an ethical decision social workers need to take into account their own informed judgment and how issues are perceived by both contemporaries and clients served. Boland-Prom and Anderson (2005) explain that when the National Association for Social Workers ratified the Code of Ethics in 2008, it included an acknowledgment that dual relationships can be part of sound social work practice. However, more effort is needed in teaching ethical decision making with regard to dual relationships and that such relationships should be assessed and ethically maintained.

One of the primary goals of all social workers is to do no harm. The formation of additional relationships outside of the social worker/client relationship, known as dual relationships, run the risk of placing clients and professionals in harm's way. According to the NASW (2008) social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client. Jayaratne, Croxton, and Mattison (1997) believe there is no dual relationship that doesn't have the potential to be exploitive, cross boundaries of ethical practice, and possibly impair the social worker's judgment.

Purpose

With increasing populations due to immigration, newly entering refugees and escalating birth rate; it is likely that the need for school social workers will continue to grow (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 2000). Social workers are needed in schools to empower students/families, advocate for social justice, and educate on social issues, concerns

and advocate for the importance of human relationships. However, ethical dilemmas related to dual relationships will be encountered as social workers attempt to achieve the above goals while working in an environment that promotes relationships among teachers and families of students.

This research will focus on rural k-12 public schools in Minnesota and the social workers employed in rural settings. According to Barker (2003) rural is described as living in agricultural, nonmetropolitan, sparsely populated areas or small towns. Barker (2003) also state that the problems experienced by people living in rural areas are like those that live in urban communities with the exception to what the community has to offer; "they often encounter difficulties of limited services and resource systems, less acceptance of any variations from the social norms prevalent in the area, fewer educational and economic opportunities" (p. 377).

For further exploration of this study the following section will provide key terms that assist in understanding dual relationships, ethical decision making, host setting, and also terms related to social work.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this research study the following terms will be used and defined accordingly in order to add clarity of understanding. These key terms relate to this study as they specifically define aspects to the school social work profession such as; case management, school social work and also student.

Casework or case management–Organizing, coordinating, and sustaining activities and services designed to optimize the functioning of students and/or families (NASW, 2002).

Dual or multiple relationships–Relationships that occur when social workers relate to clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social, or business; dual or multiple relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively (NASW, 2008).

Ethical decision making–A professional's standards of right and wrong when presented with conflicts involving their professional duties and obligations (Strom-Gottfried, 2008).

Host setting–Arenas in which social workers practice that are defined and dominated by people who are not social workers (Dane & Simon, 1991).

School social work–Social work services provided in the setting of an educational agency by credentialed or licensed school social workers. This specialty in social work is oriented toward helping students make satisfactory adjustments and coordinating and influencing the efforts of the school, the family, and the community to achieve this goal (NASW, 2002).

Student–Any person legally mandated by the state to be enrolled in an educational program or eligible to be enrolled (NASW, 2002).

The above terms will be used throughout this study to assist in the exploration of various challenges that social workers in rural public school settings face in their ethical decision making as it relates to the social work Code of Ethics. In the next section, the focus of this study will be provided as well as a brief description of what this study attempts to explore.

Research Question

How does the social work Code of Ethics impact the ethical decision making process of social workers who work in rural k-12 public school? This research question focuses on school social worker's perceived ethical dilemmas and the impact that the profession's Code of Ethics has over the ethical decision making process used in their placement in school settings. Placement in a school setting refers to the institution in which social workers are employed and conduct professional practice. For this study, the particular setting will be rural public schools where multiple professions (i.e., teachers, administrators) have their own independent understanding of professional ethics.

The Social Work professions' focus is on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society (NASW, 2008). To create a better understanding of how these elements interact, the use of systems theory will be explained and applied to the role of school social workers throughout this research study. The researcher will provide information on a) the need for social workers in a school setting throughout the last century in America, b) a description of school social worker's roles and responsibilities, c) the standards for school social work as set by the National Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics with some comparison to the Code of Ethics for Minnesota teachers, and d) the dilemmas and conflicts school social workers encounter while working in a host setting.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

"An historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society" (NASW, 2008, p. 2). According to Allen-Meares et al., (2000) "Of all our societal institutions, the school has been the one most often singled out to solve the social ills that permeate other institutions" (p. 2). This researcher has chosen to focus on the impact that the social work Code of Ethics has on the perceived ethical dilemmas and ethical decision making process of social workers who practice in the rural public school system. Rural public school systems were chosen as the focus for this study as small communities are more susceptible to an environment where dual relationships are fostered.

The review of literature illustrates the need for school social workers since the 1900s, roles social workers hold within the school setting, a description of dual relationships and social workers as a guest in a host setting such as the school. The literature also provides a comparison of the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services and the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers.

The Need for Social Workers in Schools

Social conditions, everyday life struggles and population of immigrants entering the country during the early 1990s contributed to the support of developing educational programs. Allen-Meares et al. (2000) noted that as society changed, social justice issues such as education were seen as a right for children and the importance to create a link between the school and community was significant.

Allen-Meares (2010) describes how government was adding pressure upon schools to create educational practices for the individual child; "By 1918 every state had passed its own compulsory attendance law, a situation that in effect proclaimed that each child had not only the right to benefit from what the school had to offer but an obligation to secure these advantages" (p. 25). During this time parents and factory owners had reasons for wanting to keep children from attending school.

Many parents had hoped to enter their children into the workforce and to provide supplemental income where there was an absence of adult wages. Factory owners found it beneficial to use cheap labor of children and without required birth registration it was easy for children to obtain working papers before they were of legal age. However due to the compulsory attendance laws in effect, parents were forced to send their children to school.

According to Sheldon (2007) and Allen-Meares (2010) as the new attendance requirements took place in the education system a new position was created and referred to as an attendance officer; professionals who understood the social workings of the community such as poverty, poor health and its effects on families, lack of family income, and the effects such conditions had over children's attendance in schools. The responsibility of attendance officer was assigned to school social workers, who during this era were referred to as visiting teachers. The need for visiting teachers was to support school personnel in their understanding of children's family or personal lives and make recommendations for adaptations in school programs such as educational materials needed to assist children with mental defects (Sheldon, 2007).

During the 1920s the number of visiting teachers in schools increased. Allen-Meares (2010) note that an additional attribution to the increase of social workers placed in school settings was the result of a three year trial study. This study was conducted by the Commonwealth Fund; it gave the National Committee of Visiting Teachers financial support to conduct an experiment of distributing school social workers to 30 different communities nationwide. This experiment was to provide evidence of the need for social services in schools, as means to decrease juvenile delinquency. The trial study ended by 1930 and was seen as a success as; 21 of the original sites continued on with the program, and 30 additional cities nationwide were implementing their own visiting teacher programs. By 1930, 31 states across the nation were employing 244 visiting teachers (Allen-Meares, 2010).

As America moved further into the next few decades, visiting teachers saw their role change and as such had to adapt to the needs of children and changing society. During the 1930s America was experiencing the great depression; the supply of food, shelter and clothing were sparse, and federal aid was made available only to families in desperate need of assistance. The need for visiting teachers changed to that of caseworker. These professionals were expanding their prior commitment of linking school, home and community to embracing the new task of providing emotional support for children and their families (Allen-Meares et al., 2000).

As society's shift in needs evolved after the 1940s, visiting teachers became known as school social workers. An early school social worker named Gladys Hall made the statement "the role of the school social worker was changing from one of school-community liaison to preventing poor mental health among children", a duty that later become associated with

social casework (Allen-Meares, 2010, p. 27). Another social work philosopher Ruth Smalley, described the new role the school social workers were taking as "specialized form of social casework, a method of helping children use what the school offers" (Allen-Meares, 2010, p. 28).

The emerging 1960s brought once again new issues for a continually changing society and a new need for school social workers as the civil rights movement entered into the school system. A document that influenced public education during this time was the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder or more informally known as The Kerner Report of 1968, which analyzed racial violence of the 1960s and placed blame squarely upon the public school system and the school system's failure to provide equitable education for minority children (Taylor, 2008). It was recommended at the time for elimination of racial segregation throughout the nation's public schools and increased parental involvement in the education decisions.

Social workers had to change the means in which they worked with students and families as public schools were accused of inequality in educational opportunities offered to students due to segregation (Allen-Meares et al., 2000). This new method was "group work"; which brought about a new way of interacting with the community. This included bringing families from inner city communities closer to the school community through meetings between families and schools. Intentions behind group work included the involvement from the student, family members, community resources, and school staff to work as a team to improve the student's academic performance.

An emphasis of school social work in the 1970s-1990s was on family, community, handicapped pupils and teaming with other school related professionals. During this time the ecological perspective theory was introduced to scholars and offered as an application for school social work problem solving. Barker (2003) details ecological perspective as "an orientation in social work and other professions that emphasizes understanding people and their environment and the nature of their transactions" (p. 136). Healy (2014) goes further to say that this concept "encourages social workers to recognize that problems arise because of a poor fit between a person's environment and his or her needs, capacities, rights and aspirations" (p. 122). According to Allen-Meares (2010) this theory is useful in gathering and organizing data about and from the various systems (e.g., home, school and community) that contribute to students' academic successes or difficulties.

The history of social work in the school setting has affected the decisions made by professionals in schools in the past and present and will continue to be used in the future of this profession. Historical context is pertinent to the understanding of the ethical dilemmas that social workers in schools are facing in the present and in further detail will be discussed in chapters that follow.

Defining a Social Worker in a School Setting

Social workers have a vital role in the school system not only for the social development as it relates to academic performance of children but in creating a link between school and community when needed. Review of literature has found that the definition of school social work varies by author's opinion of the tasks and responsibilities, as well as the political position a social worker holds within the institution they work. A statement made by

Jane Culbert in 1916, as cited in Allen-Meares (2010) the role that social workers have within the school setting is described as;

> Interpreting to the school the child's out of school life; supplementing the teacher's knowledge of the child…so that she may be able to teach the whole child…assisting the school to know the life of a neighborhood, in order that it may train the children for the life to which they look forward. Secondly, the visiting teacher interprets to the parents the demands of the school and explains the particular difficulties and needs of the child. (p. 26)

According to NASW (2008) the practice of school social work is described as working in collaboration to mobilize the resources of local education and community agencies to meet the needs of both students and families of students. Providing a different definition; Bye, Shepard, Partridge and Alvarez (2009) define a social worker in a school setting as one that assists students in addressing problems that interfere with their ability to function and progress academically within the school. Allen-Meares (2010) describe the role they see fit for a social worker in a school setting as "school social workers are in a strategic position to identify school policies and arrangements that adversely affect children, they have a dual function to assist specific individuals and simultaneously deal with the sources of pupil difficulties within the school" (p.33). All relevant thoughts to take into consideration as school social workers do share a common goal; to enhance the means in which students learn academically and socially in their educational setting.

When reviewing the literature found, it appears that through the past 90 years the role of a school social worker and the tasks associated with that role has been altered to

accommodate the societal differences that each decade encountered. There are some similarities among these roles and tasks, but many more differences are noticeable.

Evolving Roles of the School Social Worker

The focus of school social work duties has always been centered on the well-being of children and their academic progress. Through review of literature, it has been found that school social workers have continued to hold the role of linking school, home and community as well as explain to school personnel the importance that "out of school" lives have on children's academic performance. However, the tasks implemented by the school social workers have changed over the past century in several ways.

In the early 1900s visiting teachers had the role as attendance officer in schools after the implementation of compulsory attendance laws. According to Sheldon (2007) responsibilities of attendance officers included house visits to verify birth certificates of children and check on school registration, deliver warnings to parents who were not complying with compulsory attendance laws, and to instigate prosecutions for non-attendance. The role of attendance officer gradually altered to that more of a" liaison" when duties such as recording intimate family details: hospital admissions, adoptions, marital separations and illegitimacy were taken on. The information gathering duties of attendance officers did not improve the interactions between parents and attendance officers as the relationships "were always tinged with a power relationship founded on the idea of defective parenting" (Sheldon, 2007, p. 738).

Later in the 1920s, school personnel started to attribute children's academic failures to "nervous" and "difficult" behavioral problems. According to Becker and Marecek (2008)

mental hygienists were interested in children because they were convinced that mental illness and mental disorder were related to early childhood experiences; and social worker's role in this movement included public-health education activities to reach parents and inform them about the scientific data on child development and child rearing. School social workers and mental hygienists viewed the educational system as the prime location for preventive activity and became involved in programs for teacher education. Social work educator Jessie Taft is cited in Allen-Meares et al. (2000) as stating:

> The only practical and effective way to increase the mental health of a nation is through its school system. Homes are too inaccessible. The school has the time of the child and the power to do the job. It is for us who represent mental hygiene and its application through social casework to help the school and teacher to see their vital responsibility for an education which shall mean the personal adjustment of the individual through the activities of the group. (p. 34)

It was during the 1930s that economic and social changes related to the depression inspired school social workers to begin using case management. This new method of intervention included the use of organizing and coordinating activities or services that were beneficial to the student's and families' quality of life. During this time a major focal point for school social workers was to apply casework with the parents directly. The intentions were to create communication used to share the school's concern and learn the parent's perceptions of the problems their children faced in school. The school social workers used information gathering and interviewing skills to better understand the child's behavior and possible causes

for these behaviors displayed. Allen-Meares (2010) use a quote from scholar Florence Poole to describe the impact that case management had on children

> Social casework with the child in school has certain characteristics that are specific to the setting and that must be understood and related to the generic principles of the social casework process. The school is a setting which, to the child, is very much his own and one in which he is very much on his own. He assumes a major part of the responsibility for the use which he will make of his school experience. When he encounters some difficulty in this setting, the worker helps him to take responsibility for solving it. She helps him to understand the difficulty as it appears to the school and to clarify the problem as it exists for him. (p. 28)

In the early 1950s the school social worker's role turned to collaborator with the use of techniques such as group work. This involved discussions between social workers and teachers regarding student's emotional and/or behavioral difficulties, educating school personnel of the importance of human behavior and, how to apply both to curriculum planning. However, according to Allen-Meares et al. (2000) not all suggestions in relation to educational programs made by school social workers received attention; during this era it was uncommon for social workers to have much influence over school policies created by administration.

