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# Does Role-Confusion Negatively Impact Job Performance Among Minnesota School Social Workers?

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# Does Role-Confusion Negatively Impact Job Performance Among Minnesota School Social Workers?

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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St. Paul, Minnesota  
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent, effects and characteristics of role-confusion among school social workers in Minnesota. The quantitative study used an online survey tool to distribute and to collect a digital questionnaire from 125 members of Minnesota School Social Workers Association ( $n=125$ ). Respondents answered 20 multiple choice and short answer questions regarding themselves, their positions, and their experiences with role-confusion as a school social worker. The results were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings suggested that; while social workers reported a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, many of those with whom they work did not. This study goes on to present participants responses to short answer questions, and to suggest that school social work is a diverse, but poorly defined field and that more research is needed in order to better understand the roles and responsibilities of school social workers.

*Keywords:* School Social Workers, Role-Confusion, Survey

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## **Introduction**

### **Problem statement**

A lack of clarity in the definition of what school social workers do has become detrimental to school social workers' ability to effectively do their jobs (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, 2014; Grissett, 2008). Although role-confusion has been documented among school social workers as far back as 1975 (Grissett, 2008) it has only recently become associated with a range of detrimental factors that negatively impact school social work efficacy (Cawood, 2010).

Role-confusion has existed among school social workers for a long time (Grissett, 2008). The first national study of school social workers found widespread misunderstanding of the roles and responsibilities of school social workers (Grissett, 2008), and while role-confusion has clearly existed in the profession of school social work for a very long time, “Substantial changes and developments have occurred globally over the past decade that affect school-based social work” (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, 2014) meaning that now, more than ever, the professional identity of school social workers is unclear to school social workers as well as those with whom they work. And “With so many of the world's children affected by poverty-stricken environments, poor or no health care, and insufficient access to quality education, social workers can play a critical role in improving the lives of these at-risk youths” (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, 2014). Despite an increasingly unclear role in schools, the need for

effective school social work services is greater than ever, meaning that role-confusion among school social workers is a greater problem now than it has ever been in the past.

### **The scope of the problem**

Role-confusion among school social workers is a national problem. Widespread role-confusion has been reported among school social workers across the country (Cawood, 2010; Grissett, 2008; Teasley et al., 2012; Peckover et al., 2013), with one study finding that a shockingly low 10% of school social workers in one state had an accurate understanding of their own roles and responsibilities (Grissett, 2008).

Some reports on the prevalence of role-confusion are quite alarming. A 2014 report from the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics (U.S.D.L.S., 2014) found that there may be as many as 100,000 school social workers practicing in the country today, meaning that if only 10% (Grissett, 2008) have an accurate understanding of their job, as many as 90,000 school social workers may be dealing with significant levels of role-confusion in the United States. The National Center for Educational Statistics (IES, 2015) reports that more than 50 million students will enroll in a pre-K through 12 public school during the 2015-16 academic year. Many of these schools will be served by at least one school social worker. If only 10% of these school social workers have an accurate understanding of their role, as many as 45 million students could be finding themselves served by a school social worker who could be impaired by significant levels of professional role-confusion.

### **How role-confusion shows up in schools**

Role-confusion impairs school social workers' effectiveness. Role-confusion is not only related to the quality of the work that is done, but also the very nature and definition of that work, and many of the most common barriers to effective school



practice have recently been linked to professional role-confusion (Cawood, 2010; Grissett, 2008). In fact it is the very profligacy of responsibilities that has given rise the most widely endorsed barrier to school social work practice, having too much to do, and not enough time to do it (Cawood, 2010; Pepe, 2014).

Moreover, professionals experiencing role-confusion report lower levels of professional efficacy, satisfaction with job, pay, and coworkers, and higher rates of burnout (Grissett, 2008; Zawocki, 1963). Role-confusion can be identified in school social workers by considering the extent and diversity of their professional responsibilities, as well as their self-perceived satisfaction with their job and their own performance therein.

### **Redressing role-confusion in schools**

While the scope and significance of role-confusion among school social workers has been well documented, little has been done to address this problem. Some research into preventing or addressing several risk factors associated with role-confusion has produced some promising leads (Whitfield & Kanter, 2014), though no empirical research exists outlining ways to prevent or reduce the rates, or the effects of role-confusion among school social workers. One study does consider ways in which certain deliberate socializing and orientation strategies can be effective at reducing role-confusion among recently hired social workers in other professional settings (Jaskyte, 2005). These strategies are found to both reduce and exacerbate the effects of role-confusion, depending on how they are implemented, and in what setting (Jaskyte, 2005).

## **The State of School Social Work**

School social work has changed a lot (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, 2014). Over the past century, the roles and responsibilities of school social workers have grown and shifted to include attendance monitoring, parent and teacher training, community liaising, social casework, crisis intervention, social and developmental assessments, group and individual counseling, student, parent, and school advocacy, and program administration and management. As a result, school social workers provide a much broader range of services than do social workers working in traditional social work settings, implementing interventions targeted not only at student mental health, but also academic and behavioral goals, as well as institutional change within individual schools and school systems (Grissett, 2008; Peckover, et al., 2013).

Though this idiosyncratic practice has enabled school social work to ably meet the social-emotional and academic needs of students across the country for nearly a century, recent changes in national demographics and educational politics have presented a new challenge to school social workers in the United States (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013).

**How we got here.** School social work practice has changed significantly over the decades (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014). Phillippo and Blosser (2013) identified the 1975 passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EACHA), which later became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as a major turning point in the professional identification of school social workers. This law, for the first time, mandated and regulated school social work services by federal legislation, and in doing it forever changed the roles and responsibilities of school social workers by regulating and mandating specific services for any child with a diagnosed disability,

physical or psychological (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013). Additionally, this law established a new source of educational funding to ensure that educational requirements were being met for students with disabilities, for all intents and purposes, the EACHA, and later the IDEA were responsible for establishing, mandating, regulating and preserving special education policy as it exists in the United States today (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013).

As the responsibilities of school social workers have become more and more influenced by federal, state, and district education policy, they have frequently come into conflict with the espoused values and ideologies of the greater social work profession (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013). As Phillippo and Blosser (2013) point out, “social work and public education share a clientele but have different rationalities for their existence, different goals for the people they serve, [and] different ways of serving them”. It is no surprise that the roles and responsibilities of school social workers should become conflicted, when their very understanding of the work that they are there to do is fundamentally different from the other professionals with whom they work on a daily basis.

While it is this very tension that underlies the purpose and the importance of school social work as a profession (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013), it has also given rise to the role-confusion that has recently established such intractable barriers to effective practice. It is only by conceptualizing school social work as having a “strong identification with both the school setting and also social work values, practices, and field structures (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013)” that one can begin to understand school social work as a unique field unto itself, and such an understanding is essential to addressing the epidemic of role-confusion that has impaired school social worker practice across the

country.

### **Purpose of this Research**

The purpose of this research is to answer this question: does role-confusion impact professional identity among Minnesota school social workers? Understanding role-confusion among school social workers from an interstitial perspective may help us to understand ways to more effectively ameliorate the negative effects of role-confusion, or even how better to staunch this phenomenon entirely. This study will examine the nature of role-confusion among school social workers in Minnesota, seeking to better understand how role-confusion shows up in Minnesota schools and how it may be related to the school setting.

This study will seek a deeper understanding of role-confusion among school social workers in Minnesota Schools by seeking to answer three research questions:

- (1) Does role-confusion effect Minnesota school social workers?
- (2) Do specific job characteristics relate to role-confusion among Minnesota school social workers?
- (3) Does the school setting contribute to role-confusion among Minnesota school social workers?

The first research question will be answered by identifying how many school social workers in Minnesota identify role-confusion as a factor in their own practice, and also by evaluating how significant that role-confusion ins. The second, and more complicated question will be answered by investigating a number of factors have been previously associated with role-confusion to evaluate their effect in Minnesota schools. The third question will be answered through an analysis of the factors associated with

role-confusion among Minnesota school social workers, as well as their perceptions of their own relationship with the fields of both social work and K-12 education. The hypothesis tested by this study is: “does role-confusion negatively impact job performance among Minnesota school social workers?”

## **Literature Review**

Role-confusion and school social work have both been studied extensively (Allen-Meares, 1994; Rizzo et al., 1970) however the link between the two has been studied much less rigorously. Much research has been devoted to understanding to defining role-confusion and to understanding what risk and protective factors may be associated with it (Zawacki, 1963), and though most of this research has so far been directed at professions other than school social work (Zawacki, 1963), much of it remains relevant to this topic. This literature review will outline existing research into role-confusion, specifically addressing how it does and does not relate specifically to school social workers. This review will consider the unique professional boundaries of school social work and explore how those parameters may be related to how role-confusion manifests among school social workers.

### **Role-Confusion in Social Work**

*Role-confusion* (or role ambiguity, as it is sometimes called) refers to a lack of information, or understanding regarding the roles and responsibilities of a specific organizational position (Grissett, 2008). This phenomenon, though it is evident in many different professions and professional environments (Rizzo, House, Lirtzman, 1970), has long been associated with social work positions in general and school based social work positions in specific (Grissett, 2008).

Jendia Steele Grisset's 2008 dissertation at the University of Alabama surveyed school social workers in that state. It studied self-reported rates of role-confusion and evaluated rates of associated risk factors. Finding that most school social workers reported some significant levels of role-confusion, and that this was highly correlated with decreased levels of professional efficacy. Though this study is a useful insight into the extent and danger of role-confusion, it was limited by its narrow scope, as it surveyed only school social workers in Alabama. (Grisset, 2008)

**Sources of role-confusion.** Role-confusion is very closely connected with the role that is being misunderstood. Role-confusion, while often associated with diminished professional efficacy, has also been found to be inextricably related to the nature of the positions that often experience it as “these dysfunctions appear to be necessary concomitants and costs of providing professional control over the technical aspects of the organization's activities (Rizzo et al., 1970)”. One of the earliest empirical studies of professional role-confusion identified a number of organizational factors related to role-confusion, noting that it often “results from ... dual hierarchy” and “multiple lines of authority” (Rizzo et al., 1970).