The civil rights movement during the 1960s changed the tasks that social workers had with inner city school systems. It was the school social worker's role to create a bridge between the school and inner city communities when schools encountered issues such as inequitable educational opportunities due to segregation, children from low income or

minority households performed academically low, or when parents felt their voices were not heard by administration. School social workers used group work methods to include parents, students and other school personnel to work on social issues of the school and society, as it was a major responsibility of the school social worker to establish relationships between families and the school system, and connect schools with communities as partners in education (Allen-Meares et al., 2000).

Schreiner-Brecht, Lowry, McInerney, and Juaire (2003) describe the current role of school social worker as collaboration with community resources and coordinating services to students and their families; in more detail these authors explain coordination through a six-step process. The process begins when the social worker learns of a student who may be experiencing difficulties. This step involves the social worker determining what areas are of concern and how school progress is affected. The second step is described as contacting school personnel, family members and/or agencies that could be helpful to the student and combine a team to work with and for the student. Bringing this collaborative team together and facilitating the communication process to plan goals, identify strengths, identify weaknesses, develop strategies and distinguish roles of each member are all duties for the school social worker in the third step. During the fourth step in the coordination process, school social workers will research the community for resources and may need to create resources or services that are not available. Then as the school social works on the fifth step, the primary role is to monitor the plan that the team has initiated. In the sixth step, the social worker meets with the team to evaluate progress and make necessary changes to see that goals are assisting student's progress towards academic success.

Allen-Meares et al. (2000), Schreiner-Brecht et al. (2003), Staudt and Kerle (1987), and Sheldon (2007) explain that school social workers have had and will continue to have the role that is school-home liaison and coordinator within the social agency network of the community. Examples of this role include referring parents to community resources to accomplish or maintain a well-functioning family, create or implement new resources for pupils and their parents if they do not exist within the community, and facilitating the use of resources for both parents and students (Schreiner-Brecht et al., 2003).

Social Worker as Guest in Host Setting: School

Host settings are organizations where the decision making and missions are created and controlled by professionals outside of the social work field; and social workers have been working as guests in host settings since the time the profession was formalized (Dane & Simon, 1991). For this thesis the host setting of focus is rural k-12 public schools.

Dane and Simon (1991), Garrett (2006), and Kelly and Stone (2009) believe there are several dilemmas that social workers in host settings encounter, as they are a guest in an organization whose mission and decision making are defined and dominated by people who are not social workers. According to Kelly and Stone (2009) social workers face predicaments such as role ambiguity, value discrepancies between hosts and guests, and role strain due to the marginality of social workers' token status as resident guests. As a guest in a host setting, social workers also face the problem of continually providing evidence of their indispensability to either the mission or overall welfare of the host.

Kelly and Stone (2009) explain that conflicts in missions can arise between social workers and administrators or teachers. In a host setting social workers deal with

organizational leaders that do not focus on the same fundamentals, such as cost containment and profit incentives. An example of conflicts in mission; "school administrators and teachers may stress the primacy of cognitive development, whereas social workers may emphasize multidimensional student growth. Yet student development remains the common ground that both educators and social workers share" (Dane & Simon, 1991, p. 209). There are other circumstances that may put the integrity of the social work profession in danger. Dane and Simon (1991) continue by stating,

> A school administrator or board of education may decide that a school should devote itself primarily to the success of children who have demonstrated the best verbal and mathematical talent, relegating to secondary status the development of students who have evidenced less intellectual promise (p. 209).

For social workers collaborating with colleagues, whom follow a mission such as this, would be challenging, as social worker's professional mission is to advocate for and serve clients in an equal manner.

A second dilemma that Kelly and Stone (2009) recognize social workers face in a host setting is that of a token status; school social workers being professionally underrepresented within a given organization. This is explained by Dane and Simon (1991) as; in host settings in which 85% or more of the employees share a profession or occupation other than social work, social workers are tokens. Kelly and Stone (2009) claim that token workers encounter many barriers and discriminatory practices caused by distorted perceptions created by the predominant majority within an organization. Similarly, Garrett (2006) states that majority group member's misperceptions can lead to prejudgments of token workers; deeming them

inadequate to perform their job duties and thus depriving token workers the opportunity to learn from trial and error alongside co-workers. As there are relatively few social workers in organizations such as schools, the perceptions of these workers are that of every action or decision is scrutinized for differences in the overall organization's social norms, routines and ideology.

The third dilemma that Kelly and Stone (2009) claim that social workers face in host settings include that of role ambiguity and role strain. The authors state that social workers are often asked to fulfill the role of both helper and controller in large organizations; while in the helper role social workers are delivering services to clients on both the emotional and concrete level, while fulfilling the controller role by managing resources to clients such as completing routine tasks and using time efficiently as demanded and defined by the organization. In a large host agency, social worker's roles focus on the outcomes of maintaining a large caseload in a short time period, and the shift toward rapid assessment has made social workers modify their practice to meet organizational needs versus client's needs.

According to Garrett (2006) social workers hold a low-ranking position in a host agency so they must make deliberate efforts to influence the organization's environment. For social workers to have more control over their content and context of work assignments, as it has been seen that when social workers give up their responsibilities to other professions in the host agency they will also lose power of decision making. Dane and Simon (1991) explain social workers in host agencies do not always have a choice of relinquishing their responsibilities, but rather it is due to internal demands within the agency. Role confusion for

a social worker can also occur in a host agency when the tasks and responsibilities are shared by more than one discipline.

Garrett (2006) believes social workers are better at helping students and families make gains in their emotional health and well-being than they are at disclosing their successes with others; although this may be, modesty does not communicate with other school personnel the vital importance social worker's roles are in schools. Superintendents, district personnel, and principals may not realize roles social workers have, as school psychologists and counselors often have similar tasks or responsibilities. A study conducted by Garrett in 1995 found that only 10% of the school social workers surveyed, considered their job description to be accurate with the duties they fulfilled within the school. Role ambiguity for school social workers leads to unclear expectations or standards and potential ethical dilemmas.

Ethical Dilemmas

For decades, social workers have faced some of the most complex ethical dilemmas that at times challenge their decision-making process and professional integrity. To assist social workers with these types of predicaments an organization called National Association of Social Workers was established to "enhance the professional growth and development of its members, to create and maintain professional standards, and to advance sound social policies" (NASW, 2008). According to the NASW (2008)

> A code of ethics cannot guarantee ethical behavior. Moreover, a code of ethics cannot
> resolve all ethical issues or disputes, or capture the richness and complexity involved
> in striving to make responsible choices within a moral community. Rather a code of

ethics sets forth values, ethical principles and ethical standards to which professionals

aspire and by which their actions can be judged. (p. 7)

Ethical dilemmas can occur in every area of practice in social work; for the purpose of

this thesis the area of focus will be ethical dilemmas related to school social work in rural

communities. The dilemmas to be discussed include the aspects to dual relationship such as

friendships and the acceptance of gifts. In small communities with a low population it would

be nearly impossible to live, work and participate in community functions without knowing or

casually encountering members of the community that may have been a current/former client

or relative to that client.

Croxton, Jayaratne, and Mattison (2002) explain that despite the provision in the

NASW (2008) code of ethics concerning dual relationships, there is very little to be found in

professional literature to guide social work practitioners in a more specific manner. Boland-

Prom and Anderson (2005) explain that because some dual relationships are potentially

ethical after the 2000 revision to the NASW code of ethics, social workers should evaluate the

following contextual issues before establishing a dual relationship: "the mental health of the

individuals involved (vulnerability and power issues), cultural mores that may establish a

norm of multiple relationships, and the specific type of social work practice methods that may

result in multiple relationships" (p. 502). With this kind of predicament, it would be difficult

to adhere to several of the code of ethics as defined by the National Association of Social

Workers.

While reviewing credible research articles that pertain to dual and multiple

relationships involving social workers; it appears that there is an absence of materials written

about the complexities of nonsexual dual relationships. Much of the research that was found goes in depth about the sexual dual relationship that practitioners have formed with current or previous clients. Perhaps the concept of social workers engaging in nonsexual dual relationships has yet to gain much attention from members of this profession due to the assumption that such a relationship has no purpose.

Through research collected it appears that social workers have a differing perception of what constitutes as ethical behavior. According to Kagle and Giebelhasuen (1994) a study including a nationwide sampling of 4,800 practitioners revealed that only 14.8% rated friendships with a former client as never ethical. An ethical issue related to forming a friendship with a former client and or the client's family is the possibility of the social worker's influence and client's vulnerability brought over into the second relationship. In any dual relationship, a social worker creates with a former client, the social worker is in a position where subjecting the former client to a relationship of inferiority could be a direct result of the past relationship in which the social worker's role included special knowledge, expertise and authority, as well as the client's trust (Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994).

The possibility exists that in a small rural community a school social worker has been assigned to several schools with low population rate and has had communication and services with many of the same students over a long period, this creates an atmosphere of friendship. One aspect to friendships is comforting and communicating about personal subjects, however, according to the NASW (2008) "Social workers should not engage in physical contact with clients where there is a possibility of psychological harm to the client as a result of the contact (such as cradling or caressing clients)" (p. 20).

Conflicts of interest may also arise when a student needs the assistance of a school social worker, and the student's family members have a pre-existing friendship with the school social worker. This friendship could potentially create a dilemma for the client and the social worker as it relates to the services that can be offered to the student. Croxton et al. (2002) believe emphasis of dual relationships should not be on avoidance but rather on risk management. They go on by stating "For rural workers, many relationships are multiple. One's friends, fellow church members, grocers, auto dealers and organizational colleagues may also be clients or may be related to clients" (Croxton, et al., 2002, p. 122).

Boland-Prom and Anderson (2005) and Reamer (2001) also believe that the geographically small communities will lead to the inevitable encounter between practitioner and client and ultimately lead to significant problems as most situations are that of an overlapping business or professional relationship. An approach to this kind of predicament is establishing boundaries with clients and the social worker's own family members as they too may have independent relationships with the client's family (Reamer, 2001).

Another aspect to friendship with students or their family that could lead to ethical dilemmas is that of acceptance of gifts. According to the NASW (2008) social workers should not accept goods as payment for professional services. In the school setting it is not uncommon for teachers to accept gifts from students or family of students as a thank you for the time spent with children. This has perhaps become acceptable behavior for the employed majority as it is not clearly defined in the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers to be prohibited (Revisor of Statutes, 2009). This may give students and family of students the impression that all faculty and staff within the school can ethically accept gifts; this may be

perceived by individuals unfamiliar with the code of ethics as unappreciative or disrespectful to not have their gift accepted. The acceptance of gifts may also be perceived by colleagues, parents and other professionals in the community as bartering for services or bribery on the part of the social worker (Reamer, 2003).

In situations when a dual relationship or multiple relationships are unavoidable, social workers should take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries (NASW, 2008). Reamer (2003) explains that social work colleagues and supervisors, such as administrators are responsible for ensuring protection for all clients including; mandatory reporting of dual relationships to state licensing boards, encourage professionals to avoid personal relationships that have the potential to harm their clients or risk exploitation.

Comparison of Two Codes of Ethics

The NASW (2008) code of ethics is the description of several principles by which social workers should treat colleagues with respect; through the acknowledgment of their views, differences and qualifications, and cooperate with colleagues when it serves the client's well-being. This directly relates to social workers in a school setting, as the colleagues often have the same goals but have different codes of conduct or code of ethics to follow. For this thesis there will be a comparison of the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services and the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers.

As noted previously, it was not until the mid-1970s that a set of professional standards was written purposefully for school social workers. According to NASW (2008) these standards were developed into three areas; attainment of competence, organization and

administration, and professional practice. The revision of the 2002 standards for school social

work services includes a set of 42 principles for social workers in the school setting to apply

when making decisions that relate to ethical principles, provision of services, and

responsibilities that social workers are expected to maintain. According to the Revisor of

Statutes (2009) the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers includes 10 standards for guidance

of professional conduct. Several of these standards are similar to that of the NASW (2002)

Standards for School Social Work Services. However there appears to be even more

differences as the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers has considerably less standards to

guide teachers in their ethical decision making process.

The Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers lacks specific codes detailing

requirements for teachers to have an understanding or educational background in multicultural

competency practice. However, according to Revisor (2009) the COE for Minnesota Teachers

does include a code describing teacher's obligation to provide professional education services

in a nondiscriminatory manner. This standard is similar to that of "School social workers shall

ensure that students and their families are provided services within the context of

multicultural understanding and competence that enhances families' support of students'

learning experiences" (NASW, 2002, p. 12). Throughout the NASW (2002) standards for

school social work services are standards that explain social worker's role with culturally

competent practice such as; social workers shall advocate for families and students in various

situations including; institutional racism, support for immigrants or refugees, and

discrimination against protected classifications such as sex, race and religion.

A common theme for both the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers and the Standards for School Social Work Services is client confidentiality and safety. According to the NASW (2002) there is an importance for school social workers to maintain adequate safeguards for private or confidential information. Revisor of Statutes (2009) has a similar policy as it states "In accordance with state and federal laws, a teacher shall disclose confidential information about individuals only when a compelling professional purpose is served or when required by law" (Revisor of Statutes, 2009, p. 1). The NASW (2002) describes school social workers shall be trained to use mediation and conflict resolution strategies with students to promote positive relationships within the school, home or community. The Revisor of Statutes (2009) describes teachers shall take reasonable effort to protect students from harmful conditions related to health and safety. The Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers appears to be more focused on preventing health related issues from spreading through a school setting or reporting child welfare concerns to appropriate authorities; whereas the Standards for School Social Workers is focused on preventing negative social interactions.

According to authors Barrett, Headley, Stovall, and Witte (2006) the National Education Association provides a brief statement of ethical guidelines; however, it is not specific for defining ethical or unethical teacher behaviors; it is important to create a formal code of ethics for teachers nationwide to follow because it has been found that in education "professional standards of conduct are less clear cut than they are in other fields" (p. 422). This can be found when reviewing the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers, as there is a lack of guidance in the standards for ethical practice for teachers.

The NASW (2002) social workers have the responsibility to "demonstrate a recognition of basic human rights through the acknowledgment of the student's right to human services, to act with and make professional judgments or convictions and improve policies implemented" (p. 10). It has been found in the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers that a standard relating to student's right to education, teacher's use of professional judgement, and improvement of quality of services, is not provided (Revisor of Statutes, 2009). The following are examples of standards for school social workers that could be beneficial for teachers and administrators to also abide by but is not included into the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers; "school social services shall be extended to students in ways that build students' individual strengths and offer students maximum opportunity to participate in the planning and direction of their own learning experiences" (NASW, 2002, p. 12) and "school social workers shall consult to local education agency personal, school board members, and community representatives to promote understanding and effective utilization of school social work services" (NASW, 2002, p. 11). In the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers, there is not a comparable code to the above stated standards, explaining a significance for teachers to serve as a consultant in regards to community resources in order to promote an understanding of how home factors impact a child's learning experiences.

According to Barrett et al. (2006) the lack of a formal code of ethics is also noteworthy given the attention by educators to matters of student morality and the attempts to build character, integrity and social skills" (p. 422). The Revisor of Statutes (2009) states that a teacher shall not use professional relationships with students and parents of students for private advantage. This is similar to NASW (2008) code of ethics as it describes social

workers are encouraged to avoid from forming dual relationships with clients and families of clients. In a study conducted by Barrett et al. (2006) it was found after surveying several administrators, school teachers and content area teachers; three general domains of violations were identified in relation to professional standards of conduct. One of the violations identified by the participants included boundaries between teachers and students; such a violation represents two types of problems. The first problem identified represented a dual relationship between teacher and student, which by their definition is a conflict of interest for the practitioner (Barrett et al., 2006). Second, boundary violations place the students at risk for emotional and physical harm, which by their description personal relationships involving physical contact between teachers and students occurred less frequently than other violations (Barrett et al., 2006).

Theoretical Perspective

The topic of this research allows for the integration of the ecological perspective theory. The focus of the ecological perspective to this study is to increase the reader's understanding of the connections between the school social worker and their environment (the school) and how the transactions between the two impact the effective functioning of the professional. In this section, ecological perspective will be defined, it will be utilized to frame the research question, and the researcher will explain how social workers employ this theory in practice.

Ecological perspective focuses on understanding people and their environment and the complexities of their interactions (Barker, 2003). Allen-Meares (2010) continues by stating "it recognizes that resolution may be more effective when intervention takes place within more

than one system; it deals with the broad, complex reciprocal transactions between organisms and their environments" (p. 70). This theory attempts to explain the behavior of people and societies by identifying the interacting components of the system, as these parts can never be entirely separated from each other, and how the goodness of fit between an individual and their environment impact a person's functioning (Healy, 2014).

According to Bye and Alvarez (2007) school social workers use this theory to "target not only the psychosocial deficits of students, but also work with transactions between subsystems of students and teachers, home and school, teacher and administrators and transactions with the external environment" (p. 53). For example, during the early 1920s families worked hard to provide a living in their economic status; parents wanted their children to join the workforce and contribute to the family income, school administration created the job of attendance officer to maintain attendance in schools, this affected the income to homes but also the acknowledgment of rights children had to an education (Allen-Meares, 2010). In practice, this theory is used by school social workers to concentrate on the child in relationship to all the factors impacting him or her both positively and negatively, addressing these barriers and creating a plan to provide support to the pupil to maintain a balance necessary to function (Bye & Alvarez, 2007).

Ecological perspective can be applied to the research question: *How does the social work Code of Ethics impact the ethical decision making process of social workers who work in rural k-12 public school?*

Social workers apply the ecological perspective to practice by examining the whole system and the student's place within in, rather than any one aspect of the pupil's situation

and excluding other systems that make up the whole (Allen-Meares, 2010). As noted earlier, ecological perspective had a strong impact on the school system in the 1970s as social workers were applying group work by bringing students, parents, school staff, and community resources to enhance the academic performance of the individual student. Social workers developed support from community members, school staff and families to create a social network that had positive interactions with one another to achieve a goal.

Today, school social workers can apply this theory to recognize and address possible fractures within transactions between themselves and administration when confronted with role ambiguity, to create an intervention that improves the quality of their environment. The social worker can invite other staff within the school to be part of a group discussion detailing their professional role and creating an outline including all staff's roles and duties within the building, to be used as a reference among staff. In cases where a school social worker appears to need more support from other social workers or administration when confronted with an ethical dilemma, the social worker can set up meetings and bring in appropriate levels of school personnel to problem solve across all systems that make up the whole. When school social workers encounter dilemmas related to client confidentiality, dual relationships or personal privacy within the community, they experience a lack of balance in their life. According to Bye and Alvarez (2007) "school social workers are in unique position because they are allowed the opportunity to see a student's life in school and in the family and yet have the clinical privacy of their office to provide counseling services when needed" (p. 56). Due to their unique position, they may need to adapt to new living arrangements that cultivate a goodness of fit within their environment; such as creating distance from extracurricular

activities, living outside of the district's boundaries, and uphold strict personal standards concerning friendships with coworkers and families within the community.

In conclusion, ecological perspective is pertinent to school social work practice as it provides a foundation to understanding how social systems impact ethical decision making. School social workers do not work in isolation, as a profession social workers are educated to collaborate and function as a team player to problem solve for the greater good of their client. Bye and Alvarez (2007) states "effectiveness in these roles derives from how well they interact and work with other professionals in the school and in the community" (p. 56). The social worker's ability to confront ethical dilemmas with an intervention that improves the transactions between themselves and their clients or school personnel within the environment will promote professional growth, satisfaction and human functioning (Healy, 2014). Furthermore, this theory was utilized to dissect the research question by exploring ethical decision making based on the systems surrounding the school social worker. Lastly, the use of ecological perspective in school social work was addressed, as its importance has been shown in historical accounts.

Summary

Through the literature found it is seen that social workers have had a vital role in schools for over one hundred years. In conjunction, throughout the past 100 years the definition of a school social worker and the responsibilities held in this setting has changed several times. Allen-Meares (2010) describe the position of visiting teachers as the school social worker during the early 1900s; this position's responsibilities included recognizing and

advocating for each child's learning needs, and later connecting community resources to individual child or family needs.

School social workers are a specialized practice as they are treated as a guest in a host setting with several predicaments related to that position as a guest. This is supported by Garrett's (2006) view of social worker's low ranking position within a host agency as the reason behind social worker's deliberate efforts to influence the setting of the agency. Kelly and Stone (2009) provide role ambiguity and role strain as examples of predicaments that create the need to change or influence the environment of the setting.

Reviewing the literature, this reader found a lack of current research conducted on ethical dilemmas experienced by social work professionals, specifically related to their placement in the school setting. The current study aims to do so by probing school social workers for personal accounts related to ethical decision making. This entailed an in-depth interview with five participants. The details of this study are explored further in the chapter to follow.

Chapter III: Methodology

Method

This chapter will identify how this study was conducted as means to understanding and answering the research question. In this chapter the reader is presented with the study design, sample population, data collection, data analysis and reliability of this study. For the purpose of this research study, a qualitative approach will be used.

Qualitative research is used for gaining an insight into other's attitudes, behaviors, value systems, concerns, culture, and lifestyles (Rubin & Babbie, 2013). To gain an insight into other's lives, qualitative research is based on seeking out the 'why', rather than the 'how' of a topic through the analysis of unstructured information (Berg, 2007). This type of research involves in-depth interviews, content analysis, and the analysis of unstructured materials such as interview transcripts and participant feedback (Berg, 2007). Qualitative research relies on the participant's description of personal experiences that produce thick rich descriptions that allow for the researcher to extract meaning through the interviews conducted (Rubin & Babbie, 2013).

Design

The qualitative design used for this research study is a case study that is comprised of five in-depth interviews. According to Merriam (2009) "a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40). Similarly, Merriam (2009) suggests "a case study is less of a methodological choice than a choice of what is to be studied" (p. 40). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) define a case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. The case is, in effect, your unit of analysis. Studies may be of just one

case or several" (p. 28). Within the context of case research, the focus is at the heart or center of the study, essentially creating boundaries for the study (Miles et al., 2014). Equally important, Stake (1994) as cited in Punch (1999), suggests there are three types of case studies; the intrinsic, the instructional, and the collective case study. Stake's definition of collective case study builds upon his definition of the instrumental case study "where a particular case is examined to give insight into an issue, or to refine a theory" (p. 152). Stake then goes on to define a collective case study as "where the instrumental case study is extended to cover several cases, to learn more about the phenomenon, population or general condition, where the focus is both within and across cases" (p. 152).

As Merriam suggested a characteristic of case study is a bounded system. For the purpose of this research study, a bounded system are the experiences school social workers have related to ethical decision making while practicing in rural k-12 public schools. As found in Merriam (2009) past qualitative researchers have described a bounded system within a case study as "a unit around which there are boundaries…a program, a group, an institution, a community" (Smith, 1978, cited by Merriam). This case study includes information gathered about a particular group of people (school social workers) to effectively understand how these participants use ethical decision making processes to resolve ethical dilemmas they encounter related to the position they hold in a public-school setting.

The purpose of this case study is to explore the connection between the participant's decision making process and the ethical dilemmas that stem from the position these participants hold in a rural public school. Many of the participants also live in the small rural

community that they work in; that could add to the complexities of ethical dilemmas they encounter as a school social worker for a rural school district.

Sample

This research study involves purposive sampling method. According to Merriam (2009) purposive sampling is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). Merriam (2009) describes that the logic and power of purposive sampling is in selecting information-rich cases; those cases are those from which a researcher can learn the most about issues of importance from.

The sample for this study is five school social workers employed in three rural k-12 public school districts in central Minnesota. It is believed that this sample offers the most comprehensive understanding of the ethical dilemmas encountered by social workers who are practicing in rural k-12 public schools. Ethical dilemmas are not exclusive to any one profession; however rural school social workers are confronted with ethical dilemmas unique to rural communities as well as decision making processes that are established by the majority employed by the school setting, which makes this sample appropriate for this study.

The process for selecting participants for this study included locating rural school districts in central Minnesota and then sending an email (see Appendix C) to school social workers within those school districts. Schools of consideration included public schools with grades k-12 in rural areas of Minnesota. The selection of participants was based on interest in participation of this research study and availability to schedule an interview. The email sent out to school social workers included information introducing the researcher and the

university that the researcher is associated with, a brief description of the study, and

information about the consent form that would be presented at the time of the interview.

Participants also received a follow up phone call when they had agreed to participate in the

interview.

Data Collection

The data collected for this research study came from individual in-depth interviews

with five school social workers from three rural k-12 public school districts in central

Minnesota during the fall of 2010. The in-depth interview process for this case study included

listening, talking, conversing, and recording. Research interviews are described as "a process

in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to

a research study" (Merriam, 2009). There were two sections to the in-depth interviews; one

section was based on demographic inquiry and the other section was based on gathering data

as it pertains to the ethical dilemmas encountered in the profession as well as ethical decision

making related to the profession.

Sections of the in-depth interviews were semi structured; as each participant was

asked the same demographic questions (see Appendix A). Another section of the interview

was unstructured; these clarifying questions (see Appendix A) were related to ethical

dilemmas encountered, ethical decision making processes utilized and how the participant

views their role in the school setting as a factor in their implementation of ethical decision

making.

Five interviews were scheduled to be no longer than an hour and a half in length, to be

mindful of participant's time. The interviews were scheduled by the participant to be at a

location of their choosing. Due to confidentiality, the researcher asked each of the participants to choose a location where the interview would not be intruded upon by others and also be a place of comfort for participants. Each participant chose their office (located in the building that they practice in).

Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix B) before the interview began; a copy of this consent form was also given to each participant to keep for their records. Participants were made aware that the interview was voluntary, optional and at any time the participant could have withdrawn from the study without repercussion. The consent form stated that personal information would be kept from entering the study in an identifiable manner. Also included in the consent form was written commitment that the researcher will not use any data collected from the interviews outside of the study. The consent forms were treated with utmost confidentiality as they hold record of the participant's names. Participants were then informed that after the interview had been transcribed and put into data analysis they would receive a copy and be given the opportunity to make changes or deletions as they saw fit. The researcher then made a follow up phone call with each participant to ensure that there were no changes to be made before the text was added to the research study.

During the interview process, the interviewer's questions and participant's responses were recorded using a digital voice recorder. After the completion of the interview, the voice recorder was used for the transcribing of the interview session into a file stored on the researcher's computer. The transcribing was conducted directly by the researcher, so as to become more familiar with the data and for confidentiality purposes. The researcher's

computer was also password protected; adding trustworthiness to the research study. The digital recorder, signed consent forms, and completed transcription of the interviews were kept in a locked box to provide confidentiality. This researcher is the only person who can access the lockbox.

Data Analysis

In the process of analyzing data in qualitative research, coding can be utilized. Schwandt (2007) describes coding as "a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments" (p. 32). In this study, the coding process was used to review and identify the common themes in the individual participant responses and across cases from transcribed interviews. According to Creswell (2013) the process of analysis will be conducted in two phases; first in within-case analysis and then next in cross case analysis. Within-case analysis is used to "provide a detailed description of each case and themes within the case…followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis" (Creswell, 2013, p. 101).

After the interviews had been conducted the researcher then transcribed verbatim from the digital recorder onto separate file spaces within the researcher's computer. Once the transcribed interviews were completed, each interview was reviewed several times to ensure the researcher's complete familiarity with the data. While reviewing the transcribed interviews this researcher looked for and made note of similar words or phrases that stood out among each of the interviews in order to identify themes. Each word or phrase that stood out compared to the rest of the text was then highlighted, and along the margins of the transcribed interview notes were made of the impressions or thoughts this researcher had of these words

or phrases. The highlighted words or phrases were only those of importance or relevance to the school social worker's experiences with ethical dilemmas or the ethical decision making process implemented or otherwise related to the research question.

Using the responses to questions asked during the in-depth interviews, the researcher created multiple levels of coding from general to specific, by repeating the process of identifying themes until only the most pertinent themes remained. Through coding, this researcher explored possible emotions and values shared by participants. The concept of importance or relevance was defined as those that were found multiple times in participant's responses or having an emotional impact on the participant or the researcher while reviewing transcript.

The coding process began by first pre-coding; circling or highlighting rich and descriptive words and comments. Next, the process continued with the merging of common themes from the individual transcripts until the predominant themes of the analysis emerged. The purpose for separating each question, responses and personal thoughts into their own word document allowed for patterns to be easily identified. The patterns found from this step then allowed for main themes in the research study to be identified and titled.

Reliability

In order for a research study to have any effect on professional practice it must be rigorously conducted; it needs to present insights and conclusions that ring true to readers, practitioners, and other researchers (Merriam, 2009). The reliability of this study has been found using triangulation, member checking, and purposive sampling of school social workers.

As stated previously the purposive sampling for this qualitative study was five school social workers from three rural k-12 public school districts in central Minnesota. This is an appropriate sample for this study because the characteristics of the participants match the criterion put forth by the research question. Repeatability of this study can be conducted by following, the same framework for recruiting participants, recruiting participants with the same qualifications, conducting interviews using similar style of questions and through duplicating the coding process found in this study.

Triangulation is known as a qualitative technique used to establish integrity of the inferences that the researcher makes. According to Schwandt (2007) triangulation is a process of discovery in which the genuine meaning resides within an action or event best uncovered by viewing it from different vantage points. Merriam (2009) describes that triangulation can use multiple methods of data collection; including interviews and possible observations. This research study has provided five interviews to be individually analyzed and cross case analyzed. The following has also been implemented for this study: multiple interviews, a digital recorder used during each interview, and signed consent forms provided to each participant and the researcher.

A qualitative technique used to receive feedback from participants is called member check. This technique is an important procedure for qualitative research, verifying the participant's interviews for accuracy. The technique of member checking was utilized throughout the review of data. Participants received a hard copy of the transcripts to review and provide feedback to the researcher. Member check provides participants with the opportunity to have knowledge of the use of information from the interviews that will be

utilized in the study (Schwandt, 2007). For the researcher, member check is an additional opportunity to add rigor to the findings.

The trustworthiness and rigor of this study can be found using dependability. Schwandt (2007) describes dependability as "the process of the inquiry and the inquirer's responsibility for ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented" (p. 299). Dependability has been displayed through the process of conducting a coherent literature review of research articles related to ethical dilemmas encountered by school social workers and through the documentation of data collected from the interviews with participants.

Ethical qualitative inquiry in this study is evident through the use of confidentiality of data collection. According to Schwandt (2007) ethical qualitative inquiry can be explained as a contract- a written agreement between the researcher and participant. For this study, the written agreement came as a consent form in which participants were provided information related to the voluntary status of each interview and that they could at any time leave without any repercussions. Participants were informed of the measures the researcher took to keep data safe and inaccessible to others; through the use of lock box and nonuse of internet communication related to data as well. Data collected from the interviews were reviewed by each participant; they were made aware that no identifiable information related to the participant would enter the study. Participants also received a copy of the consent form they signed, on the date of the interview.

During each individual in-depth interview, the participants were verbally informed of the Institutional Review Board process that the researcher has utilized. The IRB is designated to approve, monitor, and review research involving human and animal subjects; to protect the

rights and welfare of the research participants. The IRB process for this study ensures that all participants' risks are minimized and reasonable. This includes no harm is done to participants, informed consent will be obtained from all participants and appropriately documented, and the privacy or safety of all participants will be maintained.

An equally important factor contributing to the trustworthiness of the study is confirmability. Confirmability is described as establishing the fact that data and interpretation of an inquiry is not merely a figment of the researcher's imagination (Schwandt, 2007). Confirmability was demonstrated through the documentation of transcribed interviews, as well as the digital recording of those interviews saved onto a compact disk.

Summary

In this chapter the researcher described the methods unique to qualitative research studies. The qualitative method was best for this study as it allowed for the researcher to find insight into participant's attitudes, behaviors and culture related to the school social work profession. In this study the researcher used a case study comprised of five school social workers from three rural k-12 public school districts in central Minnesota. This purposive sampling is best for this research study as it provides a good representation of the ethical dilemmas and ethical decision making process unique to school social work. Also, the various demonstrations of trustworthiness of this research study have been shown through the use of credibility, dependability and confirmability.

Chapter IV: Data Analysis

As stated previously, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore thru in-depth interviews, the challenges and experiences five school social workers face in their everyday ethical decision making. From data collected, it is evident that school social workers are employed in settings where they may be the only one following a separate Code of Ethics. This aspect alone creates situations where social workers may feel isolated from coworkers and/or contemplating to adhere to their professions' Code of Ethics. For those who do not have the professional insight and support from others in that setting who follow the same Code of Ethics, it is especially true. This chapter will analyze major themes that emerged from the interviews conducted with five school social workers who are employed in rural Minnesota k-12 public school districts. The findings of this study have been organized into separate themes which include participant responses. Excerpts chosen from interviews by the researcher will assist in exemplifying major themes and provide deeper insight into the question being studied.

The data analyzed consisted of text from the complete transcription of five in-depth interviews. The text studied is actual words of professionals who described their personal and professional experiences as school social workers for rural school districts in Minnesota. The five major themes identified and discussed in this chapter include:

1. I choose to eat alone.

2. Try to be a community member and have a private life.

3. We need a director from within the District Office too. support from other School Social Workers.

4. They don't know/understand our Code of Ethics.

These themes will be described in the above order; *I choose to eat alone* gives insight into personal experiences of school social workers who feel it is in their best interest to eat alone in their office or avoid the teacher's lounge all together as a tactic to keep client information confidential. *Try to be a community member and have a private life* discusses how several participants have tried to maintain a private life while engaging in community activities within the same small community they also work. *We need a director from within the District Office too* speaks to the idea of creating a director position over social workers within School Districts; this would allow school social workers easier access to a professional with knowledge of social work values and ethics, as well as the ability to give legal advice regarding case consultations. *Support from other school social workers* focuses on how the participants sought out other social workers in their district for consultation and support with ethical decision making. *They don't know/understand our Code of Ethics* discusses the personal situations that the participants dealt with in regards to teachers and administration not fully understanding the Code of Ethics that school social workers follow as a guideline in their profession. The description of these five major themes begins with *I choose to eat alone*.

I Choose to Eat Alone

Four of the five participants spoke of their decision to eat at a different location than that of the teachers' lounge as an attempt to avoid conversations with teachers and other staff

which could be centered on students of their concern. This is described below from an excerpt from the interview with Ann:

> They [teachers] ask me to find out information and ask me to report back to them. So that can be kind of touchy. This is probably the number one reason I don't eat lunch in the teacher's lounge. Because if teachers can get me away from my office and ask me questions; then you know it would be nothing for them to go ahead and start talking about that kid, or what you found, or what the parents said. But I don't like to be put into that situation, especially when other teachers are around. So I just avoid the teacher's lounge all together.

In the interview with Bella, the topic of sharing information with teachers about issues students confront in their lives outside of the school setting came about. This interviewer then asked if staff and teachers ever requested information about students that she did not feel comfortable providing. She responding by saying "yes" and continued by describing what she interpreted as their motive behind asking for information. This is displayed in more detail in the following excerpt:

> Here's the thing, you get two different kinds of people looking for information. You get the nosy teacher who just wants to know what's going on and maybe doesn't have the best relationship with the student, so they aren't coming with it from the concern for the child. They just want to know what's going on. And that's when it's very easy to say "Can't do it". But then you have the couple of teachers who have the relationship with the kids, who have the heart for the kids and have the best interest for the kids in mind. They just want to know what's going on outside of the school so

they know why so and so is sleeping in class, or why so and so can't concentrate in

class. These teachers want to help and want to know how to help. That's what makes

it so hard.

Further into the interview with Bella, she commented she is often confronted with what she

considers an ethical dilemma; keep what social work professionals consider confidential

information about clients to herself or, to share this information with teachers whom she

considers "an intricate part of the school and sees the students all of the time" (personal

communication, March 12, 2010). This is illustrated in the following excerpt from Bella:

You know we eat lunch together and they [teachers] will say "hey what's going on

with so and so, man they are having a bad day?" And again it's that piece of do I want

to share, should I share; because I want to give them information and I would give

them everything I can. But it is hard to say to most "yeah, were working on some

stuff", and be able to leave it at that because they see them every day and work with

them every day. But when I think of law, it is probably right not to share. At times I

think it would be easier to keep it to myself, but how right is that when there's stuff

going on and the teachers are having a hard time because they don't know how to

help. Then again is it right for the student to not share, probably not because they

won't get the additional help from their teachers.

Bella then suggested that teachers and staff should be able to separate themselves from work

related tasks during their down time. However, it proved to be impossible when the only place

to eat is a lounge shared by all staff. She made comments about considering her teachers,

administration and other staff to be friends; and enjoyed spending time talking with them

when it was non-client related conversations. The teacher's lounge however was not her place of choice to eat lunch, as she preferred to steer clear of such conversations.

Of the four out of five interviews where the participants felt they should eat at a location other than the teacher's lounge in an attempt to avoid staff and teacher's questions about students, Connie spoke of her choice as though it were an easy one to make. Connie said that she is asked frequently about students by staff; however she is also very comfortable telling them that she cannot provide the answers they seek. Below is Connie's description of such situations:

> Most of the time I just say, "Oh you know I can't share that with you", and it's hard, they know it's hard. But tough, because that's just the way it is. Umm…I also don't lead a teacher up to the point where I have to say "I can't tell you the rest", I just don't go there. And if they ask me a question I often times say "I don't have that information", because sometimes I don't have all the accurate information. But…if I know it, and they know I know it, then I say "that's just something I can't share right now".

Connie described client confidentiality as an ethical dilemma for her when she is confronted by questions from teachers who do not understand her need to hold information confidential:

> A high risk ethical dilemma is when, for me, is here in the school I am bound by a different set of standards in terms of what information I share then the teachers are. And sometimes I share information with teachers and then they share it with community members and that becomes very difficult. So I try to remind them that

information is confidential and they need not to share it with anyone else outside of the school. And that is only…if I indeed need to share it with them in the first place.

In the interview with Dana, she spoke of her efforts to set boundaries while creating friendly relationships with teachers and how this has enabled her to better follow the Code of Ethics' perspective of client confidentiality. This is best illustrated by the following excerpt:

I'm very cautious about who I give information to concerning the students and their families. And you don't want to be stand-offish. You don't want to just say no. It's about integrity, it's about professional confidence and it's about being healthy to you. I say establish a boundary early on, or you will set yourself up for trouble later on.