Rizzo, House and Lirtzman's 1970 survey of employees at a major manufacturing firm ( $n=199$ ) from both the central office and the main plant, salaried and hourly) evaluated a number of factors related to role-confusion, job satisfaction, and professional efficacy, finding that role-confusion is in fact related to many of these factors. While this study establishes an empirical basis for role-confusion in many fields dating back more than 40 years, its age, and its focus on professionals other than social workers does limit its direct applicability to this topic. (Rizzo et al., 1970)

Another organizational factor related to role-confusion is “ambiguous definition of a task and inconsistent direction from a superior (Zawacki, 1963).” This can be related to multiple chains of command within an organization, a lack of understanding of organizational structures, or a professional or philosophical difference between a professional and their supervisor(s) (Jaskyte, 2005; Rizzo, et al, 1970; Zawacki, 1963).

Jaskyte's 2005 survey, administered to MSW students ( $n=210$ ) from two successive annual graduating classes of a major southern university, studied the different ways in which recent social work hires are socialized and oriented to their new professional settings, and evaluated how these different tactics may play a role in limiting professional role-confusion. The study found a number of different tactics to be somewhat effective, noting that an individualized approach was most highly correlated with lower rates of role-confusion. This study is a useful perspective on how widespread role-confusion is within the social work profession at large, however it's small sample size (which was not limited to school social workers) limits its direct application to this topic (Jaskyte, 2005).

***Role-confusion in schools.*** The intractable, organizational nature of the causes of role-confusion is especially evident in public school settings (Allen-Meares, 1994; Grissett, 2008; Jaskyte, 2005; Phillippo & Blosser, 2013; Richard & Sosa, 2014). Role-confusion is especially prevalent among school social workers due to a number of specific causes including organizational factors like dual hierarchies (Allen-Meares, 1994; Zawacki, 1963), multiple supervisors, differential expectations, multiple work-sites (Allen-Meares, 1994), and most notably, the unique position that social workers occupy in the public school setting (Allen-Meares, 1994).



*The unique position of school social workers.* Grissett (2008) contends that “Role ambiguity... is inherent to school social work practice, as the school social worker operates within a host setting (an organization whose mission is defined by someone other than a social worker) that often does not understand the role, skills, and knowledge of a social worker.” This lack of understanding is essential to the nature of the school setting where social workers are utilized to provide a perspective and skill-set that is different from other professionals in the academic setting (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013; Richard & Sosa, 2014). As Richard and Sosa (2014) note, “School social work is distinguished from other school-based professions by its emphasis on serving marginalized and oppressed populations as well as its theoretical foundation framing practice from an ecological systems perspective.” This professional philosophy and theoretical orientation differentiates school social workers from the teachers, administrators, and even other mental health professionals (like counselors or psychologists) with whom they work on a day to day basis.

Because social workers bring a unique skill-set and perspective to the school setting, they are able to provide a unique and important service. However, as a result their role becomes misunderstood and ambiguous, not only to their coworkers and supervisors, but often even to themselves (Jaskyte, 2005; Richard & Sosa, 2014; Rizzo et al., 1970), as school social workers' “Role development is a combination of both a social worker's skills and the perception of the employment setting... However, because the school social worker's role has not been prominent ... the school's perception of the social worker's role tends to take precedence over the social worker's skills and training (Richard & Sosa, 2014).”

In their 2013 study, Richard and Sosa conducted a survey of school social workers in Louisiana ( $n=378$ ) with the purpose of further understanding and defining their roles within the school setting, finding a generally consistent picture of the role that school social workers play in Louisiana public schools, though this role is not entirely representative of their actual job description, as this role has, and continues to, change over time. While this study is useful in determining consistent standards of practice within a certain group of school social workers, because it is limited to school social workers in Louisiana it has limited relevance to this research. (Richard & Sosa, 2013)

*Diversity of tasks and responsibilities.* School social workers perform many different job tasks in their work (Allen-Meares, 1994). Though misunderstanding from other school based professionals may be the most important organizational cause of role-confusion among school social workers, a number of other organizational causes have been well studied and documented (Allen-Meares, 1994; Grissett, 2008). Most notable among these causes are the sheer number of different tasks and responsibilities that school social workers take on. A 1994 empirical study of school social workers (Allen-Meares, 1994) found that social workers endorsed 104 different “job tasks” of which “100 were judged to be at least very important (Allen-Meares, 1994).”

Analysis of these tasks revealed five different factors or “job dimensions” including “leader ship and policy-making ... educational counseling with children ... home-school liaison ... administrative and professional tasks, and ... facilitating and advocating families' use of community resources (Allen-Meares, 1994, p.563).” This diversity of tasks and responsibilities is, in part responsible for the ambiguous role that social workers fill in school settings (Allen-Meares, 1994), and as it becomes harder for

other professionals to understand and define the roles and responsibilities of school social workers, it becomes even harder for the social workers themselves (Allen-Meares, 1994; Richard & Sosa, 2014).

Allen-Meares' 1994 nationwide survey of mostly white, mostly female, school social workers ( $n=860$ ) sought to identify different aspects of the job of school social work, and to rank those dimensions by importance. Allen-Meares found 104 different “job tasks”, with 100 of those ranking as “at least very important,” and concluded that school social work is a job influenced by many different variables (Allen-Meares, 1994).

*Multiple work sites.* Many school social workers also work at multiple different schools (Allen-Meares, 1994). While 104 discrete job tasks (Allen-Meares, 1994) may seem like a lot, these responsibilities become further confused when considering that one empirical study found that “Fifty-seven percent [of respondents] reported assignments to two to seven individual school buildings, and 18 percent were assigned to eight to 15 school buildings. Eighty-seven percent were assigned to one school system or district, and 9 percent were assigned to three or more (Allen-Meares, 1994, p.562).” The many different roles and responsibilities that school social workers take on may be different between different work sites, where they may report to different supervisors. With so many different jobs to juggle, often in multiple different locations, it is no surprise that school social workers (and those who work alongside them) might become confused about exactly what role the school social worker is meant to fill at a given school.

*Non-social work supervisors.* Many school social workers are not supervised by social workers (Allen-Meares, 1994). Such a large and diverse workload would be confusing under the most conducive circumstances, however most school social workers

function without social work supervision. Allen-Meares (1994) found that “Only a few respondents [28%] were being supervised by a person with a degree in social work” and that “supervisors typically held degrees in special education, regular education, psychology, and guidance counseling (Allen-Meares, 1994, p.562).” This means that even as school social workers struggle to understand their roles, the people who they count on for direction, and for help to define and understand this role, are not themselves trained to understand that role themselves.

*Multiple professional organizations.* Even outside of the workplace it can be difficult for school social workers to find a comprehensive or definitive understanding of their role in a school. School social workers are organized, regulated, and influenced by a number of national, state, and local organizations (Allen-Meares, 1994). Allen-Meares (1994) reports that “Respondents indicated membership in NASW [69%], a state school social work association [57%], the National Education Association [38%], and the American Federation of Teachers [13%].” and that “Many held multiple memberships. (p.562)” This indicates that multiple organizations have a hand in helping to define the role of a school social worker, including groups that represent only social workers, and groups that represent only education professionals. To further complicate matters, only “Seventy-seven percent indicated that their state department of education had certification requirements for school social workers.” (Allen-Meares, 1994).

It is clear that “The practice of the school social worker is influenced by a number of school variables that are beyond the control of the practitioner, including large caseloads, multi-building assignments, unreasonable expectations by supervisors and administrators who are not of the same professional back ground, and insufficient

numbers of workers to address needs (Allen-Meares, 1994, p.565).” It should be no surprise that role-confusion has been so frequently identified among school social workers – it is, as has been noted, an essential component of the position (Allen-Meares, 1994; Grissett, 2008 ;Jaskyte, 2005; Phillippo & Blosser, 2013; Richard & Sosa, 2014 ; Rizzo, et al., 1970; Zawacki, 1963) The intractability of role-confusion in school social work is undeniable, and its effects make this a cause for great concern to school social workers and those who count on them.

*Other barriers to effective practice.* School social workers endorse many different, specific barriers to their most effective practice (Teasley, et al., 2012). Cawood's 2009 survey of members of the School Social Work Association of America ( $n=250$ ) evaluated respondents assessment of how able they were to implement certain research based school violence intervention programs. This study found multiple barriers to program implementation, noting that the higher prioritization of academic needs was the most widely endorsed barrier to program implementation. While rash of recent school violence, most notably bullying and mass shooting, may have changed how schools prioritize violence intervention programs, this study illuminates how academics can often take priority over much of the mental health work that school social workers are tasked with. (Cawood, 2009)

Teasley, Archuleta, Crutchfield, and Chavis' 2012 study, using a convenience sample of school social workers ( $n=284$ ), identified barriers and facilitators to school social work practice in different geographic settings and found that time constraints and caseloads were the most commonly widely endorsed barriers to practice, and that respondents from urban locations reported higher numbers of barriers than those from

suburban and rural settings. This study is useful in evaluating how many of the risk factors associated with role-confusion often manifest in school social work practice, however, it does not address role-confusion directly. (Teasley, et. al., 2012)

Furthermore, because there are no national requirements to be a school a social worker, each state has developed its own requirements, as a result the roles and responsibilities of school social workers vary greatly from one state to the next (Grissett, 2008). As such, it is impossible to develop a singular definition for the role of a school social worker, meaning that school social work roles and role-confusion, though they exist across the country, look different in different places.

*The changing face of school social work.* School social work is a changing profession (Peckover, et al., 2011). In 2011, Peckover, Vasquez, Van Housen, Saunders, and Allen authored a survey of school social workers in Iowa ( $n=268$ ), studying changes in what kinds of interventions are utilized by school social workers in that state. They found that a shift in practice is indeed taking place, and that respondents report increasing rates of multi-systemic interventions, working more closely with families and communities. This study emphasizes the importance of this shift, noting its departure from the more traditional mental health case-management approach. However, it is limited to a small number of school social workers in a single state, so while it does offer some promising leads on how school social work might be better practiced, its national applicability is limited (Peckover, et al., 2011).

## **Effects of role-confusion**

Role-confusion is associated with many personal and professional risk factors (Grissett, 2008). Role-confusion has long been associated with a number of negative effects for those experiencing it, leading to “socialworkers’ burnout, lack of commitment, low satisfaction with pay, coworkers and supervisors, poor performance, and job stress in a number of empirical studies (Jaskyte, 2005, p.71)”, and one of the very earliest studies of professional role-confusion found that it “resulted in an increase in anxiety, a less favorable attitude toward the superior, and a decrease in productivity (Zawacki, 1963).”