Dana then described her decision to eat alone as a hard one to make. Dana claims that in her 16 years as a school social worker she found that her personality is one where she needs to have inclusion to feel good, but that she has made a cognizant effort to avoid eating with staff in the teacher's lounge. This is what Dana described as her attempt to forcing herself to "isolate". However, Dana feels her role in the school is that of a social worker accessible to all students and staff members, which includes making an effort to not isolate herself to the point where she is no longer "visible". Dana made comments of her belief that she is a social worker at all times, which means she needs to be accessible to everybody in the school, staff and students alike. The following was Dana's final comment about eating in her office:

What I learned early on, is that I need to be accessible to all. So if I eat lunch with the third grade team, I'm alienating all others just by association. So…I choose to eat alone.

Overall, each of the four participants spoke of their choice to eat alone in their office or away from other school staff as a means to avoid involvement in unethical conversations.

Try to be a Community Member and Have a Private Life

The second theme that emerged during data analysis is *Try to be a community member and have a private life*. Each of the participants were asked if they currently resided within the same community that they worked, four of the five participants replied yes. Of these four participants, three had examples of how their role as school social worker in a rural community affected their ability to maintain a comfortable private life within the community.

Bella's statements about her experiences involving coaching or leading children's groups within the community and how it conflicts with rules enforced by the school begin to describe difficulties maintaining a private life in a rural community that one works:

Working in the same town that I live in, I get to know the kids and stuff. It's suggested that we don't drive kids home because you don't want the kids alone with you. But I coach hockey and track, my daughter is in the Girl Scouts, so I am around the kids on my own time. Now I drive my own kids' home [from activities] so I will drive [other] kids home because I would rather have them with me and have a ride than be on their own or walk home. So I do drive kids home even though I probably shouldn't. But since I feel like I have my kids with me, there's somebody else there. I would see that as a low risk ethical dilemma too.

For Connie, she found it hard to maintain two jobs within the same community. She described that it could have become a dual relationship or potentially harm the work with her clients at either location:

I did some contracted work through the county's step family adoption program. At the time it was policy to make a home visit with the step and biological parent. And many times I would encounter a family that had a child that attended our school area. I would have to turn the case over to another social worker within the county because I couldn't be the school social worker and the county worker at the same time. So many cases got turned over that I left the position with the county.

Another aspect to living and working in the same rural community includes fewer choices of schools your children could be enrolled into. This is further illustrated by Connie, who expressed her struggles with having her own children attend the school she works within and how the parents of her children's friends have tried to confide in her about their own issues with the staff or school:

Well my daughter is now going to school here because years ago we started an all day / every day kindergarten program, and since then I kept her here to keep some consistency. She has a friend that has qualified for special education, and so it has started to get sticky when you know my daughter's friend's parents get mad because they didn't like the way the school handled this or that situation. So when our kids are together these parents will try to talk to me about it, but I don't want to talk with these parents about these situations when I'm not at work. So I tell them "I can't talk about that", and you know I don't like being that way but you know I don't want to say "do you want to talk about work when you're not there, I'm off duty and I don't like talking about work". When my contract time is over, I don't want to talk about those kinds of things when I'm off work, think about it you know. You know it gets tricky.

Dana also commented on what it was like for her to have her children in the same school district she worked for, but attending school in the same building that she is the only social worker for.

I found myself in a low risk ethical dilemma at the beginning of this school year. My son was in the midst of developing a friendship with a boy at our school and that child was referred to me by the principal and the classroom teacher. They wanted me to meet with mom to go over some assessing and recommendations. I immediately had that tug of "oh my god my kid's first friend" and I really wanted to be mom and yet I know I am the only social worker in the school. I also know you don't ever just start and say I'm only going to do a little, because once you meet with that family they could pour out whatever, and then you're already in the mix of it all!

In further discussion with Dana I learned that her ultimate decision was to seek advice from the classroom teacher and principal, and later meet with the mom to ask for permission to involve a social worker from another building within the district. Dana confessed that it was a very difficult decision to make, asking a social worker from another building who had their own caseload to take on a client on the other side of the district once a week, but she felt it was best for her client's family and her own child's relationship to the client.

Similarly Dana also had a dilemma concerning who in the community she could form friendships or various relationships with. She described that after moving into the community she works in, avoiding dual relationships has set her apart from her peers. Dana said that she has had to make several changes that affect her own family to avoid dual relationships from forming, one of which was choosing a childcare provider:

I don't get the luxury of developing the same kind of friendships or relationships with people at work or even outside of work. And it's because I have to be accessible to all staff and all the children and their families. So I have to be cognizant of where I put my children in daycare, because will their children wind up in my school, will any of the teacher's kids be in that daycare, and will I find something out about a teacher I work with that I don't want to know.

Connie later described how she considers maintaining a completely private life is nearly impossible when living and working within a rural community:

More people know each other here, I mean living here people know where the teachers live, we all know where the principal lives and if they have another job outside of the school like community ed. You know…parents will know who you are and what you do for a living. They may say "hey you're from the Elementary School, you cook there, you're the social worker there, or custodian there, tell me about such and such". That's when I try my best to say "I gotta go" and get out of there as fast as I can. But you know, sometimes you have to do it to keep your own life private and encourage them to do the same.

Based on accounts by these three participants, it is seen to be difficult maintaining an active position within community activities such as sports, volunteer organizations and second jobs; all roles that one would consider a part of their private life while simultaneously trying to preserve the professional role held within the community's school system.

We Need a Director from Within the District Office Too

All five participants in this research study agreed they and their fellow social work colleagues from the school district they work for could benefit from having a representative in the district office that is familiar with or specializes in the social work licensing requirements, the NASW code of ethics and the profession's values. According to the participants there are many situations throughout the school year where they feel additional support is needed from someone who works on the same level as other department heads or board of directors within the district office. One of the participants, Bella, spoke of the difficulties she encountered when seeking advice regarding client's documents:

> I could always use additional support when dealing with ethical dilemmas. Umm in our school, I'm the only one. Well in each school we are the only ones [social workers] that know what our ethical guidelines are. I have talked to the administrators here and they will even ask me if something is ethical or not, they don't necessarily know. Like even when we get together as a large group of social workers, we split right down the middle about ethical decisions. But it is hard to not have somebody who is readily available to answer ethical questions. It would be nice to have somebody that we can go to that answers questions about paperwork and privacy issues. We don't have a head of our department, we can ask the head of the special education department, but we don't have a head of social work.

Bella continued to explain that she and other social workers in her school district have questions about their records and how long documents should be kept on file. According to Bella the social workers have an entirely different kind of record keeping than any other

professionals in their district. She said that in the past she has made phone calls to the

district's attorney only to be told to call the board of social work licensing and direct her

questions to them. This, Bella said was "very frustrating because then we call the board of

social work licensing and they say to ask our district's attorney. No one will give you a

definite answer because if we get into a negative situation, no one is going to say that they

told you what to do".

Connie shared a similar point of view regarding the need for a head of the social work

department in her school district. She explained that in her school district there are a total of

10 social workers and they do not have someone familiar with the social worker's ethical

concerns. In fact, Connie explained that the same person who is in charge of decisions for the

EBD (Emotional Behavior Disorders), LD (Learning Disorders) programs is expected to be

available to provide guidance for social workers. This, Connie says is an accommodation she

is appreciative of. However, this individual has numerous responsibilities for other

departments, that there is limited time to learn more about social work ethics in order to

answer questions for all the social workers in the district.

According to Connie she recognizes that the principal of her school is the boss and

that they run the show in that particular building, however she feels that seeking guidance

from the principal about ethical concerns or even social worker duties is not always in her

best interest. "There really isn't someone who oversees the social workers and advocates for

what it is that we do or what we need and sometimes things get put on our plate that don't

really apply to social work". Connie concluded her thoughts on how to create a head of the

social work department by describing a position created using part time hours rather than full time:

> I don't see it being a full time job but you know more of a part time. So maybe it could be a social worker who has a certain degree, dual or something. But somebody, so that when the coordinators are sitting and making decisions they have somebody who can say 'a social worker shouldn't be doing that task, it's not really in their role within the school'.

In discussion with Ann about social worker's tasks within the school setting, she spoke of situations where she has been asked to do things out of the typical social work role. "I end up doing things that aren't necessarily my role and I just kind of do as a catch-all-person. Things that someone who's not a licensed staff, who's not in the classroom can do. Today, I'm sorting paint". Ann explained further that she feels if a position could be created among the board of directors, specifically to represent the district's social workers to the rest of the district than it would help building administrators and teachers fully understood the uniqueness of the roles and duties that social workers hold in the school. This, Ann said, "would help them learn how to better utilize school social workers throughout the building".

When interviewing Dana, she provided her opinion on the need for a director within the district office who could fill the position of a supervisor over the social workers within the school district she works for. Below, Dana describes how such a professional's guidance could be utilized in situations involving ethical dilemmas:

> Usually I stew about it [ethical dilemma] a little bit. Then depending on the nature of the dilemma, I may contact another MSW. But they usually only listen to me and hear

why it's bugging me and say "I know why it's bugging you, it's blah blah blah".

Sometimes I need more than that, in terms of supervision, someone who is an ally to

me but also has the concept of my license and puts that first rather than the emotions I

am feeling at the time. It would be supervision from someone who gets the setting I

am in and can help me figure out what plan I need to make and do.

This discussion continued further by Dana sharing her thoughts on how additional support

could be offered when dealing with ethical dilemmas for social workers in a school setting.

I think it would be helpful for administrators to have a little bit of in-service on those

who are working as a guest in their building, because this school is our host. We

provide our services in this building because it's a convenient place to reach children

who are at risk. Umm…so you are one of them, but you're not. You know what I

mean? I would say it's critical for the administrators to understand the principles

social workers are operating with. A supervisor from the district office could help

administrators understand this better.

Eleanor too, felt that she could use more support from the administrators of both

buildings she works in when dealing with ethical dilemmas that require legal advice. She

made comments about her appreciation for the administrators of each school where she is the

only social worker for, however it seemed to her that they did not fully understand the ethics

and values that all social workers abide by. Eleanor also made it very clear that she did not

feel it was the administrator's duty to study the social work ethics, rather the social work

department's responsibility to supply that information. This, can be best exhibited in an

excerpt from her interview:

You know I think administrators have good ideas but I don't think they know much

about social work ethics, so it might be nice if we had some kind of "head" of social

work that we had access to. Umm…you know we don't have a social work

coordinator and I think that might be helpful to have somebody like that who we can

go to, as a centralized person. Because they might have more knowledge about some

of the laws and things like that, versus an individual social worker can only speak

from experiences we have.

All of the participants agreed there is a great need for a "coordinator", "director" or

"head" of the social work department within all of the school districts represented. Each of the

participants recognized a different need for additional support from their district office, but it

is clear each district could benefit from assistance with legal advice, determining appropriate

use of social work services and teaching others about the social work code of ethics or values.

Support from Other School Social Workers

This next theme emerged from the topic discussed above. As each participant shared

their views on the need for additional support from their school district, instinctively they

would begin to share where they currently receive support from within the district. Each

participant spoke highly of the dependability their fellow social work colleagues prove to be

when dealing with ethical dilemmas and the decision-making process associated with these

situations.

Ann explained to me that when she is presented with a situation she considers to be an

ethical dilemma she thinks of not only how she would feel if she were the student's parent but

also her colleagues. This, she said, involves remembering past experiences shared with her,

reflecting on words of advice she has received prior to the situation and how she can best guess what their reaction would be when she tells them her decision. Ann stated:

> The actions I take when presented with an ethical dilemma is first how would I feel if I were the parent? Then I think, if I checked with the other social workers, what would they say I should do about it? And that is kind of my way I judge what I should do.

Ann continued to explain that in her school district most of the schools have one or two school social workers, and throughout the district there are about 13 social workers. These social workers are able to hold a meeting once a month. In these meetings, she said:

> We get together and have really good ethical discussions. If anything comes up we talk about it, other people give their perceptions, their ideas, its problem solving. There's some social workers who are cut and dry as in "this is the way it's going to be", and then there's some social workers who are like "well, you know that's kind of a grey area, what else could you do, or what else have you tried?" So it's interesting to hear everybody's perspective and I think that it has changed how I do things a little bit.

Most would consider a school's administrator or classroom teachers as the primary source of support for advice in situations with a family or student. However, during the interviews several of the participants, said they felt it was best to go to another social worker instead. One such participant was Bella; she spoke of how she seeks out the support from her fellow social workers from within her school district rather than administration or teachers when presented with an ethical issue:

I do consider teachers and administrators to be a source of support, one of the biggest

because I see them on a daily basis, we know the same kids. The problem with that is

they are held to a different standard than we [social workers] are, and so what might

be okay for them, may not be okay for us. So they will usually support what I want

for them to say, but that's not always the right answer and they don't know what we

are held to. So when it comes to the ethical issues I can't count on them for that

support, I go to the larger group of social workers in the district and present the issue

to them.

During further discussion with Bella it became obvious that even with support from social

work colleagues, who have the same knowledge about ethics and values related to the social

work profession, it still remains difficult handling ethical decision making:

I definitely get the other social worker's opinions, but none of us know what's

"right", none of us. We do this ethical training, and we all have these questions we

need ethical answers to, I can't think one time where one hundred percent of us have

been like "yes, this is the right answer", and "yes, this is what I would have done".

The big issue is "yeah, don't have a relationship with the client", "don't date the

client", but those other ones [ethical dilemmas] aren't as clear cut as that.

Connie and Eleanor made similar comments to Bella's. They too felt that the teachers

and administrators in their schools are very helpful but do not fully grasp why they cannot

make the same decisions because of the social work code of ethics they abide by. Connie said

she feels she can go to her administrator for assistance but must also take into consideration

that he does not have the same licensing guidelines:

I have found that I can go to him [administrator] for certain things. But typically I

would go to other school social workers in the district. We are very fortunate to have

as many as we do, it's about 12 or 13. And we all have experiences that have been

used as a learning tool during discussions and conversations.

Eleanor described why she feels that the other school social workers in her district are what

she considers to be her "first line of defense", rather than the teachers or administrator.

I find it more of a conflict going to teachers or my administrator for support, for the

reason of thinking about what information you can and can't share with them. They

kind of have their own ethics and guidelines that they need to follow and so usually if

I find some sort of dilemma I base my decisions on the values and ethics of social

work. And I usually work much closer with my group of social workers from the

district, they come up with ideas I might not think of, or know what I did was right in

a situation.

Of all the participants interviewed, only one commented on seeking support from

social workers outside of the school district they work in. Dana described that she takes her

license very seriously and feels she is the social worker not only for the students in her

building but also for the teachers and staff. This, Dana says, leaves her in a position where she

must be available to everyone, always. She said although her relationship with the

administrator is very open and safe, she prefers to never form a friendship with others in the

school because she may not know when someone is confiding in her as the school social

worker or as a friend. In Dana's words:

When presented with an ethical dilemma, usually I think about it a little bit by myself.
I have several friends, who have their MSW, and one is within the school district, the
other two are not, I can go to these people. Sometimes I do need someone who is not
in the school district for support. I will also align and go to my current principal. She
is not someone with an MSW, doesn't have the same ethical code and yet she has that
practice in a school setting. What these people, with different backgrounds, offer,
help me bounce things back and forth.

It is apparent that each participant has found the support needed in times of ethical
dilemmas from within their school district; whether it is from other social workers, teachers or
administrators. Most of the participants recognize and appreciate the assistance that teachers
and administrators offer. However, it seems that the individuals most qualified to offer advice
or support are those who share the same licensing requirements, code of ethics and values, the
school social workers.

They Don't Know/Understand Our Code of Ethics

Based on the personal accounts from the participants, there are several concepts of the
social work code of ethics that are not known or not understood by teachers and
administration in the schools. Each participant shared personal experiences concerning their
difficulties clarifying why they cannot do some of the things that are common in teachers' and
administrators' everyday practice. Such experiences include confidentiality, dual relationships
and the subject of gifting.

Confidentiality is something valued very highly for social work practice and in a
school setting many professionals use debriefing to better understand a child's situation.

However, school social workers may contemplate what kind of information they feel comfortable sharing among their colleagues about a client's current situation. Ann explained her conflicting feelings over sharing information about students or families with teachers and staff in her school:

An everyday low risk ethical dilemma to me is when a parent tells me something, and I think "should I tell the teacher". To share information about that student or parent could be an ethical decision. A lot of times I will ask the parent and follow their lead. That's the best way. Teachers ask me for information about the kiddos in their class all the time. But as a social worker I know that I must hold the information shared with me, by the parent or even the student, with the highest confidentiality unless I see room for potential harm.

In more ways than one Ann has had to explain to others the set of standards social workers conduct their work by; she provided an example of how she dealt with a situation involving a dual relationship, a subject suggested to avoid by the Social Work Code of Ethics. Ann's child was seeking counseling from a therapist in the same community that she works and lives in. In this situation, Ann said the therapist had been working with her child for quite some time before she learned the therapist became a stepparent to a child who had been participating in friendship groups with Ann and other children at the school. When the therapist and biological parent sought full custody of the child, the therapist asked Ann to come to court and testify that the therapist's home better suited the child's needs. Ann explained that she felt she should have ended the counseling sessions for her daughter from this therapist soon after finding out the therapist was a parent to one the children at her school,

as this was a dual relationship for her. When asked how she handled the situation, Ann said she ended the counseling sessions for her daughter through this therapist and involved the principal concerning the therapist's request to attend court on the family's behalf.

Bella too has dealt with situations involving dual relationships that conflicted with her position in the school. This, Bella explained happened several years prior to the interview when she had just started in her position with the school system. A teenage boy came to her office many times during the week seeking support from someone while he was bouncing between his biological parent's and an aunt's home. His home situation was unstable and never permanent; simultaneously he formed a friendship with Bella's teenage son who also attended the high school. Soon Bella and her husband became a source of support for this teenage boy outside of school hours. Once the county's system made arrangements for him to move away to live with his father, the boy requested that Bella attend a meeting with the new school he would attend in another district. This became a conflict for Bella as her administrator was not familiar with staff going to meetings outside of their school district for a student leaving, and she had yet to confide in her fellow social workers within the district about this dual relationship. Bella made the decision to take time off from work to attend this meeting for her son's friend and past client. When Bella did bring the issue to the large group of social workers within the district, they were surprised by her decision and she says that afterwards she saw the error in her ways. Bella has learned from that experience and states so:

> There was definitely an opportunity for boundaries, but if I didn't go I would have
> left this Dad and kid, who don't know each other very well, with a new school to set
> up a plan and no one knows him like my husband or I. I was his biggest ally here. So

yes there is a reason to set boundaries; and I have made a conscience decision to separate myself from the kids my kids form friendships with, and those that I see at school.

Another area of the Social Work Code of Ethics that Bella found difficult to explain to teachers or clients was the suggestion to avoid gift receiving and giving. Gifting is very common in a school setting and Bella says that every year around the holidays she has at least a few client systems that want to leave her a small gift of appreciation for her time and support given. This however is frowned upon by the social work profession as it can become confusing for client systems to understand the boundaries of the formal relationship. Bella stated that she has to be sensitive to how the client will accept her reasons for refusing a gift, but she has learned to be cognizant of how quickly the boundary lines can be crossed. She made a statement about the issues of gifting and forming friendships with clients and how it varies for teachers and school social workers:

It can be hard to tell a student or parent that you cannot accept a gift card or whatever because they would give these things to their teacher and its welcome by them. Umm, the whole friend thing is difficult. It may be the difference in our Code of Ethics, to their Code of Ethics. It's just like the Facebook, the Facebook is also a negative thing, because teachers have students on there as friends and I wouldn't do that. To know someone on Facebook is called "friend" it's just a word, you know what I mean? But it can be taken so seriously.

During the interview process, four of the five participants admitted they did not know what the teacher's or administrator's Code of Ethics entails. One participant, Connie, talked

about how she has never had a conversation with her co-workers about differences between the teacher's Code of Ethics and the social work Code of Ethics. She said she was aware teachers have a set of standards to use as a guideline, but was not sure what the standards were. This is shown through an excerpt from her interview:

I don't know theirs' completely, so I'm not a hundred percent sure what theirs says about confidentiality. What I run into more so than teachers, because I think teachers are pretty good about confidentiality and being non-judgmental; are the para-professionals here. Some of our discipline assistants get some pretty privileged information about kids who are in trouble. They don't have the same Code of Ethics that I do, so they share information in the community about some of the kids and their families. On a few occasions I have been present in meetings with the principal, where this issue has been addressed with these para-professionals.

Eleanor, too, felt that teachers were very good about keeping information confidential in the community. However, she did say that it is different once back in the school setting; this is explained further in the following excerpt:

I don't think that teachers here know our Code of Ethics and that may be why they do not understand why confidentiality is such a high priority. Like for example, we do on/off task observations of students. These are subjective, not part of the curriculum, and not something we do for all students. Teachers want to know if certain things like an on/off task observation has been done, and they feel that it should be put into the child's cumulative file, and then they want access to it. And I know other social workers in the district ask parents if it can be put into their child's file, but I don't

even ask, I just feel that it shouldn't be everybody's information. I think it's for the teachers and parents at that time, and that's it. That information could affect how teachers view a student later on when they leave this school.

Of all the participant's opinions on the topic, Dana may have the broadest view concerning teacher's understanding of the social work Code of Ethics. She feels it is the school social workers responsibility to ensure all staff in the school learns the basics of the social worker's roles in the school setting and that part of their role is to adhere to our Code of Ethics. Dana stated:

The beauty of our role as social workers is we have the luxury, and curse I think, is that the relationship kind of develops as you go. I have experience being here in my district for 16 years, and I see some social workers get put into the role as a "social skill instructor". You know because you're in a school and everyone thinks that's what you do in a school, teach! And that's not our role. I think my colleagues here understand my role more and more every time they send a student to see me for services. The staff at this school understands our Code of Ethics because I will articulate it, based on what they need to know or what's happening. But I also know much about their Code of Ethics, one because I adhere to it as someone who is licensed from the Department of Children and Families as an educator. But again I have to go to my highest license, and since I'm licensed as an MSW it's a stricter Code of Ethics. So I use the MSW license as my set standard for operating.

All of the participants would agree there is room for opportunity to learn more about the teacher's Code of Ethics, as well as provide ways for teachers to learn more about the

social work Code of Ethics. Each participant spoke of how they personally dealt with issues that the social work Code of Ethics has suggested professionals to avoid. Some of these issues included dual relationships, refusing a gift from the client system or the lack of understanding differences between the Code of Ethics for both teacher and social worker professionals.

Summary

In conclusion, the participants expressed the following findings. It has been a challenge for school social workers to handle situations involving other professionals who follow a different set of standards than the ones in the Code of Ethics established by the Board of Social work. The primary source of support for these school social workers has been their own colleagues who have the same licensure, values and Code of Ethics, rather than the teachers or administrators from within the same building that they practice. Having a director over the school district's social work department who specializes in licensure and Code of Ethics who could handle legal matters, ethical decision making and seeking advice would be beneficial for school social workers in small rural communities. Many school social workers find it easier to exclude themselves from the larger group of faculty within the school who spends lunch or free time in the teacher's lounge; by instead retreating to their office so they are not asked questions that risk sharing confidential information about their clients. Lastly, from these interviews it has been found that living in the same rural community that you are employed makes it difficult to maintain a private life while simultaneously avoiding dual relationships and ethical dilemmas with other community members.

Chapter V: Discussion

This study aimed to explore the challenges that school social workers face in their everyday ethical decision making as it relates to the NASW Code of Ethics. In conclusion to the interviews and data analysis, this chapter will lead with examining the information learned and will describe how these findings affect the social work profession and what further research would be of use to the social work profession applying it to the rural k-12 school setting.

In this final chapter the discussion begins by summarizing the major themes that emerged in the narrative descriptions: *They don't know/understand our code of ethics, Support from other social workers, I choose to eat alone, We need a director from within the District Office too,* and *Try to be a community member and have a private life.* The chapter will then explore the significance of this study's findings in relation to the social work profession. Limitations and recommendations for further research will conclude this discussion.

In the findings of these major themes it is indicated that the professionals interviewed whom practice in the rural k-12 school setting have similar experiences involving isolation from their professional peers, discovering a need for department leadership, and recognizing a lack of knowledge among other staff concerning the NASW Code of Ethics to which they abide by.

They Don't Know/Understand Our Code of Ethics

A concern that appears throughout this study is that of the differences between the social work Code of Ethics created by the NASW and that of the Code of Ethics for

Minnesota Teachers, the lack of knowledge that other professionals in the building have of the

social worker's COE, and how this has impacted ethical dilemmas that school social workers

encounter. Research found through interviews with participants of this study revealed that

although they were aware the teachers, principals and administration within the district have

their own Code of Ethics to adhere to, they have never been involved in a discussion over the

differences between the NASW Code of Ethics and the Code of Ethics for Minnesota

Teachers. Similarly, participants shared they were cognizant that other staff inside the school

were not familiar with social worker's adherence to the profession's COE as a high priority,

and this lack of knowledge could lead to ethical dilemmas. These ethical dilemmas include

but are not limited to client confidentiality, dual relationships and the subject of gifting.

"A school social worker shall demonstrate commitment to the values and ethics of the

social work profession and shall use NASW's Code of Ethics as a guide to ethical decision

making" (NASW, 2002, p. 10). Participants shared past situations in which they had to make

the decision to disclose client information with other staff and how they deemed this to be an

ethical dilemma for them. The route that each participant took in coming to a decision was

made using their knowledge of the social work Code of Ethics, specifically, those related to

client's privacy and confidentiality. When comparing the individual sections of the two Code

of Ethics, it is interesting that the Code of Ethics for Minnesota Teachers only includes 1

section referring to client confidentiality under the first subpart "Standards of Professional

Conduct" (Revisor of Statutes, 2009); while the Code of Ethics for social workers includes 18

sections related to privacy and confidentiality under the first standard "Social Workers'

Ethical Responsibilities to Clients" (NASW, 2002). Likewise, participants also stated that it

should be the responsibility of the school social worker to educate colleagues in the fundamentals of the social work Code of Ethics, and in doing so, it allows for growth and understanding of the social worker's role in the school setting.