**Professional efficacy.** Role-confusion impairs professional efficacy (Grissett, 2008). Role-confusion negatively effects, not only those experiencing it, but also the organization as a whole, with “dissatisfaction for the members and loss of organizational efficiency and effectiveness (Zawacki, 1963).” In fact, school social workers experiencing role-confusion report themselves to be less effective (Grissett, 2008). A survey designed to measure school social workers own perceptions of their role-confusion and efficacy found that “role ambiguity was negatively related to the overall school social worker self-efficacy (Grissett, 2008).”

**Escalation.** Furthermore, this effect appears to compound itself, as “The overall negative correlations indicate lowered degrees of need fulfillment with increased role conflict and role ambiguity (Zawacki, 1963).” As a result, over time, role-confusion only escalates as a problem, and “As social workers gain experience, they are experiencing an increased level of role ambiguity (Grissett, 2008).”

These findings reflect not merely the lack of understanding of those newer professionals who have yet to fully understand their position, but rather that they are

indicative of an inherent role-confusion in school social work that becomes more evident to practitioners as they gain job experience. These findings suggest that the longer a school social worker remains in their position, the more they come to recognize and personally endorse a number of specific factors that have come to be associated with both role-confusion and decreased self-efficacy. (Grissett, 2008; Zawacki, 1963).

### **Role-confusion is especially damaging to school social workers**

Role-confusion is especially dangerous for school social workers (Peckover, et al., 2013). One study found that social workers reported “pressure to conform to beliefs of other professionals about the proper way to behave or about the manner in which their role should be carried out, as well as faced incompatible demands from other workers (Jaskyte, 2005, p.82).” With school social workers working alongside (and often being supervised by) non-social workers, this effect is especially relevant in the public school setting, where “demands from the system of public education have often trumped social work theory, confining the practice of social work to individual interventions. (Peckover, Vasquez, Van Housen, Saunders, & Allen, 2013, p.10)” even though social work theory endorses an ecological, or systems based understanding of students’ problems.

These challenges may be related to the fact that “Administrators, colleagues, and the community all had different perceptions of the roles school social workers were to perform” and found a general confusion among the colleagues of school social workers regarding the difference between “school social worker, school psychologist, and education consultant roles (Peckover, et al., 2013, p.15).”

**Unclear professional organizational standards and identities.** School social work is different between different states, school districts, and even within schools themselves (Richard & Sosa, 2014). Another risk factor unique to the school setting is “A



lack of uniformity in state and national role definition contributes to the role ambiguity among school social workers, with potential consequences for their job satisfaction, performance, and ability to advocate for the profession” (Richard & Sosa, 2014).

Three different national associations claim to represent school social workers (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013), lending credence to the notion that school social work is more than just “social work in a non-social work setting (Bartlett, 1988).” It is a distinct and unique field of practice, in which the “setting is not necessarily secondary but rather, an equal in how it can inform, and provide a rationale for, work within the setting (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013, p.20).”

**Role-confusion creates specific barriers to effective social work practice in schools.** Role-confusion is associated with specific barriers to effective practice (Teasley et al., 2012). Recent studies have named a number of challenges in the field of school social work, identifying several specific barriers to effective practice that were very widely endorsed by respondents. These were: time, caseloads, funding/resources, school staff (teachers/administrators/other professionals), parents and families, and school and school district policies (Teasley et al., 2012), and the finding that “school social workers are most frequently confronted with the obstacle of academics taking priority over the need to address the behavioral objectives of students (p.146).” This statement is representative of a great many of the perceived barriers that these studies found (Cawood, 2010). One school social worker, who was interviewed in Pepe's (2014) study stated,

*Most of the dilemmas that the kids are having, or emotions that are coming up for them are something that is way bigger than I could ever address soundly at school. I can scratch the surface, and help give them some coping skills to get through. But the individual work doesn't get to happen because you have a case-load of 70, and there are 32 hours that the kids are actually here in a [week] ... good luck seeing 70. (Pepe, 2014)*

This school social worker went on to describe the systemic nature of the challenges that she and her clients face, expressing a social work understanding of the situation, while describing the treatment limitations of the academic setting. She describes the ways in which role-confusion has frustrated her, by saying “*Most of my challenges throughout the school district have been more with the staff than they have with the families or the kids... the hardest part for me personally is helping people to understand where I'm coming from* (Pepe, 2014).” giving weight to the notion that a lack of role clarity between school social workers and other staff can be a major barrier to effective service delivery.

These barriers were understood to be unique to school social work, the byproduct of how school social work has developed practices and infrastructure, unique to its own needs and setting that are unlike those used in the larger parent fields of Social Work and k-12 education. (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013).

### **Protective Factors**

There are some promising leads regarding protective factors. Though role-confusion is a very widespread and debilitating force among school social workers in this country (Allen-Mears, 1994; Cawood, 2010; Grissett, 2008; Peckover, et al., 2013; Pepe, 2014; Richard & Sosa, 2014), several protective, or ameliorating factors have been identified in helping to enable social workers to better identify and perform their roles in a variety of professional settings. One study of recent MSW graduates found that “Social workers, new to multidisciplinary settings, are faced with difficulties relating to all aspects of their role: clinical, professional, and bureaucratic. (Jaskyte, 2005, p.70).” This indicates that this problem is not unique to school social workers, and it is possible that approaches used in other professional settings may be effective in schools as well.

**Socialization.** One promising approach has been the deliberate socialization and orientation of new social workers (Jaskyte, 2005). This approach recognizes the importance of “Socializing them into settings where the predominant view is non-social work requires orienting employees to the broader system, and taking into account such issues as role definition and professional autonomy. (Jaskyte, 2005, p.70).” While “Empirical evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of various socialization tactics in lowering role ambiguity and conflict (Jaskyte, 2005, p.74)” and certain measures have been shown to be effective with certain groups, certain other socialization programs have served to exacerbate role-confusion, rather than ameliorate it (Jaskyte, 2005), and noted that, in multidisciplinary teams, “It would be especially beneficial if colleagues with whom a social worker will be working on the daily basis would participate in the training along with supervisor, department chair, and newcomer (Jaskyte, 2005, p.84).”

**Other protective factors.** Other protective factors have been found to ameliorate many of the risk factors associated with secondary trauma among clinicians. (Whitfield & Kanter, 2014) While this may seem unrelated, many of these risk factors, including decreased job satisfaction and perceived self-efficacy, are similar to those associated with role-confusion. It is possible that these practices may be effective in reducing the negative effects of role-confusion.

These factors include increased levels of self-care, creating and maintaining a more manageable workload, and finding and utilizing peer support and consultation (Whitfield & Kanter, 2014). While these approaches are promising, they are unfortunately especially difficult to implement in a school setting where workloads are notoriously excessive and other social workers are often unavailable for consultation and

peer support (Allen-Mears, 1994; Grissett, 2008; Pepe, 2014).

**Role clarity.** Another important protective factor to consider, is the opposite of role-confusion – role clarity. The emergent study of role-clarity, the degree to which clinicians feel sure and secure in their understanding of their role within an organizational setting has presented some promising ideas about how role-confusion might be addressed. Barbara Friesen's 1983 study of managerial behavior and organizational culture found that the size, centralization and formalization of an organization were often related to employees' job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and, notably, their sense of role-clarity (Friesen, 1983). This study of supervisors ( $n=66$ ) and subordinates ( $n=263$ ) employees of 23 different mental health agencies, both public and private, in Oregon (Friesen, 1983) is useful in understanding how role-clarity might be associated with certain organizational characteristics as well as with personal protective factors such as higher job satisfaction and increased self-perceived professional efficacy (Friesen, 1983). While these findings are useful in beginning to understand role-clarity, this study is more than 30 years old, and it did not include any school social workers, so it cannot speak to the issue of role-confusion among school social workers today.

A more recent study of more than 2,000 recently qualified child and family social workers in England investigated the relationship between perceived self-efficacy and role-clarity, among other things (Carpenter, Shardlow, Patsios, Wood, 2015). This study found that “High self-efficacy was predicted statistically by ... role clarity and ... job satisfaction”, among other factors (Carpenter, et al., 2015). This study is very useful in understanding how increased role clarity can promote a greater sense of self efficacy, and provides a helpful counterpoint to the established link between role-confusion and

decreased self-efficacy (Allen-Meares, 1994; Grissett, 2008). Unfortunately this study took place in England, and did not survey school social workers, and so it does not provide any information directly related to how role-confusion, nor role clarity might manifest among school social workers in Minnesota.

Understanding role clarity as a counterpoint to role-confusion is a useful way to examine this phenomenon, however, it has been studied relatively little, and has not yet been studied in the school setting. Greater research and understanding of role clarity among school social workers would be beneficial in understanding role-confusion in this group.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This study will assess the prevalence, causes, and effects of role-confusion among school social workers in Minnesota through an *Ecological Systems* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) lens, and from an *Interstitial Perspective* (Philippo & Blosser, 2013). This will allow us to consider not only the way in which multiple systems effect the functionality of school social workers, but also to understand the systems themselves as a product of the overlap between the professional realms of social work and K-12 education.

### **The Interstitial Perspective**

An *interstice* refers to a “mesolevel location that forms from overlapping resource networks across multiple organizational fields in which the authority of the dominant resource network does not prevail.” (Morrill, 2009). *Interstitial practice* is any practice that operates in such a location. Interstitial practices grow out of these spaces, informed by the practices, values, and parameters of both of their informing organizations or practices (Morrill, 2009). Interstitial practice “diverges from and improvises on these larger fields’ practices in order to help practitioners respond to ... unique practice demands and opportunities (Philippo & Blosser, 2013, p.20).”

Interstitial practices develop to meet needs where existing practices are unable to fully meet a need, or solve a problem, or when they spill over into the traditional domain of another organization or profession (Philippo & Blosser, 2013). Over time these interstitial practices develop their own identities, organizing and governing bodies or

agencies and come to define themselves, and structure themselves independently from their parent professions (Philippo & Blosser, 2013).

School social work is an interstitial practice (Philippo & Blosser, 2013). School social work has long existed in a contested professional space, bordered on one side by social work, with all of its concomitant values and ideologies, and on the other by the professional field and systems of k-12 education, characterized by its own set of goals and theoretical frameworks (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013). The practice methodologies and models of school social work have developed over time to incorporate these divergent, and at times contradictory professional characteristics, and in this way school social work has grown to be a distinct and unique area within the fields of both the social work and k-12 education.

As school social work programs battle for funding from both human service and educational coffers, school social workers face increasing demands from both sources, demands that often seem to be at odds with one another (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013). Additionally, rising rates of youth homelessness and youth poverty, coupled with increasing social and political attention on bullying, school violence, academic achievement and the so-called “achievement gap” have increased the need school based social work services (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013). This increasing demand, in combination with competition for funding has given rise to greater accountability and standardization of school social work services, and in their efforts to meet these standards of accountability school social workers currently find themselves the servants of two masters, the professional fields of both social work and k-12 education.

The interstitial nature of school social work, and “the ongoing need to maintain

legitimacy in the fields of social work and k-12 education amidst these fields conflicting institutional logics.” (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013) has given rise to the phenomenon of role-confusion in the field of school social work, and “a significant level of role-confusion between school social workers and administrators, colleagues, and the community” (Peckover, Vasquez, Van Housen, Saunders, & Allen, 2013).

As school social workers “adapt to demands from social work and k-12 education, even as these demands diverge or conflict” (Peckover, et al., 2013) a number of significant barriers have developed in the service delivery mechanisms of school social workers, with one recent study identifying role-confusion as being directly responsible for creating and maintaining these barriers (Peckover, et al., 2013). These barriers to effective school social work practice have become major difficulties in the school social work profession, and understanding the role-confusion that underlies current state of school social work will be necessary to meaningfully address them and find effective solutions.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

First espoused by Yuri Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological Systems Theory is one of the cornerstone philosophies of social work. Bronfenbrenner described people as developing within the context of four “systems,” these being the micro-, mezo, macro, and exo-systems. A fifth system, the chrono-system, was later added (DuPoy & Gilson, 2012). These five systems comprise the environment in which people develop. Through their interaction with, and influence upon, and from, people develop their understandings of their own role, and function in the world. This process takes place throughout the lifespan, and people's individual identities, self-images, and relational styles are thought



to constantly develop and grow through their constant interaction within these systems (DuPoy & Gilson, 2012).

These systems, naturally, effect school social workers as much as they effect anyone else (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Especially the Micro-System, which encompasses home, and workplace relationships, and the Mezo-System, which includes broader communities and neighborhoods are important in assessing factors in understanding how school social workers come to understand their roles and responsibilities within their schools (DuPoy & Gilson, 2012). Also notable is the Macro-System, which includes the national, regional and district level educational and mental health policies that inform and enforce the ways in which school social workers are required to practice (DuPoy & Gilson, 2012). Finally, the Chrono-System describes the changes that these systems undergo over time (DuPoy & Gilson, 2012). Understanding how systemic mezo-systemic needs shift (such as rising rates of youth homelessness) or how macro-systemic policies may change (like the passage of new laws or policies effecting the practice of social work, or the role of schools in mental health case-work) is important in recognizing the ways in which the needs and pressures of various systems can change over time, and can force school social workers to reassess their own understandings of their roles.

### **Using this Perspective**

From an Ecological Systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) perspective, and an interstitial perspective (Philippo & Blosser, 2013; Morrill, 2009), a new understanding of role-confusion, as it relates to school social workers becomes possible. This study will consider role-confusion among school social workers as a product of the systems native to the interstice between social work and K-12 education. These micro-systems include

relationships with coworkers, supervisors, and professional peers in both the social work, and educational fields, and recognizes the dissimilar ideas about social work and about school social work that may be present in these different relationships. Relevant mezo- and macro-systems include the differential professional and organizational identities, missions, and requirements that exist in the systems connected to each of these independent professional fields.

By recognizing that these different systems primarily serve and relate to professionals who are either educators or social workers, we can see that school social workers are in constant interaction with systems of both fields, resulting in a unique professional and personal ecological system. This study will explore school social workers' relationships and interactions with these different systems in order to better understand, if, and how, the role-confusion associated with school social work may or may not be related to the interstitial nature of the profession of school social work.

## **Methodology**

### **Overview**

This quantitative study, which was carried out under the authorization of the University of St. Thomas (UST) Institutional Review Board (IRB), was conducted during the 2015-2016 school year. This study was completed in partial fulfillment of a Master of Social Work degree at the St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas School of Social Work. This nine-month research project is a graduation requirement, though it is neither a thesis nor a dissertation. The hypothesis tested by this study is: “does role-confusion negatively impact job performance among Minnesota school social workers?”

### **Sample**

The population that was studied is the school social workers in Minnesota, specifically, members of the Minnesota School Social Work Association (MSSWA). This group of more than 400 clinicians was selected for two reasons. Most importantly, Minnesota school social workers are a professionally diverse group. School social workers in Minnesota provide a wide range of services to a very diverse student population. Although school social workers (and social workers as a whole) are not a particularly diverse group, being, for the most part, white (non-Hispanic) and female (Grissett, 2008), Minnesota school social workers are a professionally (if not personally) diverse group, serving a wide range of students in with diverse needs in a multitude of different roles and settings. The second reason for selecting this population is access. The

researcher has direct access to the MSSWA, and for this reason was able to ensure that the survey would reach as many potential respondents as possible. In this way the sample for this research will be the entire population of MSSWA members. Inclusion criteria for this sample will be that respondents are currently school social workers in the state of Minnesota who are MSSWA members. The sample used in this study will be composed of those MSSWA members that choose to complete and submit the survey.

### **Data Collection**

This study contacted every MSSWA member, distributing a survey electronically to each member. The data was then collected using an online survey tool in order to preserve respondent anonymity. Data was accessible only to the researcher and the research committee. No names were attached to the data, and because some respondents may be identifiable from their responses to certain demographic questions, all data was aggregated, and no individual surveys were retained.

### **Instrument**

The research instrument used in this quantitative study was a survey questionnaire that was delivered to all MSSWA members. This survey (attached as Appendix A) was designed specifically for use with this study and this population based on the research instruments used in, and the results of previous studies (Grissett, 2008; Pepe, 2014).

**Instrument development.** Grissett's (2008) survey of Alabama school social workers was able to aptly assess the presence and prevalence of role-confusion among school social workers as well as their perceptions of self-efficacy. Elements of this survey have been selected and adapted, based on the results of Pepe's (2014) qualitative study of St. Paul Public Schools social workers in order to create an instrument capable of

evaluating both research questions, while being as short and accessible as possible.

In addition to Grissett's (2008) items used to evaluate the extent of role-confusion, several additional items have been created and adapted to evaluate factors that have been previously associated with role-confusion among school social workers (Cawood, 2010; Grissett, 2008; Peckover et al., 2013; Teasley et al., 2012; Pepe, 2014) in order to evaluate the nature of role-confusion among school social workers in Minnesota, including demographics, risk factors, protective factors, and specific roles and responsibilities.

As multiple studies have identified a lack of time as a primary concern for school social workers (Cawood, 2010; Grissett, 2008; Peckover et al., 2013; Teasley et al., 2012; Pepe, 2014), creating a small and manageable survey was considered to be of primary importance in order to ensure a satisfactory response rate from this busy research population. As such, the items on this survey have been constructed as Likert scales where possible, and when this option was unavailable (as with many demographic items) answers were intended to be as short as possible, such as "Age," or "Years of experience as a school social worker." Three final "short answer" style questions were included in order to ensure that respondents were provided with an opportunity to better describe, or provide context for their responses.

Finally, all items were adapted or constructed within the conceptual framework of interstitial theory. As such, the survey provided insight into the ways in which the interstitial nature of school social work practice is related to role-confusion within the field.

## **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data analysis consisted of both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to gain a clearer understanding of the population being studied through presentation of demographic information. They were also used to answer the first research question, “does role-confusion effect Minnesota school social workers?” By presenting the number and percentage of school social workers experiencing role-confusion, and to what extent they perceive it in their own work, this study presented a comprehensive picture of the extent and impact of role-confusion among school social workers in Minnesota schools.

The inferential statistics used were chi-square analysis of characteristics of the school setting with elements of role-confusion. By examining the relationship between these factors this study was able to understand the nature of school social worker role-confusion in Minnesota, and in doing so answer the second research question, “do specific job characteristics relate to role-confusion among Minnesota school social workers?” These analyses further helped to answer the third research question, “does the school setting contribute to role-confusion among Minnesota school social workers?” By understanding the relationship between school social workers’ role-confusion and their identification with the fields of both social work and K-12 education, as well as their assessment of their own roles and responsibilities this study was able to begin to understand the ways in which the interstitial nature of school social work, and the multiple elements of school social work practice may be related to role-confusion within the profession.

## **Findings**

The survey (attached as Appendix A) was delivered to 420 members of the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA), but not all finished, or in fact even started the survey. Some of those who attempted to take the survey did not meet inclusion criteria, while others simply chose not to complete it. The largest number of responses to any single survey item (excluding inclusion criteria) was 125, and so the sample for this survey was determined to be 125 practicing school social workers in the state of Minnesota who are MSSWA members ( $n=125$ ).

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The research findings will present descriptive statistics exploring the demographics of school social workers as a group and also by examining the positions that they occupy in Minnesota schools. These statistics go on to present responses to Likert items measuring respondents' clarity and/or confusion regarding their professional roles and responsibilities.

**Demographics.** The first section of the survey asked respondents a series of multiple choice questions investigating characteristics of themselves and of their positions. Findings from these questions are presented below.

***Licensure and education.*** Of this sample 49% ( $n=60$ ) were licensed as Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker (LICSW), the highest available level of licensure in the state, and 95% ( $n=95$ ) of respondents reported that their highest academic degree was

a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, although respondents reported a wide range of educational backgrounds including Bachelor of Social Work degrees (BSW) and advanced degrees in education, psychology, marriage and family therapy and school counseling.

**Work experience.** Respondents reported a range of experiences in social work, with 43% ( $n=54$ ) having practiced social work for more 16 or more years, 26% ( $n=33$ ) for 9-15 years, and 40% ( $n=38$ ) for fewer than 9 years. This diversity was also seen in years practicing social work in schools, with 33% ( $n=41$ ) of respondents reporting that they have been practicing school social work for 16 or more years, 26% ( $n=33$ ) for 9-15 years, 14% ( $n=17$ ) for 4-8 years, and 27% ( $n=34$ ) having practiced in schools for less than 4 years. Data showing respondents work experiences is presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Social Work Practice Experience of Survey Participants* ( $n=125$ )

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Years practicing social work		
	0-3	15 (12%)
	4-8	23 (18%)
	9-15	33 (26%)
	16 or more	54 (43%)
Years practicing social work in schools		
	0-3	34 (27%)
	4-8	17 (14%)
	9-15	33 (26%)
	16 or more	41 (33%)

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**Positions.** Items 7 through 15 of the survey asked participants to describe various aspects of their position. For most questions respondents provided a variety of answers showing a fairly even split between urban, suburban and rural settings, general and special education funding sources, and working with all ages from pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This data is presented below in Table 2.

There were two notable exceptions to this variety. The first was item number 8, in



which a significant majority (74%) of respondents ( $n=93$ ) reported working at only one building, 21% ( $n=26$ ) of respondents serving 2-4 buildings, and 5% ( $n=6$ ) reported serving 5 or more buildings. The second exception was item number 14 which showed that even though 60% ( $n=75$ ) of respondents work with other social workers, and 66% ( $n=82$ ) were at least somewhat trained or oriented to their position by a social worker, only 16% ( $n=20$ ) of respondents reported that their supervisor was a social worker.

Table 2

*Minnesota School Social Work Positions* (n=125)

Students served	
<51	10 (8%)
51-150	38 (30%)
151-300	13 (10%)
301-500	24 (19%)
>500	40 (32%)
Buildings served	
1	93 (74%)
2	18 (14%)
3	7 (6%)
4	1 (1%)
5 or more	6 (5%)
Ages or grade levels served	
Early Childhood (Pre-K)	25 (20%)
Elementary (K-5 <sup>th</sup> grade)	81 (65%)
Middle School (6 <sup>th</sup> - 8 <sup>th</sup> grade)	60 (48%)
High School (9 <sup>th</sup> - 12 <sup>th</sup> grade)	56 (45%)
Funding source	
General Education	15 (12%)
Mostly General Education	23 (18%)
About Half General Education and Half Special Education	21 (17%)
Mostly Special Education	30 (24%)
Special Education	14 (11%)
School(s) setting(s)	
Urban	36 (29%)
Urban and Suburban	9 (7%)
Suburban	22 (18%)
Suburban and Rural	18 (14%)
Rural	38 (30%)
Students receiving free or reduced price lunch	
>15%	13 (10%)
15-40%	25 (20%)
41-60%	31 (33%)
61-80%	16 (13%)
>80%	29 (23%)
Working with other social workers	
Yes	75 (60%)
No	50 (40%)
Supervised by a social worker	
Yes	20 (16%)
No	104 (84%)
Trained or oriented to position by a social worker	
Yes	32 (26%)
Somewhat	50 (40%)
No	43 (34%)

**Job task endorsement.** Survey item number 16 asked respondents to endorse specific job tasks for which they are responsible in their current position. Their responses are presented below in table 3. There were 21 specific listed job tasks as well as an option for “Other” with a fill-in-the-blank. All 21 of the listed job tasks were endorsed by at least some respondents, with “Medication” responsibilities being the least widely endorsed at 9% ( $n=11$ ) and “Group Work”, “Counseling,” “Family Outreach,” “Reporting,” and “Crisis Intervention” being the most widely endorsed job tasks. 39 respondents endorsed the “Other” category. The most common responses in this category were related to homelessness, behavior interventions, teaching social skills and other subjects in a classroom setting, 504 plan coordination responsibilities, and work on and with various teams and committees in their school and district. Job task endorsement responses are presented in table 3.

Table 3

<i>Job Task Endorsement (n=124)</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Group work	118 (95%)	6 (5%)
Counseling	119 (96%)	5 (4%)
Case management	56 (45%)	67 (55%)
Training other staff	88 (71%)	36 (29%)
Attendance monitoring	88 (72%)	35 (28%)
Transportation	40 (33%)	83 (67%)
Medication	11 (9%)	112 (91)
Administrative responsibilities	76 (62%)	47 (38%)
Policy advocacy	66 (53%)	58 (47%)
Family outreach	120 (97%)	4 (3%)
Truancy	97 (78%)	27 (22%)
Community outreach	103 (83%)	21 (17%)
Education	107 (86%)	17 (14%)
Reporting	121 (98%)	3 (2%)
Due process	77 (63%)	46 (37%)
Billing	25 (20%)	98 (80%)
Testing/evaluations	55 (48%)	68 (52%)
Crisis interventions	122 (98%)	2 (2%)
Policy making	46 (37%)	78 (63%)
Managing staff	26 (21%)	97 (79%)
Working with 3 <sup>rd</sup> party or outside organizations	93 (75%)	31 (25%)
Other	39 (44%)	49 (56%)

**Role-confusion likert scales.** Item number 17 on the survey was a likert scale type item that asked respondents to endorse whichever response they found most appropriate in response to a series of statements related to role-confusion. The response options were “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” “Neither Agree nor Disagree,” “Agree,” and “Strongly Agree.” Responses to item number 17 are presented in Table 4.

Respondents were much more likely to report that they understood their own professional roles and responsibilities than they were to report that their supervisors understood them, and were even less likely to agree that their coworkers understood the social workers roles and responsibilities. Notably, even though only 4 respondents strongly agreed with the statement number 16, “I have enough time to complete my tasks” 57 strongly agreed with statement number 15 “I am effective at my job” and 72 strongly agreed with statement number 14, “I like my job.”

Additionally, while only 33% ( $n=39$ ) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statement number 17, “People have realistic expectations of me” 58% ( $n=71$ ) Agreed or strongly agreed with statement number 18, which read “I am able to meet expectations.”

Table 4

*Role-confusion Likert Items*

(n=123)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have a clear understanding of my job's roles.	3 (2%)	3 (2%)	8 (7%)	49 (40%)	60 (49%)
I have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.	1 (1%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	40 (33%)	79 (64%)
My supervisor has a clear understanding of my job's roles.	3 (2%)	19 (16%)	17 (14%)	66 (54%)	17 (14%)
My supervisor has a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.	8 (7%)	20 (16%)	17 (14%)	57 (46%)	21 (17%)
My coworkers have a clear understanding of my job's roles.	6 (5%)	23 (19%)	26 (21%)	52 (42%)	16 (13%)
My coworkers have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.	8 (7%)	26 (21%)	29 (24%)	44 (36%)	16 (13%)
State and local policy makers have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.	9 (7%)	38 (31%)	46 (38%)	28 (23%)	1 (1%)
My role within the school is clear.	3 (2%)	22 (18%)	27 (22%)	49 (40%)	20 (17%)
Everyone at school knows what I do.	7 (6%)	32 (26%)	28 (23%)	38 (31%)	17 (14%)
My coworkers understand what social workers do.	3 (2%)	21 (17%)	31 (25%)	53 (43%)	14 (11%)
My training and skill set are being fully and appropriately utilized.	6 (5%)	23 (19%)	14 (12%)	52 (42%)	24 (20%)
I am treated more like a teacher than like a social worker.	18 (16%)	57 (47%)	25 (20%)	16 (13%)	6 (5%)
My professional evaluation metrics are appropriate to my position.	9 (8%)	28 (24%)	24 (20%)	41 (35%)	16 (14%)
I like my job.	1 (1%)	2 (2%)	4 (4%)	32 (29%)	72 (65%)
I am effective at my job.	1 (1%)	4 (3%)	6 (5%)	50 (42%)	57 (48%)
I have enough time to complete my tasks.	26 (21%)	55 (45%)	15 (12%)	22 (18%)	4 (3%)
People have realistic expectations of me.	4 (3%)	40 (33%)	39 (32%)	34 (28%)	5 (4%)
I am able to meet expectations.	1 (1%)	19 (16%)	31 (25%)	52 (43%)	19 (16%)

**Short answer questions.** The final three items of the survey were short answer questions regarding role-confusion and the school as a host setting for social work.

Significantly fewer (n=101) participants chose to complete these questions.

**First question.** The first question, survey item number 18, asked, “Are there any barriers that contribute to the lack of clarity regarding the roles of school social workers? If so, what are they?” Only 12% (n=12) of the responses clearly stated yes or no to the

first part of the question with 7% ( $n=7$ ) answering “Yes” and 5% ( $n=5$ ) “No.” However, because most of the responses directly described these barriers without answering yes or no, it can be reasonably inferred that most respondents did in fact believe that there are barriers to role clarity for school social workers.

*Commonly identified barriers.* The most commonly identified barriers were: limited time; too much work; variety in practice, roles, and responsibilities between different school social workers, schools, districts, and school years; limited budgets; an absence of leadership or advocacy for role clarity at the district or policy making level; being in a new position (the first time a school has had a social worker on staff); being the only social worker on staff at a single school or district; and often having their roles or responsibilities confused with those of teachers, administrators, psychologists, county workers, or, most often, with school counselors.

*Second question.* The second short answer question, survey item number 19, asked “Do you think that role-confusion might be related to the school setting? If so how?” 50% ( $n=51$ ) specified “yes” and 9% ( $n=10$ ) specified “no” although, again, many respondents referred directly to this relationship, and so an affirmative response can be reasonably inferred in most of these responses.

*Common themes.* Among those who answered “no” several noted that such role-confusion is to be expected in any host, or multi-disciplinary setting, and so is not unique to the school setting. There were a number of common themes among the affirmative responses, several of which were also prevalent in responses to the first short answer question, most notably that social workers are often treated like teachers, administrators, or counselors; and that roles can be very different from year to year, or between different

programs, schools, or districts.

Other common themes were: the focus on academics rather than on mental health; and school social workers' inclusion in teachers' unions and on teachers' union contracts. Interestingly, the phrases “wear many different hats” and “be a team player” appeared in a number of the affirmative responses.

**Third question.** Survey item number 20 was the final short answer question. It asked “Does role-confusion effect how you do your work? If so how?” On this item 25% ( $n=24$ ) of respondents directly answered “yes” and 24% ( $n=24$ ) directly answered “no.” As with the other short answer questions, most responses that did not specify yes or no seemed to describe the ways in which role-confusion effected how respondents practiced, and so an affirmative response can be reasonably inferred.

*Common themes.* The most commonly expressed theme in responses to this question was the need for school social workers to explain their role to their coworkers very frequently and directly. Interestingly, this theme was present in both affirmative and negative responses to the question. Many respondents noted that clarifying their role is in fact a part of their job. Some said that this prevents role-confusion from effecting how they do their work, while others said that simply needing to do this effects how they do their work.

A common theme among those who said that role-confusion does affect how they do their work was the feeling of doing, or being pressured to do jobs or tasks outside of their role as a school social worker. Many of those who reported that role-confusion does not affect how they did their work, noted that role-confusion did effect their work in the past, but because they have been in the same position for several years, it has stopped

effecting how they do their work. Some reported that they have sufficiently clarified or explained their role to other staff, while some reported changing or adapting their practice to fit the needs and expectations of their setting.

### **Inferential Statistics**

Inferential statistics were used to more closely examine the data and to explore possible relationships between respondents' answers to different survey items. The statistics used were chi-square, using nominal data, and ordinal data that was simplified to better fit the statistical model.

**Chi-squares.** Chi-squares were used to explore possible relationships between job setting demographic information and role-confusion likert scale responses. Ordinal data from likert scale items was simplified to create nominal data for more useful and readable analysis by chi-square. In order to simplify ordinal likert data the responses “strongly agree” and “agree” were combined, as were the responses “strongly disagree” and “disagree” and responses of “neither agree not disagree” were excluded from analysis. The final chi-square analysis explored the relationship between two ordinal variables, likert items 1 and 15. In this case, data from both items was simplified to combine strongly agree with agree, and strongly disagree with disagree.

***The supervisor.*** Table 5 shows the chi-square analysis of responses to survey item number 14, “Is your supervisor a social worker?” (Yes-No) and responses to survey item number 17 part 3 “My supervisor has a clear understanding of my job's roles.” (Strongly/Agree-Strongly/Disagree) and part 4, “My supervisor has a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.” (Strongly/Agree-Strongly/Disagree).

This study has two null hypotheses: there is a relationship between whether or not



a school social worker is supervised by a social worker, and whether they believe that their supervisor understands their jobs roles and there is a relationship between whether or not a school social worker is supervised by a social worker, and whether they believe that their supervisor understands their professional responsibilities.

Table 6 shows the p-values for this study. The p-value for the chi-square of the variables supervisor is a social worker and supervisor understands my jobs roles is 0.17, and the p-value of the variables supervisor is a social worker and supervisor understands my professional responsibilities is 0.13. Because the p-values are greater than 0.05 the null hypotheses are not rejected, the research hypothesis that there is a relationship between whether a school social worker is supervised by a social worker and how clearly their supervisor understands their jobs roles and professional responsibilities is not supported by this research.

*Yes.* 70% ( $n=14$ ) of respondents who reported that their supervisor was a social worker selected Strongly Agree or Agree and 10% ( $n=2$ ) selected Strongly Disagree or Disagree in response to the statement “My supervisor has a clear understanding of my job's roles.” 75% ( $n=15$ ) of this group agreed or strongly agreed, and 10% ( $n=2$ ) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “My supervisor has a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities. It should be noted that only 16% ( $n=20$ ) reported that their supervisor was a social worker.

*No.* Among the 84% ( $n=104$ ) of respondents who reported that their supervisor was not a social worker, 65% ( $n=68$ ) agreed or strongly agreed, and 19% ( $n=20$ ) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “My supervisor has a clear understanding of my job's roles.” 60% ( $n=62$ ) of those who did not report being

supervised by a social worker agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My supervisor has a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.” 25% (n=26) of this group disagreed with that statement.

Table 5  
*Association Between Having a Social Worker as a Supervisor and Feeling that One’s Supervisor Understands Their Professional Roles and Responsibilities*

	Strongly disagree and disagree	Strongly agree and agree
	My supervisor has a clear understanding of my job's roles	
Supervisor is a social worker (n=20)	2 (10%)	14 (70%)
Supervisor is not a social worker (n=104)	20 (19%)	68 (65%)
	My supervisor has a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities	
Supervisor is a social worker (n=20)	2 (10%)	15 (75%)
Supervisor is not a social worker (n=104)	26 (25%)	62 (60%)

Table 6  
*P-Value Association*

	Chi-Square	P-Value
My supervisor has a clear understanding of my job's roles	6.49	0.17
My supervisor has a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities	7.05	0.13

**The coworkers.** Table 7 shows the chi-square analysis of responses to survey item number 13, “Do you work with other social workers?” (Yes-No) and responses to survey item number 17 part 5 “My coworkers have a clear understanding of my job's roles.” (Strongly/Agree-Strongly/Disagree) and part 6, “My coworkers have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.” (Strongly/Agree-Strongly/Disagree).

This study has two null hypotheses: there is a relationship between whether or not a school social worker works with other social workers, and whether they believe that

their coworkers understand their jobs roles and there is a relationship between whether or not a school social worker works with other social workers, and whether they believe that their coworkers understand their professional responsibilities.

Table 8 shows the p-values for this study. The p-value for the chi-square of the variables works with other social workers and coworkers understand my jobs roles is 0.50, and the p-value of the variables works with other social workers and coworkers understand my professional responsibilities is 0.44. Because the p-values are greater than 0.05 the null hypotheses is not rejected, the research hypothesis that there is a relationship between whether a school social worker is works with other social workers and how clearly their coworkers understand their jobs roles and professional responsibilities is not supported by this research.

*Yes.* 60% ( $n=45$ ) of respondents who reported working with other social workers selected Strongly Agree or Agree and 20% ( $n=15$ ) selected Strongly Disagree or Disagree in response to the statement “My coworkers have a clear understanding of my job's roles.” 55% ( $n=41$ ) of this group agreed or strongly agreed, and 24% ( $n=18$ ) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “My coworkers have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.

*No.* Among respondents who reported not working with other social workers, 46% ( $n=23$ ) agreed or strongly agreed, and 28% ( $n=14$ ) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “My coworkers have a clear understanding of my job's roles.” 38% ( $n=19$ ) of those who did not report being working with other social workers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My coworkers have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.” 32% ( $n=16$ ) of this group disagreed with that statement.

***Role-clarity and professional efficacy.*** Table 9 presents the chi-square analysis of survey item number 17, parts 1, “I have a clear understanding of my job's roles” (Strongly/Agree-Strongly/Disagree) and 15 “I am effective at my job” (Strongly/Agree-Strongly/Disagree). The null hypothesis of this study is: there is a relationship between a school social worker's understanding of their job's roles and how effective they feel at that job.

Table 10 shows the chi-square and p-value for this study. The p-value of these variables is 0.00, and because it is lower than 0.05, this research does support the null hypothesis, and the research hypothesis that there is a relationship between how well a school social worker understands their job's role, and how effective they feel they are in that job.

Table 7  
*Association Between Working with other social workers and Feeling that One's Coworkers Understand Their Professional Roles and Responsibilities*

	Strongly disagree and disagree	Strongly agree and agree
	My coworkers have a clear understanding of my job's roles	
Works with other social workers (n=75)	15 (20%)	45 (60%)
Does not work with other social workers (n=50)	14 (28%)	23 (46%)
	My coworkers have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities	
Works with other social workers (n=75)	18 (24%)	41 (55%)
Does not work with other social workers (n=50)	16 (32%)	19 (38%)

Table 8  
*P-Value Association*

	Chi-Square	P-Value
My coworkers have a clear understanding of my job's roles	3.33	0.50
My coworkers have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities	3.75	0.44

Table 9  
*Association Between Having a Clear understanding of One's Job's Roles and Feeling that One is Effective at their job*

I am effective at my job	Strongly disagree and disagree	Strongly agree and agree
	I have a strong understanding of my job's roles	
Strongly disagree or disagree (n=5)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)
Strongly agree or agree (n=107)	5 (4%)	98 (83%)

Table 10  
*P-Value Association*

	Chi-Square	P-Value
My coworkers have a clear understanding of my job's roles	59.36	0.00

## **Discussion**

This study sought to explore the extent and effects of role-confusion among school social workers in Minnesota, and further to understand what factors may be associated with social worker role-confusion in the school setting. The research findings show that this is a very complex issue, and that while relatively few social workers report any confusion about their own roles and professional responsibilities, many school social workers report negative effects of role-confusion in their daily practice. This discussion will further explore ways in which this research is consistent with, or different from previous research on the topic, as well as outlining several shortcomings and limitations of this study and presenting some ideas for future research related to social worker role-confusion in the school setting.

### **Role-confusion is Widespread**

One of the most ubiquitous claims of prior research was that role-confusion was widespread among school social workers (Allen-Meares, 1994; Grisset, 2008; Peckover, et al., 2013), with one study reporting that “most school social workers reported some significant levels of role-confusion” (Grisset, 2008). This study may seem to contradict this claim, as 89% ( $n=109$ ) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I have a clear understanding of my job's roles.” and 97% ( $n=119$ ) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities.”

While these responses do indicate that school social workers in Minnesota are

quite clear on their professional roles and responsibilities, respondents were much less likely to agree or strongly agree that their supervisors and coworkers have such a clear understanding. Respondents spoke to this lack of understanding in the short answer section, as one respondent pointed out “there is not clear role distinction between social workers, school psychologists, and counselors. Because of this, school personnel tends to lump us all together” and another referred to “Teachers misconception of our roles or even principals not understanding our role.”

In fact, even those who reported that role-confusion was not a factor in their work described the lengths that they have to go to in order to prevent it from becoming a factor, as one respondent put it “I have taken clarifying my role very seriously. I do it in every multidisciplinary interaction I have.” Therefore, although this research does not reflect prior research that school social workers themselves are often confused about their own role, it does reflect the findings of previous studies that differences of understanding, and confusion about the role of school social workers between school social workers, teachers, supervisors, and administrators is widespread and can affect the work that school social workers do.

While this research seems to support previous findings that role-confusion is widespread, more research is needed to better understand how other school personnel and stakeholders in the community understand and conceive of the role of a school social worker. Better understanding how different groups understand the role of school social workers will help to understand how that role is so often misunderstood.

**Role-confusion negatively effects those experiencing it.** The negative effects of role-confusion were also widely endorsed in previous research (Allen-Meares, 1994; Grisset, 2008; Peckover, et al., 2013), with one study finding that “role-confusion is highly correlated with decreased levels of professional efficacy.” (Grisset, 2008). This assertion was supported by the findings of this research. As demonstrated in table 9, this study found a very strong association between a social workers understanding of their job's roles and their feeling that they were effective in that job. Additionally, while very few respondents reported confusion about their job's roles and responsibilities, many respondents spoke extensively about ways in which role-confusion effects and impedes their ability to do their work in the short answer sections. While some promising research points to some protective factors for role-confusion in social work (Jaskyte, 2005), more research is needed to better understand and develop protective strategies to reduce role-confusion among school social workers specifically.

**Barriers associated with role-confusion.** Previous research identified a number of barriers to professional efficacy that were strongly associated with role-confusion among school social workers (Allen-Meares, 1994; Grisset, 2008; Peckover, et al. 2013; Teasley, et al., 2012), the most notable of these being “time, caseloads, funding/resources, school staff (teachers/administrators/other professionals), parents and families, and school and school district policies” (Teasley, et al., 2012) and general confusion among the colleagues of school social workers regarding the difference between “school social worker[s], school psychologist[s], and education consultant[s]” (Peckover, et al., 2013).

These barriers were also seen in this research, with 66% ( $n=81$ ) of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement “I have enough time to complete



my tasks” and extensive reports of confusion at schools between the roles of school social workers, school psychologists and school counselors. In this way the findings of this study align with those of previous studies on the topic. Respondents also referred to this in the short answer section, saying things like “Too few SSW, large numbers of students to serve”, “too many students in my caseload”, and “I have 5 schools to myself, sometimes I don't feel I can be effective. It gives me less time with staff and students at each site to assist with ongoing issues.”

A frequently commented upon effect of role-confusion was doing, or feeling pressured to take on non-social work roles or tasks at school. This finding was found in previous research into the topic, (Jaskyte, 2005; Peckover, et al., 2013) and it appears to be both widespread, as many respondents referred to it in the short answer portion of the survey, and effective, as one respondent reported, “most days I don't know what my role is until I get to the school to see what needs to be done.” and another stated that “there are simply not enough staff to meet all of the diverse student needs, so everyone ends up being spread very thin and jumping into any/all roles that they can in a moment out of personal integrity rather than realistic or reasonable role delineation.”

Though school social workers seem to be very aware of these barriers, it is unclear whether or not their supervisors and coworkers are aware of them. A better understanding of how well other school personnel understand these barriers will be useful in better understand the expectations that are placed on school social workers.

***Supervision and coworkers.*** Previous research suggested an association between non-social work supervision and role-confusion, as well as confusion associated with non-social work colleagues. It was noted that role-confusion is often related to

professional or philosophical difference between a professional and their supervisor(s) (Jaskyte, 2005; Rizzo, et al, 1970; Zawacki, 1963) and that because school social workers practice alongside non-social workers role-confusion can be especially prevalent in the public school setting, where “demands from the system of public education have often trumped social work theory, confining the practice of social work to individual interventions.” (Peckover, Vasquez, Van Housen, Saunders, & Allen, 2013). Allen-Meares (1994) pointed out that Many school social workers are not supervised by social workers, and indeed, this research found that only 16% ( $n=20$ ) of respondents were supervised by social workers.

However, as Tables 6 and 8 show, p-values for the chi-square analysis of role-confusion with non-social work supervision, and with non-social work colleagues were greater than 0.05, meaning that this research does not support a relationship between these variables. That said, the effects of not having social workers in supervisory positions, and or having coworkers who do not understand the social work role, was very widely discussed in the short answer portion of the survey. Respondents commented on a range of issues associated with supervisors, administrators and other staff, many of which were well explored in previous research.

One respondent reported “I have multiple supervisors who have differing ideas about my role. We are frequently asked to serve in roles that are not related to our discipline such as, bus duty, lunch duty, in-school suspension halls.” This is a clear account of multiple chains of command, a factor long known to contribute to role-confusion (Zawacki, 1963).

Further research into how to redress or ameliorate misconceptions of the roles and

responsibilities of school social workers will be an important step in removing the barriers associated with role-confusion. Future research into how to clarify the roles and responsibilities of school social workers for other school personnel would be most helpful.

***The importance of academics.*** Cawood's 2010 study reported on the common occurrence of “academics taking priority over the need to address the behavioral objectives of students” in a school setting, and respondents in this study also picked up on this theme, noting that “there are a lot of professionals in one building whose main tasks involve teaching and behavior management. Social workers can get pulled toward these host environment tasks”, “It has been a challenge to "fit" school social work into the "teacher" mode/role.”, and “the focus in the building is on how to achieve better educational outcomes.” The relative importance of academics and mental health are clearly a concern for many school social workers. Better understand of how school social workers and other school personnel prioritize these factors would be helpful in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of school social workers.

***Variety in school social work roles.*** One prominent theme that was not found in previous research was the variety on school social work roles. Respondents reported that one possible barrier to role-clarity in school social work is the difficulty of actually defining the role. This was often attributed to the variety of roles that school social workers take on. These roles are seen to be very different between different programs, schools, districts, and even from one school year to the next. One respondent wrote, “School social work looks different in school buildings and in every school district. Even depending on what grades you work with” and another said that “It's very different from

district to district so there is not one clear place to look to determine what the role of a school social worker is.”

It is clear that there is a great deal of variety among school social workers and school social work positions. Understand how school social workers define their roles might be helpful in identifying the common roles and responsibilities that would be necessary in order to better craft a cohesive definition for the roles of social workers in schools.

**Finding a clear role.** Despite this disparity in school social work roles across the state, and all of these barriers to role-clarity for school social workers, the significant majority of respondents reported having a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and a slimmer majority also reported that their supervisors and coworkers have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. One possible reason for this is that social workers reported gaining clarity during their time in a role. When asked if role-confusion effected their work, one respondent wrote, “not at this point in my career--it did when I began” suggesting, as others did, that they have been able to achieve some level of role clarity over the years. This seems to contradict Grisset's (2008) that role-confusion actually increases the longer a school social work stays in a role. Respondents explained this in two different ways.

**Clarifying one's role.** Several respondents wrote about the lengths to which they have gone to clarify their role for those around them, saying “Preventing role-confusion is essential in my daily work. In a multidisciplinary setting, role clarification is my job”, “I will clarify my role if somebody states something that does not fit in my role”, and “I do a lot of educating of coworkers.” A few also discussed the challenges of working in a

new setting, or with new staff who have not yet been educated about what role a school social worker plays in a given school setting. This of course poses the familiar challenge of time to the school social workers, as one said “we need to take additional time to educate other professionals within our school district.”

*Adapting one's role.* Some respondents also talked about how they have changed their own roles and expectations since taking a position, noting that this has helped them to achieve greater role clarity. One respondent wrote that “over time and needs within the school and counseling department, my roles expanded to include the academic needs of the students because of working with the person in whole. This expansion evolved in to becoming more of a school counselor based on changes in job expectations.”

#### **Role-confusion is inherent to school social work.**

Several previous studies posited that role-confusion is actually inherent and intractably connected to school social work. (Grissett, 2008; Phillippo & Blosser, 2013; Richard & Sosa, 2014), and though most respondents report having a clear understanding of their professional roles and responsibilities, it seems that not everyone shares that understanding.

Furthermore, because the roles and responsibilities that school social workers take on are so diverse, it may be impossible to actually define what a school social work role is, meaning that presenting a clear picture for new staff of what it means to be a school social worker, could very well be impossible. As such, this research seems to support previous findings that “Role ambiguity... is inherent to school social work practice, as the school social worker operates within a host setting (an organization whose mission is defined by someone other than a social worker) that often does not understand the role,

skills, and knowledge of a social worker.” (Grissett, 2008)

In fact, the school social workers who took this survey seem happy with this situation. They speak openly about how others do not understand their role or their perspective, and yet 94% ( $n=104$ ) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I like my job.” and 93% ( $n=107$ ) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I am effective at my job.” Earlier findings that a lack of understanding is essential to the nature of the school setting where social workers are utilized to provide a perspective and skill-set that is different from other professionals in the academic setting (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013; Richard & Sosa, 2014) are supported by this research.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study has one important strength, as well as a four noteworthy limitations.

**Strengths.** The greatest strength of this survey is its scale. As quantitative research, this study had the opportunity to survey a very large group of school social workers. Additionally, a surprisingly high response rate provided much more robust data, meaning that the statistics presented in this research are much more reflective of MSSWA members than smaller studies. For this reason this survey accurately reflects the perceptions of MSSWA members and is generalizable to all MSSWA member school social workers in the state.

**Limitations.** The first limitation of this survey is that it was restricted to MSSWA members. Because the survey is tailored, and limited to, school social workers in Minnesota, results are not generalizable outside of the state. That said, role-confusion among school social workers has been identified as a national phenomenon (Cawood, 2010; Grissett, 2008; Peckover et al., 2013; Teasley et al., 2012) and while results of this

survey may not be directly applicable to school social workers outside of Minnesota, they can shed some light on the phenomenon of role-confusion on a larger scale.

A second limitation is that the study was restricted to social workers. While this study benefits by surveying all MSSWA members across Minnesota, it is also limited to school social workers, and as such does not reflect perceptions of other professionals and stakeholders in the school systems. Thirdly, school social workers who are not members of MSSWA were not included in this study. Understanding how school social workers who are less connected to professional organizations such as MSSWA might help to better understand the role-confusion associated with school social work. Furthermore, while findings accurately reflect the perceptions of school social workers, they do not have the advantage of considering how the profession of school social work is viewed by teachers, administrators, parents, or other community members.

The fourth limitation of this survey is in the statistics presented. While the descriptive statistics and chi squares are useful understanding role-confusion among school social workers, there are a huge number of analyses possible within this data set. Further analysis of the data that was collected would be extremely helpful in better understanding role-confusion among MSSWA members.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This research mostly fits with earlier research on the subject of role-confusion among school social workers, but raises new questions on that topic. Because school social work is such a diverse field, it may in fact be impossible to clearly define the roles or responsibilities of school social work, that said, better understanding the various roles and responsibilities that social workers take on would be invaluable in understanding

school social work as a field and better defining it for social school social workers as well as their supervisors and coworkers.

Additionally, little is understood about how much of a social worker's role is determined by their social work background and training, how much is informed by their school setting, and how much is self-determined through their own ability to shape the parameters of their position. School social workers clearly play an active role in determining their own roles within a school, and learning what aspects of school social work practice are considered to be most important, most rewarding, or most desirable could further illuminate the field of school social work.

Finally, though this research explored how school social workers think their supervisors and coworkers understand their roles and responsibilities, it could be useful to directly explore the perceptions of these groups. A survey of teachers, principals, administrators, or other school staff investigating how others view the roles and responsibilities of a school social worker could be useful in order to better understand how the roles and responsibilities of a given social worker or social work position are defined.

### **Implications for Clinical Practice**

This research presents two major implications for clinical practice. These are related to how school social workers can use this research, and to how principals and supervisors can use this research.

**How school social workers can use this research.** The most important thing for school social workers to take away from this research is that they are not alone. Role-confusion, and the frustrations and barriers that are associated with it are widespread, and



MSSWA members across Minnesota experience them. They should also recognize the importance that so many respondents place on the task of clarifying their role, some going so far as to identify it as a part of their job. Because school social workers and school social work positions are so diverse, it is incumbent upon school social workers to take the lead on clarifying their own position for their coworkers. Helping one's coworkers to understand their role may help the social worker to better understand their own role.

**How principals and supervisors can use this research.** While school social workers do a great deal to clarify their own roles and responsibilities within a school, they need support in this from their principals and supervisors. It is somewhat alarming that so many school social workers seem have taken on the task of clarifying their own role for their coworkers. Principals and supervisors of school social workers can, and should, do more to help school social workers to clarify their role to teachers, behavior staff, administrators, and other professionals in the school.

## **Conclusion**

Role-confusion is clearly a widespread and detrimental concern for school social workers in Minnesota, and better understanding how school social workers and those they work with understand the field of school social work will be essential to ensuring quality school social work practice in the state. This research shows that some form of role-confusion is prevalent in Minnesota, and that it is detrimental to those who experience it, however, there is some evidence to suggest that role-confusion is not only present, but also necessary to school social work. Better understanding the roles and responsibilities of school social workers will help to empower school social workers to

do the best work that they can do, but more research will be needed in order to understand how best to implement protective measures in order to reduce role-confusion among school social workers in Minnesota.

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## Appendix A

### *Letter of Introduction to Survey Participants*

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Hello!

My name is Samuel Pepe, I am an MSW student at the School of Social Work at the Universities of St. Catherine and St. Thomas, and I would like to invite you to participate in a survey about Role-Confusion among School Social Workers like yourself.

You were selected to receive this invitation because you are a member of the Minnesota School Social Workers Association. If you are a currently practicing school social worker in the state of Minnesota you are eligible to participate in this study. This short survey is quick and easy, and your responses will be invaluable in helping to better understand the barriers to effective practice that school social workers may face in Minnesota today and will help me to complete this important graduation requirement so that I can be a school social worker like you!)

Thank you for your time and your consideration!

-Samuel Pepe

**Follow this link to the Survey:**

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:

XXXXXXXXXXXX

## Appendix B

### *Letter of Informed Consent to Survey Participants*

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You are invited to participate in a research study about professional role-confusion and role clarity among school social workers in Minnesota. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a school social worker who belongs to Minnesota School Social Work Association (MSSWA). You are eligible to participate in this study for the same reason. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Samuel Pepe. The research committee chair is Dr. Kari Fletcher, PhD, LICSW, of the St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas School of Social Work. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to investigate role-confusion in school social workers in Minnesota. Information gathered through my study will help to identify how role-confusion may impair professional efficacy, and how these limitations might be ameliorated. This research is being performed pursuant to the completion of my MSW degree this year.

**Procedures:** If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to complete an online survey. This survey will take you approximately 20 minutes using the online survey tool, Qualtrics. The results of your survey will be then be compiled by me. I will perform statistical analysis examining the outcomes of all surveys taken, and the summary of these findings discussed in the resulting study and presentation. This online survey has been distributed to all 1000+ members of the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA).

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:** This study presents no risks to you as a participant, and is completely anonymous. I appreciate the time commitment you, as a busy professional, will make in order to participate in a survey. I hope that you will feel the time you spend is worth it, and that participating in my study will give you the sense you are contributing to help support, advocate, and develop a greater sense of school resources available to schools and to school social workers in Minnesota.

**Privacy:** Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. To protect your anonymity, I will protect electronic information collected by this survey by storing the data under password protection using Qualtrics. Your identity will not be connected to your responses to this survey and you will not be identifiable in your responses.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include a Qualtrics data-set. All information you complete will no longer be identifiable after it has been submitted via Qualtrics. Because the data collected from this online survey will be de-identified upon submission, data will be retained indefinitely and consent forms will not be retained at all, as is standard practice used for such surveys. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Minneapolis Public Schools, St. Paul Public Schools, or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate, however because data collected by this survey will de-identified, you will not be able to withdraw from this survey after entering any information. Should you decide to stop after beginning the survey, you may skip a question or quit by exiting the survey at any point during the survey. Any information you do complete will be analyzed and applied; therefore, once you have submitted your data, there will be no way for you to withdraw from the study.

**Contacts and Questions:** My name is Samuel Pepe. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at XXXXXXXXXXXX, or on the phone at XXXXXXXXXXXX. You may also contact my faculty advisor and research committee chairperson, Kari Fletcher, at XXXXXXXXXXXX. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at XXXXXXXXXXXX with any questions or concerns.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read, and understand the above information. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age.

## Appendix C:

### *Questions used in Survey Questionnaire*

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**Inclusion Criteria:** These questions will determine your eligibility for inclusion in this study.

- Are you a licensed social worker? Y/N  
Are you currently employed by a public, or independent school or school district?  
Y/N  
Are you a member of the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA)?  
Y/N

**Demographic Information:** These questions will ask you about your self and your professional experience. This information will help us to better understand who is responding to this survey and to know more about where they are working.

- What degree do you hold? BSW, MSW, DSW, PhD  
What license do you hold? LSW, LCSW, LICSW  
How many years have you been practicing? 0-3, 4-8, 9-15, 16+  
How many have you been practicing in schools? 0-3, 4-8, 9-15, 16+  
How many students do you serve? <50, 50-150, 150-300, 300-500,  
>500  
How many buildings do you serve? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5+  
What age level do you serve? ECFE, K-5, MS, HS  
My position is funded by ... Gen. Ed. Only, Special Ed. Only,  
Mostly Gen. Ed., Mostly  
Special Ed. About half-and-half, Other  
My school(s) is/are ... Urban, Suburban, Rural, Urban and  
Suburban, Suburban and Rural  
About what proportion of your students receive free or reduced price lunch?  
>80% <15%, 15-40%, 41-60%, 60-80%,  
>80%  
I work with other social workers Y/N  
My supervisor is a social worker Y/N  
I was trained or orientated to my position by a social worker  
Y/N

**Job Task Endorsement, identify tasks that are a part of your job responsibilities:**

These questions will ask you to identify what specific job tasks you may identify as part of your professional responsibilities as a school social worker. Please check Y for any tasks that are a part of your work and N for any tasks that are not.

- group work Y/N  
counseling Y/N  
case management Y/N  
training other staff Y/N



attendance	Y/N
transportation	Y/N
medication	Y/N
administration	Y/N
advocacy	Y/N
family outreach	Y/N
truancy	Y/N
community outreach work-sites	Y/N
education	Y/N
reporting	Y/N
due process	Y/N
billing	Y/N
testing/evaluations	Y/N
crisis intervention	Y/N
training	Y/N
policy-making	Y/N
managing staff	Y/N
work with 3 <sup>rd</sup> party/outside organizations	Y/N
Other _____	Y/N

**Likert Scale Items:** These questions will ask you to endorse a range of opinions about your position as a school social worker. Please mark the response that most appropriately aligns with your own feelings about that statement using the following scale:  
1=Strongly Disagree - 2=Disagree - 3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree - 4=Agree - 5=Strongly Agree – N/A

- I have a clear understanding of my jobs' roles
- I have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities
- My supervisor has a clear understanding of my jobs' roles
- My supervisor has a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities
- My coworkers have a clear understanding of my jobs' roles
- My coworkers have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities
- State and local policy makers have a clear understanding of my professional responsibilities
- My role within the school is clear
- Everyone at school knows what I do
- My coworkers understand what social workers do
- My training and skill set are being fully and appropriately utilized
- I am treated more like a teacher than like a social worker
- My professional evaluation metrics are appropriate to my position
- I like my job
- I am effective at my job
- I have enough time to complete my tasks
- People have realistic expectations of me
- I am able to meet expectations

**Short Answer Questions:** In an effort to better understand how role-confusion may be present in your work, these questions will ask you to describe certain aspects of school social work that you may not have had an opportunity to more fully address in the preceding portions of this survey.

Does role-confusion effect how you do your work? Y/N  
If so, how?

Are there any barriers that contribute to lack of clarity regarding the roles of school social workers?

Y/N  
What are they?

Do you think that role-confusion might be related to the school setting? Y/N  
If so, how?

If you have any additional feedback or information, please use the following space.

## Appendix D:

### Online Resources for School Social Workers Experiencing Role-Confusion

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<u>Minnesota Resource</u>	<u>Internet Address</u>
Minnesota School Social Workers Association	<a href="http://www.msswa.org/">www.msswa.org/</a>
MSSWA Model for School Social Work	<a href="http://www.msswa.org/School-Social-Work-">http://www.msswa.org/School-Social-Work-</a>
National-Model Education Minnesota	<a href="http://www.educationminnesota.org/home">www.educationminnesota.org/home</a>
<u>National Resource</u>	<u>Internet Address</u>
National Association of Social Workers	<a href="http://www.socialworkers.org/">www.socialworkers.org/</a>
NASW School Social Work Standards	<a href="http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.sswaa.org/resource/resmgr/imported/naswschoolsocialworkstandards.pdf">http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.sswaa.org/resource/resmgr/imported/naswschoolsocialworkstandards.pdf</a>
School Social Work Associations of America	<a href="http://www.sswaa.org/">http://www.sswaa.org/</a>