Dual relationships were mentioned several times during the interview process with participants. As found from the participants, social workers in schools are often viewed by students or parents of students as friends. These friendships, as seen by the client system, can be brought on after a student or parent attends individual or group counseling, or becomes familiar with the social worker in a community based activity. One participant described how common technology such as Facebook have furthered this notion for the client system, as several teachers will add students and parents to their friend list on the popular website. This is not surprise after reviewing a study conducted by Barrett et al. (2006), in which a survey with education professionals revealed several violations were identified in relation to professional standards of conduct including boundaries and dual relationships.

For a social worker to update a client to a so-called friendship status, insinuates that the relationship is more than that of a professional necessity. Furthermore, it runs the risk of exploitation and creates potential harm to the client (Jayaratne et al., 1997). According to the NASW, situations in which dual relationships are unavoidable, social workers should take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries (2008).

Another ethical dilemma that is common to the school setting is that of gift giving. Although it is not uncommon for social workers in various settings to be offered gifts from their clients; in the school setting it is commonly acceptable for teachers and para

professionals to accept the gifts. Working in an environment where this can be seen as a norm, makes it more difficult for social workers to explain to students and parents the professional reasons for respectfully declining the items. Reamer (2003) continues by stating that client gifts may be nothing more than a simple gesture of appreciation for services, it is still in the best interest of the social worker to take careful consideration into the meaning behind each gift and establish boundaries regulating the acceptance of gifts.

The findings of this study point to the importance of educating both social workers and the administration, teachers, and para professionals within the school in each other's Code of Ethics. As Jayaratne et al. (1997) would suggest, social workers who consistently perform in a manner aligned with the profession's ethical standards inadvertently assist the administration personnel when evaluating the performance of the worker. It can also be said that if administration, teachers and other support staff had more extensive knowledge in regards to the Code of Ethics for social workers, it would also provide a strong support system for social workers who need counsel and advice concerning ethical dilemmas from professionals who use similar ethical standards to guide their day to day work.

Support from Other School Social Workers

A concern found through opinions among the participants interviewed for this study and also in the literature reviewed is of the school social worker's assignment in the school setting being compared to that of a guest in a host setting. As described by Dane and Simon (1991) the school can be considered a host setting as it is one in which the mission and decision making are defined and dominated by people other than social workers. Findings of

this study has shown this statement to be true, as each social worker interviewed stated that of all staff employed in the school, they are the only social work professional.

As the only professional from the social work field within the building, situations arise when the NASW Code of Ethics is utilized as a tool, providing guidance when there is an absence of other social workers who could provide counsel and advice concerning ethical decisions. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) simple answers are not always available to solve complex ethical issues, and that is what makes ethical decision making a process, "Social workers should take into consideration all the values, principles, and standards in this code that are relevant to any situation in which ethical judgement is warranted" (p. 5).

In the school setting, members of administration, teachers and support staff are closest in proximity to the school social worker as well as the issues involving the students of that building. However, seeking out professional advice and guidance from other social work professionals who share the same values, ethical principles and ethical standards may be in the best interest to the school social worker. Several of the participants of this study gave recognition to the administration and teachers within their school as a source of support, yet gave reasons such as different Code of Ethics to abide by, not sharing the same licensing guidelines, and following through with their duty to the client by withholding confidential information, in pursuing counsel from other school social workers.

According to NASW (2002): "Ethical decision making in a given situation must apply the informed judgement of the individual social worker and should also consider how the issues would be judged in a peer review process where the ethical standards of the profession

would be applied" (p. 5). Participants offered ways in which they make ethical decision making regarding students or families of students. They spoke of the need to first compare how they would feel if they were the parent of the child, next how a colleague would feel about the situation and go about handling it, then lastly how the issue would be seen if presented to a large group of social workers from within the district.

Several of the participants in this study credited social work colleagues from other schools within the same district as their primary source of support when dealing with ethical dilemmas. They talked of the various perceptions and ideas presented by other social workers in large group discussions; describing some professionals as cut and dry, believing there is one definitive answer, while others see some issues as a grey area with several routes to take in resolving ethical dilemmas.

I Choose to Eat Alone

As stated previously, rural social workers are often the only social work professional employed in a school building. As the only social work professional they also adhere to a specific set of ethics that are different from the majority. Following a different Code of Ethics can lead to discrepancies between professional missions and values among staff in the school setting, particularly regarding client confidentiality.

From the interviews with participants, it was found that most of these professionals made purposeful measures to avoid teacher's lounges or cafeterias, steering clear of interactions with other staff who find it more comfortable to use such locations to discuss issues related to the students. Several participants made statements of their fondness and friendship towards other staff in the building, however, they still made the choice to eat alone

due to the environment that the lounge creates for staff who do not have strict ethical standards related to client confidentiality to uphold.

Of the five participants, only one found it fairly easy to share down time among other staff in the school and not feel as though she should limit conversations with staff to the confines of her office walls. This participant stated that she has set clear boundaries with her colleagues regarding the information she is willing and able to share, and is rarely asked for information regarding students outside of her office. Another participant with similar views regarding boundaries, described her personal need for inclusion among staff in order to feel healthy and happy while on the job. For this professional, her integrity and professional confidence proceeded the need to be included; to perform in an ethical manner she found it was best to form a boundary around all staff and eat alone so as not to alienate anyone.

As one participant pointed out, the school social worker has a duty to all students and staff within the building; and to isolate one's self inside of an office, limits the accessibility staff has to a resource important to the entire school. From the interviews with participants, it was found that there is a need for boundaries to be set among staff members in the school regarding the different hats that social workers where while in the building. Creating boundaries with other staff regarding information shared about students enables adherence to the Code of Ethics and minimizes the chance for ethical dilemmas to occur. For many social workers who view other staff in the school as friends, a clear line must be drawn, outlining where the "friend" starts and stops, preferably to locations such as the teacher's lounge.

We Need a Director From Within the District Office Too

It was found through interviews of this study, various ethical conflicts during a school social worker's day to day practice occur in which having a director within the district office who is familiar with the profession's values and principles would be beneficial.

According to the participants, there are many occasions throughout the school year wherein they encounter an ethical dilemma that they present to the larger group of social workers seeking advice from, however there may not be a general consensus of how to resolve the issue. It was also pointed out that for social workers sharing their ethical dilemmas with principles or other MSW colleagues, they are often met with sentiments regarding the emotions they are feeling for the situation, rather than advice that comes from an ethical stand point that aligns with the license they hold. A director or head of the social work department would provide assistance in determining the best interest for the client system as well as the school social worker.

Several of the participants spoke of the need for someone who can answer legal questions specific to their ethical decision making. These situations include seeking out advice from the school administrator concerning record keeping, only to find out they too do not have an appropriate answer and instead are referred to the Board of Social Work Licensing, who then makes the referral to check with the school district's attorney. A department head or director from within the district office could assist in providing solutions or act as a go-between from these meetings to district coordinator meetings for complex issues that are considered district wide issues.

Another area of concern addressed by the participants of this study is that of role and responsibility confusion among other staff in the school. Participants stated that principals often times assign tasks that do not fall within the typical social work role, but rather as a catch-all for jobs that can be fulfilled by someone who is not licensed for the classroom. Similarly, a study conducted by Garrett in 1995, found that only 10% of the school social workers surveyed had an accurate job description, leading to unclear standards and expectations among their colleagues. Perhaps assigning a director over the social work group who could clearly define the tasks and responsibilities at a district level could improve the utilization of the social worker's skills, as well as speak to the importance of collaboration between principals and social workers to prioritize goals that fit with the mission and needs of the district.

Some participants of this study stated that within their district, they have been assigned an individual to oversee their ethical concerns, however this person is also in charge of two other departments and has not been able to familiarize themselves with the social work profession's Code of Ethics. This again leaves the school social worker confronted with an ethical dilemma and limited professionals with proper qualifications to seek ethical guidance from.

Findings of this study points to a need for a representative from the district office to oversee all of the school social workers, qualified with a strong understanding of the social work Code of Ethics. The position at its most basic core would be an individual who is familiar with the profession's ethical values and principles, licensing requirements for school social workers and ethical decision making. As one participant pointed out, this position could

be filled using part time hours, perhaps by a current social worker within the district who holds additional degrees and is willing to uphold a dual role among colleagues. The importance of creating this role provides school social workers with an advocate to speak on behalf of the profession during meetings with coordinators of the district; clarifying the tasks social workers should be in charge of within the school setting.

Try To Be a Community Member and Have a Private Life

Of the five participants of this study, four stated that they currently live in the same community that they work within. Several went further to detail how active they are within the community; some as coaches for various sports teams, parishioners in local churches, board members for local homeless shelters and volunteers for elderly living in long term care facilities. Each of these roles within the social worker's personal life create a platform where friendships could develop with individuals and families with whom they may also interact with in their professional setting, creating a dual relationship.

The NASW would suggest for these social workers to be aware of and if possible avoid potential conflicts of interest that would impair professional conduct (2008). However, according to Croxton et al. (2002) this is inevitable for the rural social worker, as most of their relationships are going to be multiple; fellow church members, organizational colleagues or the local grocer may be either a client or related to their client. This was the case for one participant of this study. After a potential conflict of interest arose when it was revealed that the social worker's family and a student's family shared a therapist within the rural community, the social worker followed the Code of Ethics' guidance to terminate professional services in order to protect client's interests (NASW, 2008).

As professionals working in the same rural communities that they also reside within, many occasions involving interactions with coworkers can arise. Due to familiarity with one another in a workplace environment, it is only natural for friendships to form among colleagues and carry over to personal time off site. For the participants of this study, these interactions included social gatherings at colleague's homes and coaching teams for school sports. Several of the participants disclosed that they had experienced situations where a co-worker either brought up issues regarding students or asked for information regarding students during this personal time. In each instance the social workers felt the information was either sought out for as a tool in further assisting the student through academic barriers or in a gossiping fashion that could potentially be taken to conversations with others outside of the school walls within the community. Whatever the case may be, the way in which colleagues went about to discuss the student's private matters lead the participants to feel uncomfortable. Not only do situations such as these take place during non-contracted hours, in which these individuals do not want to think about work related issues, but it also puts the school social worker in a position where they must apply ethical decision making concerning their colleague's professional conduct.

Another ethical dilemma associated with living in the same rural community with which you work is that of dual relationships. Several of the participants spoke of being involved in their children's extracurricular activities. During these activities they interact on a regular basis with other families within the district, and often form friendships with these families. They deemed these interactions as low risk ethical dilemmas. Such examples include parents confiding in them over issues they had concerning other school personnel, giving

rides to students from sporting events or girl scouts; both instances falling outside of the

school's professional conduct. Another situation that participants recognized as a high risk

ethical dilemma involved students who were friends with their children, or children of the

social worker's friends, seeking their assistance or counsel when dealing with family troubles.

This put the social worker in a tough position; deciding whether to share the information with

administration or county officials, as this could make matters worse for the student if the

parents were notified, meanwhile trying to sustain a healthy friendship with the family.

A sentiment shared by the participants include the challenging task of maintaining a

private life within the same rural community in which you provide direct service to many of

its students and families, whom you will also encounter on your own time. Participants

described living a private life within the same rural community that one in also employed, as

nearly impossible; as everyone knows who you are, where you live, and what activities your

family is partaking in. The likelihood of making personal sacrifices is high. Various aspects to

the school social worker's private life is taken into careful consideration when choosing who

to form friendships with, what school to enroll their children into, which child care provider to

hire, which agencies are viable options for a second job. With each choice the social worker

runs the risk of conflicts of interest.

Recommendations for Direct Service

"School social workers assist students by addressing problems that interfere with

student's ability to function and make academic progress in school" (Bye et al., 2009, p. 97).

Although the specific role and outline of duties of a school social worker may vary depending

on the district locality, the importance of having a social worker in that arena is still the same.

These professionals hold a substantial duty towards a district achieving its goal for each student to successfully learn emotionally, socially and academically. With the ever-evolving social changes experienced in our country, varying obligations could include but not be limited to; providing families with referrals to resources within the community, serve as a home to school liaison officer and holding seat on committees or advisory boards active in the rural community.

This study has brought to light some implications for social workers working in the rural school setting. Due to the space that a rural community offers, a social worker offering referrals for local resources to students and/or student's families could result in potential ethical dilemmas for the social worker when limited resources may be available. If a situation involving the client's or social worker's confidentiality being compromised should present itself, either the social worker or the client system's needs may be affected. As drawn from the interviews, this was such a case, and the social worker withdrew services from a community resource that was later revealed to be shared by the social worker and her client system. Situations such as these highlight the unique dilemmas that a social worker of a rural community experiences, and point to the need for additional support within the district and/or employing more than one social worker to each school.

Just as with providing resources can lead to ethical dilemmas; becoming active in the community and serving on advisory boards in a rural community can also uncover the possibility of encountering boundary issues. When working alongside other community members on advisory boards, community development projects or as an advocate, the social worker poses the risk of forming a secondary relationship as a friend with various people

associated with the client system. Many boundary issues and dual relationships are subtle and occur between social workers and former clients; there is substantial disagreement among social workers over the appropriateness of forming friendships, participating in social activities and serving on community boards with former clients (Reamer, 2003). It is recommended that perhaps additional trainings coincide with continued educational credits be offered through NASW specifically to social workers who are employed in the school setting. These trainings could present an opportunity for social workers to be involved in mock up ethical dilemmas relevant to the rural communities they work and/or reside in. This could also be of value to the social workers who practice in rural communities as an opportunity to find support and friendship from other social workers from their area of expertise.

Services could also consist of conducting student, parental or group counseling and providing consultation to teachers and other staff. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for a school social worker in a rural community to abide by the profession's ethical responsibility to the client. In other words, social workers must maintain adequate safeguards for the privacy and confidentiality of information shared with them by the client system (NASW, 2008). Issues related to client confidentiality arose several times during interviews with the participants; most often when teachers or other staff inquired about a student's family or the student's personal well-being as a means to getting a grasp on in-class issues. Although the staff and the social worker's expectations for students educational goals are the same within the school, the way in which professionals in this setting share information regarding the students are different. The social worker has to approach sharing information concerning the client's personal state with other staff on a need to know basis; as some of it may leak into

other conversations among staff members in the school or potentially into the community, as was the case found in interviews with participants.

As found in the review of literature and interviews of this study it is clear that there is a need for other professionals within the district to become aware of and possibly learn some of the core values of the social work profession. My findings indicate that although principals generally understand and are able to identify what school social workers do, as they are usually the ones whom delegate tasks or responsibilities among staff; it is the teachers and support staff within the school that are not as well-informed as to the role expectations or ethical obligations of the social worker (Garrett, 2006). Allowing school social workers, with an opportunity to share the manner in which they make ethical decisions regarding client systems or professional peers that mirrors the code of ethics, provides other staff in the building with an insight into the social work profession. As the NASW (2002) Standard for School Social Work Service would suggest: "School social workers shall constantly be aware of the overall goals, objectives, and tasks of their specialty area and interpret them to local education agency personnel, so that the primary professional activities and competencies of school social workers are maintained" (p. 11).

This researcher proposes that social workers could organize and facilitate staff meetings within the building for administration, teachers and support staff to attend as an educational opportunity to learn about each other's current tasks, projects or roles within the building. This could provide a chance for school social workers to share the profession's mission and the core values that the mission is rooted within. In turn these meetings could create a platform for other staff to get a better understanding of the importance of the social

worker's commitment to their client systems, and the need for careful and discreet sharing of knowledge pertaining to the client system's personal or emotional situations with other staff during school gatherings.

Lastly, this researcher proposes school administrators develop a formal evaluation of the school social worker's job performance designed around their roles and responsibilities within the school. This evaluation would be used as a guideline for administration and social workers in defining and adhering to the professional expectations of the social worker, as it was found that many districts had unclear roles for their social workers within the building. Feedback from administration, colleagues within the building and parents of students receiving services from the school social worker would be included in developing formative and summative evaluation tools. These tools would support and advocate for the social workers position as a guest in a host setting.

Limitations

As in all cases involving research, there comes a time when each researcher finds limitations to their study; that has been found to be true of this study as well. One such limitations pertaining to this study includes the scarce number of literature found concerning school social work or the ethical dilemmas related to practicing in the school setting. It was a difficult task uncovering literature that provided insight into ethical dilemmas specifically related to the school setting, not only for social work professionals, but also for teachers and administrators. This would have allowed for a comparison between the statuses that various staff hold as guests within a host setting, as well as their professional responsibilities to the client systems. Similarly, there appeared to be limited amount of literature pertaining to the

social worker's placement in rural school setting in contrast to urban school settings, if available this could shed light to possible ethical dilemmas unique to each type of community.

Generalization of this study's results is limited in that the data collected was drawn from a convenience sample from two rural public districts. The number of participants who expressed an interest in participating in the research, as well as availability in scheduling an interview around their professional responsibilities contributed to the small sample size. Thus, the participants of this study are not representative of a diverse population of social workers experiencing ethical dilemmas, and expanding the selection of school social workers could provide additional perceptions.

As stated previously, schools of consideration were to be public schools with grades k-12 in rural areas of central Minnesota, this locality allowed the researcher to travel within time restraints to conduct interviews. Similarly, it could be said that limiting research to public schools inhibited an opportunity to explore the spectrum of ethical dilemmas across both public and private schools in these rural areas.

Another limitation to this study is that of researcher bias. In this qualitative study, the researcher is the primary tool for data collection, as I composed specific questions used to create dialogue with participants. The same can be said for analysis, as this researcher was the primary tool used to interpret the common themes that emerged from that dialogue. Therefore, it is vital that the researcher's perceptions do not influence the findings. It was important to this study that I examine my own probable biases concerning ethical decision making, and attempt to exclude those personal feelings during the research process. In addition to lessen researcher bias, this researcher used open-ended questions during the interview process. This

allowed the participants to share their personal experiences and opinions on ethical dilemmas without the pressure of meeting possible researcher expectations.

Although limitations to this study were found, there is still a great importance in the findings that can contribute to further research. The sample size for this study is appropriate for collecting data related to ethical dilemmas of school social workers practicing in rural communities. However, future research would do well to increase the sample size of these professionals, expand the distance between the rural communities in which participants are found, and include various types of schools (e.g., private, public, and charter).

Further Research

This qualitative inquiry could be the first steps for future research in understanding social worker's ethical decision making process when dealt with dilemmas unique to their placement in the rural public school system.

Future research would benefit from the perspectives of social workers among not only rural school districts but also urban districts, as they could supply valuable information. In depth interviews with these professionals would provide data to compare the ethical dilemmas unique to both settings and pin point what areas of education are needed for these social work professionals to practice in an ethical manner as seen best for the school arena. The data found from these studies could be used by the NASW to create a training program specific to social workers who practice in school settings, providing an opportunity for social workers to discuss the ethical issues unique to the school placement and create an outline of topics using the code of ethics. These trainings could also serve as an outlet for social workers in rural

districts to have meet ups with other social workers who share their position as a guest in a host setting.

It would also be of interest to study the current perceptions of various professionals who practice in an assortment of host settings that work alongside social workers. Do the many other professionals within the host setting view social workers as a guest? Or do they view themselves and/or all professionals as a guest to the host setting? It would be equally interesting to explore the views of those in an administrative role concerning their opinions about who qualifies as a guest in a host setting as well. The information gathered could provide the social work profession a broader understanding of how their roles and responsibilities are viewed by their colleagues in various settings. The findings could also provide an opportunity for the NASW to review and revise education standards for those in an undergraduate and graduate level impacting future practices in the social work field.

Summary

The intention of this research was to explore the experiences of social workers who were confronted with ethical dilemmas while providing direct service within rural public schools, and how the challenges faced were impacted by adhering to the NASW Code of Ethics. The findings of this study indicated that school social workers are presented with ethical dilemmas unique to not only their placement in a rural setting, but also as the only staff member within the school from the social work profession. These challenges include: lack of support from individuals who abide by the same code of ethics, difficulties related to private life due to professional obligations within the same community, avoiding interactions with other staff members to evade inappropriate sharing of client information among other

staff members, and the need for higher up assistance from within the district. Lastly, in the findings are recommendations to provide additional support from the NASW to school social workers regarding ethical decision making.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Demographics

1. For confidentiality purposes, how would you like to be identified throughout this study?
2. Male or Female?
3. What is your age?
4. Identified race and ethnicity?
5. What is your title?
   LSW, MSW, LGSW, LISW, LICSW
6. When did you receive your degree?
7. Do you have any other licensures than that from the social work board?
8. How long have you been a school social worker?
9. What other community activities are you involved in outside of your current job?
10. In what school level do you currently practice in?
    Elementary, Middle, Secondary
11. Do you or have you ever lived in the same community as the school that you have worked in?
12. How do you keep your CEU's current?

In Depth

1. How do you define an ethical dilemma?
2. How would you define ethical decision making?
3. Provide an example of a low risk ethical dilemma?
4. Provide an example of a high risk ethical dilemma?
5. What actions do you take when presented with ethical dilemmas?
6. Who do you consider to be a source of support when encountering ethical dilemmas?
   Administration, Teachers, Other Staff
7. Do you feel that the staff at your school has a clear understanding of your role as a social worker in this school? In what ways?
8. Are you aware that the state of Minnesota has a Code of Ethics for Teachers? If so, in what ways do you perceive a difference between that and the NASW Code of Ethics?
9. How do you define dual relationships?
10. What is your experience as a school social worker with dual relationships?How have you handled situations involving dual relationships?
11. What types of dual relationships have you noticed within the school setting?
12. How have you observed other school staff handle situations with dual relationships?
13. What differences do you perceive between rural and urban school settings as it relates to dual relationships?

14. In what ways do you feel additional support should be offered to you in the school setting, when dealing with ethical dilemmas?
    Teachers, Code of Ethics, Administration

Ethical Dilemmas Related to School Social Work

You are invited to participate in a research study of school social worker's ethical decision making process as it relates to the guest status in a host setting. You were selected as a possible participant because your name was found on your school's website and you are a school social worker that is currently practicing in a rural k-12 public school.

This research project is being conducted by Michelle Lang to satisfy the requirements of a Master's Degree in Social Work at St. Cloud State University.

Background Information and Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the possible ethical dilemmas that school social workers encounter while practicing in rural k-12 public school.

Procedures

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to partake in an interview over the course of an hour and a half. The questions you will be asked to answer will help the researcher explore how school social workers use ethical decision making processes related to their position in a school setting.

Risks

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research study, which means that the harm or discomfort anticipated in the research is no greater than that encountered in daily life.

Questions will not be invasive in nature, nor will the questions pose as a risk of danger to employability, reputation or criminal liability.

Benefits

The benefits to participants of this study is providing a better understanding of the complexities of ethical dilemmas encountered by practicing social work in rural school settings. The information obtained may contribute to establishing better boundaries for future school social workers who encounter ethical dilemmas.

Confidentiality

Information obtained in connection with this study is confidential and no information that can be identified with you will be revealed. All raw data and any identifying information will be stored in a secure location and will be destroyed when the study is complete. You will have an opportunity to review the text and withdraw comments prior to publication.

Research Results

At your request, I am happy to provide a summary of the research results after the transcription has been completed. Results of this study will be available at the Social Work Department in Stewart Hall at St. Cloud State University and upon completion; my thesis will be placed on file at St. Cloud State University's Learning Resources Center.

Contact Information

If you have any questions right now, please ask. If you have any questions later, you may contact me at lami0301@stcloudstate.edu or my advisor, Cath Stilwell, at cjstilwell@stcloudstate.edu. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. Your may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty after signing this form.

_____   _____

Signature   Date

Appendix C: Email Letter to Possible Participants

Dear _____,

My name is Michelle Lang. I am a graduate student at St. Cloud State University in the Masters of Social Work program. Currently I am working on a graduation thesis requirement, a qualitative research study. This study is focused on the ethical decision making process that rural school social workers use and how it is impacted by the school setting. I am conducting in depth interviews with school social workers, these interviews should take no longer than an hour and half. I found your email address from _____school website and would like you to be a participant of this research study. The interview will be at a place and time of your choosing and convenience. The interview questions will be based on the ethical dilemmas encountered while practicing in a rural school setting and what if any ethical decision making process was utilized. All data collected will be kept confidential and no identifiable information will be used in the study. If you are willing to participate in this study please write back to this email address. Details for time and date of the interview can be arranged at that point in time. Thank you for your time.

Michelle Lang

Appendix D: IRB Approval

St. Cloud State University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Sponsored Programs

Office of Sponsored Programs   Administrative Services 210
Website: stcloudstate.edu/osp   Email: osp@stcloudstate.edu   Phone: 320-308-4932

Name: Michelle Lang

Address: 3805 226th Ave NW

St. Francis, MN 55070

Email: lami0301

IRB APPLICATION DETERMINATION: EXEMPT

Co-Investigator:

Project Title: How is the ethical decision making process of rural school social workers impacted by the school setting?

Advisor: Cath Stilwell

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **EXEMPT**

We are pleased to advise you that your project has been deemed as exempt in accordance with federal regulations. The IRB has found that your research project meets the criteria for exempt status and the criteria for protection of human subjects in exempt research. Please note the following items concerning our exempt policy:

-- Principal Investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects in this project

--Exempt protocols DO NOT need to be renewed.

--Exempt protocols DO NOT require revisions. However, if changes are made to a protocol that may no longer meet the exempt criteria, a new initial application will be required.

--Adverse events (research related injuries or other harmful outcomes) must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible.

--The IRB reserves the right to review the research while it is in progress or when it is completed.

Good luck on your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs at 320-308-4932 or email jlkuznia@stcloudstate.edu. Please use the SCSU IRB number listed on any of the forms submitted which relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the IRB.

For the Institutional Review Board:

Jodi Kuznia
IRB Administrator
Office of Sponsored Programs

For St. Cloud State University:

Dennis Nunes
Dean, Graduate Studies

OFFICE USE ONLY

SCSUIRB#: 714 - 876
Type of Review: Expedited

Today's Date: 2/22/2010
EXEMPT: 2/22/2010
Expiration Date: