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## Addressing Needs Among Students Affected by Domestic Violence: Social Workers' Perspectives

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Addressing Needs Among Students Affected by Domestic Violence:  
Social Workers' Perspectives

By

Kiah J. Dahlquist, BSW, LSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

Committee Members

Kari L. Fletcher, Ph.D., LICSW (Chair)  
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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 issue of domestic violence is of great concerns and the impact on children is becoming more widely acknowledged. This social issue contains many consequences and ramifications and a wider understanding of children's needs are emerging. With this growing recognition the importance to meet this children's needs have been identified. This qualitative study explored how school social workers support children impacted by domestic violence through six ( $n = 6$ ) semi-structured interviews. The findings, developed through an open-coding process, included the following themes: *interventions used by school social workers to support children experiencing domestic violence; barriers to supporting children affected; resources that help school social workers; and supports school social workers obtain when working with children affected by domestic violence*. These themes aligned with previous research but participants added depth and understanding to the previous research. More research needs to be performed in evaluating the effectiveness of interventions utilized to support children impacted by domestic violence.

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# **Addressing Needs Among Students Affected by Domestic Violence: Social Workers Perspectives**

## **Introduction**

Domestic violence is an issue of great concern for children causing negative consequences and ramifications. More than three million children witness domestic violence in the United States every year (Holt, 2015). Within that, one in 15 children are exposed to domestic violence, and 90% are eyewitnesses to this violence (Holt, 2015). Children who have experienced violence are much more likely to experience significant psychological problems short and long term (Childhood Domestic Violence Association, 2014). Domestic violence in childhood is directly correlated with difficulties learning; lower IQ scores, deficiencies in visual-motor skills and problems with attention and memory (Childhood Domestic Violence Association, 2014).

Although this reality is not new, more recently the concerns of children are becoming more widely acknowledged (David, LeBlanc, & Self-Brown, 2015). Children are beginning to be seen and identified with a growing recognition of their human rights. With this increasing awareness of children involved in domestic violence situations, a wider understanding of their needs is emerging (David et al., 2015). With this growing recognition, it is important for school social workers to be prepared to meet the increasing needs of children whose lives are affected by domestic violence.

Domestic violence is a social issue that may result in greatly impacting those involved with consequences and ramifications. Evidence suggests, that children who witness or experience domestic violence experience negative consequences impacting their development (Miller, Richardson, & Stanley, 2012). In addition, school age children involved in domestic violence are more likely to academically underachieve compared to

their non-impacted peers (David et al., 2015). Over time, the lasting effects and the consequences of domestic violence compound exponentially increase when unaddressed (David et al., 2015). With a problem so severe, it is important that these children are identified so their needs can be met (Miller et al., 2012).

Domestic violence has come to the forefront in the past 20 years, but more recently there has been profound progress in identifying children exposed to domestic violence (Holt, 2015). An understanding of the behaviors displayed by children has improved in order to help in identifying any concerns so that appropriate action is taken. Early identification and the awareness of a child's potential problem have addressed earlier help and support (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). The significance of early identification is essential because research shows that there is a reluctance of children to disclose information about abuse to anyone (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). Barriers to disclosure and the impact that it can have on a child stresses the importance of responding quickly to any potential situation so that children are safe and their needs are met.

With the complexity of domestic violence, response is required to ensure the needs of all those affected are met. Research has found that children and families require a supportive and safe environment so that the issue of domestic violence can be discussed (Miller et al., 2012). Support comes from multiple sources revealing a strong importance of developing a multi-disciplinary response to ensure effective action for those affected by domestic violence (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). Children can easily get lost and become unrecognized in the issue of domestic violence, which is why it is important for school social workers to intervene and help safeguard children sooner and more effectively



With the growing recognition of children needing to be safeguarded, school social workers hold a significant role for students who are affected by domestic violence. School social workers are typically the first point of contact in a school for all potential domestic violence situations by consulting and connecting with teachers and other school personnel (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). The main role of a social worker is to support students so that they can succeed academically, socially and emotionally (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). School social workers provide preventative and responsive interventions to the needs of students affected by domestic violence. Social workers are an on-going support person to the child by advocating for their best interest.

In light of paucity of research studies exploring interventions for students impacted by domestic violence; this study attempts to fill that gap. The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine how school social workers best support children impacted by domestic violence.

## Literature Review

This study explores how school social workers best support children impacted by domestic violence. Throughout this process it will be crucial to gain an understanding of domestic violence and why meeting the needs of student affected is vital. This literature review is comprised of five sections: (1) effects of domestic violence; (2) the importance of early identification; (3) opportunities for disclosure; (4) the response to children affected by domestic violence; and (5) the importance of the school setting. These sections are explored from previous research and will provide insight into these issues.

### Definition of Terms

The terms domestic abuse/violence, affected child, and school social worker are all terms used throughout the research literature. These will be used throughout the course of the study. Researchers and learners alike may come to this study with their own preconceptions of how to define each of these terms. Therefore, these terms will be defined for the purpose of maintaining a sense of clarity throughout this study.

**Domestic abuse/violence.** Holt and colleagues (2015) have defined domestic violence as follows:

Domestic abuse, also referred to as domestic violence, is a pattern of dominating, forceful, controlling, and threatening behavior that encompasses physical, emotional, psychological, economic, and sexual abuse. Violence occurs as an effective means of controlling and dominating the other person. Domestic violence often creates a cycle of abuse during which tensions rise and an act of violence is committed. The ramifications of a violent relationship are numerous and severe and may leave a victim trapped in the cycle of abuse. Domestic violence can take place regardless of gender, age, or sexuality. For the purpose of this study and maintaining a sense of consistency, the term “domestic violence” will most commonly be used to describe interpersonal violence between a domestic relationship. (p. 8)

**Affected Child.** Affected child is used to describe children known to, or expected to, experience domestic violence (Holt, 2015). Anyone under the age of 18 can be an affected child regardless of age, sexual orientation, race, culture, religion or marital status (Holt, 2015). Affected children can come from all socioeconomic backgrounds and educational levels (Holt, 2015). Domestic violence not only affects those who are abused, but also has a substantial effect on family members, friends, co-workers, other witnesses, and the community at large (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). For the purpose of this study and providing a sense of consistency, the term “affected child” will most frequently be referred to someone who has witnessed abuse or has been affected first-hand by harm or violence.

**School Social Worker.** School social workers hold a significant role for students who are affected by domestic violence. The main role of a school social worker is supporting students and families so that students can succeed academically, socially and emotionally (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). The school social worker is typically the first point of contact in the school for all potential domestic violence situations and holds the role of an on-going support person to the child. As an advocate for the child, school social workers provide preventative and responsive interventions to the students needs (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). School social workers are an integral part of a team within the school setting collaborating for the best interest of the child. For the purpose of this study the role of a school social worker is mentioned to provide a clear and consistent understanding.

## **Statistics and Context, Prevalence of Problem**

The reality of domestic violence is not new and is becoming increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. It is no longer a hidden phenomenon that is not recognized or accepted as a societal problem out of the public eye. The social problem of domestic violence has come to the forefront in the past few decades and is now seen as a public issue (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). The concern of children living with and experiencing domestic violence is increasing and becoming an acknowledged issue. Children living in violent homes are beginning to be seen and recognized, and their lives are affected as a consequence of experiencing domestic violence (Holt, 2015). More than 25% of children ages zero to 17 years were exposed to violence within the past year (David et al., 2015). In the United States, children ages two to five years, 15% witnessed family abuse, 9% witnessed community abuse, and 21% witnessed some form of violence in their lifetime (David et al., 2015) Domestic violence is a problem of enormous consequences and the ramifications are numerous and severe. This is a significant problem affecting millions of children in the United States. The prevalence of this concern is evident.

## **Effects of Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is an issue of serious consequences. The impact on children exposed to domestic violence is greater than had previously been understood (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). There is an extensive amount of evidence to show that children who witness or experience domestic violence suffer negative consequences. Research reveals that exposure to domestic violence as a child is related to a number of trauma symptoms, emotional concerns, behavioral and social problems that can have a negative impact on a

child's development (Clark & Wydall, 2013). Previous research found that when there is evidence of domestic violence, children are at greater risk of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and are significantly more likely to exhibit behavioral and emotional difficulties (Holt, 2015). In their research examining where domestic violence occurs, Clarke and Wydall (2013) found that children are seen as being isolated and neglected with an environment that does not provide them with a sense of security. The effects of domestic violence on a child can be severe. Previous studies have found general behavioral, cognitive, and emotional implications of exposure to domestic violence on children include; excessive irritability, sleep problems, fear of being alone, immature behavior, stunted language development, poor concentration, aggressive and antisocial behavior, anxiety, depression, violent behavior, and lost frustration tolerance (Holt, 2015). The impact of domestic violence has been shown to affect children academically at school and studies reported that affected children are more likely to be academically underachieving (David et al., 2015). Research revealed children experiencing violence at home displayed aggressive behavior, lacked concentration, had poor attendance, and possessed lower than average reading ability and do not demonstrate their full potential (David et al., 2015). Domestic violence has lasting effects on children and a wider understanding of their needs is emerging.

In one study, David, LeBlanc and Self-Brown (2015) conducted quantitative mixed-method research examined the association between violence exposure in the home and community and preschool children's school readiness, and whether familial routines emerge as a potential protective factor for this association. Caretaker-preschooler dyads ( $n = 83$ ) participated in questionnaires focusing on domestic violence exposure,

community violence exposure, preschool routines, school readiness, and demographics. Results from this study indicated that children are frequently exposed to domestic violence and community violence. The findings also found that school readiness scores were lower for children whose primary caregivers reported fewer discipline and daily living routines, regardless of the level of violence the child is exposed to, but the protective impact of discipline and daily living routines were reduced as the level of home violence exposure increased. Results also indicated that children's increased exposure to community violence was related to lower school readiness. Exposure to domestic violence was negatively and significantly associated with school readiness scores. Results from David, LeBlanc and Self-Brown's study are relevant to the current study in showing the effects of domestic violence for children impacted and the need for interventions.

### **Importance of Early Identification**

Research has revealed that professionals lack awareness of the dynamics of children experiencing domestic violence and as a result, they do not always respond appropriately (Clark & Wydall, 2013) Although there has been a lack of awareness, studies have found that increasing progress has been made in identifying children exposed to domestic violence (Holt, 2015). Holt (2015) found that an understanding of behaviors that may be displayed by affected children help in identifying any concerns so appropriate action is taken. Previous research has shown that earlier identification of affected children and awareness of a child's potential problem can address timelier help and support (Holt, 2015). Understanding the significance of domestic violence and becoming aware of a child's needs is the first step toward effective practice.

In one study, Holt (2015) conducted mixed-method research that explored the types of behaviors primary school educational staff observed in children known or suspected to experience domestic violence at home, as well as their opinions, attitudes, and experiences regarding how affected children are treated in schools and how they believe this could be improved. Educational staff ( $n = 25$ ) participated in this study by completing a questionnaire. Result from this study indicated that children living in violent homes have a lower frustration tolerance, are easily angered, and are more irritable and aggressive. The findings also found that there is a strong importance for early identification and more specific training, the need for opportunities for children to disclose information to staff, and the importance of information sharing. The results from Holt's study are relevant to the current study in discussing the need to be aware of these situations so that these children can be support in order to improve their functioning.

### **Opportunities for Disclosure**

There has been a growing emphasis on children's rights and the importance of understanding a child's perspective of their own life (Miller et al., 2012). The reluctance to disclose information is well documented throughout previous research (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). Research shows that shame, fear of not being taken seriously, along with the threat of retribution are often barriers to disclosure for children (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). Research had found that the self-silencing of affected children has a negative and damaging impact on personal development, the ability to acquire emotional competence, and a child's communication skills (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). With barriers to disclosure, research had found that providing opportunities for a child to openly discuss and disclose domestic violence and offering emotional support is important (Holt, 2015). Often

schools are seen as a safe place, providing respite from an unstable home life for many children (David et al., 2015). Research revealed that ensuring a supportive place in all schools, having someone to turn to for emotional and social support and the opportunity to talk about an issue are significant factors in the coping strategy of a child experiencing domestic violence.

In one study, Miller, Richardson and Stanley (2012) conducted qualitative mixed-method research that explored the perspectives of young people, victims and perpetrators on domestic violence and relevant services. Young individual, ages 10 to 19, who have been affected by domestic violence ( $n = 19$ ) participated in five focus groups allowing these individuals to talk freely about their lived experience. Survivors of domestic violence ( $n = 11$ ) and perpetrators ( $n = 10$ ) participated in semi-structured interviews focusing on their perspectives of domestic violence and relevant services. Results from the study indicated that survivors and perpetrators participating in this study were less likely to disclose and acknowledge domestic violence because of the stigma, shame and embarrassment associated with disclosing. The findings also found that young people and survivors acknowledged the impact of domestic violence on their life. Results also found that all three groups of participants have had contact with a variety of professionals and services. The three groups of participants stated the importance of professionals listening to them, taking them seriously, validating their accounts, and providing them with information. The results from Miller, Richardson and Stanley's study are relevant to the current study in showing the barriers to working with domestic violence situations and how to effectively respond and support individuals affected.



## **Response to Affected Children**

Given the complexity and enduring nature of domestic violence, response is required to ensure the needs of those affected are met. The research found that children and families require support from a variety of individuals and agencies (Clarke & Wydall, 2013). With support from multiple sources, collaborative partnership and effective information exchange was found as a way to take forward a problem so action can be taken (Miller et al., 2012). In one study, Clarke and Wydall (2013) revealed a strong importance of developing a multi-agency response to ensure effective action for those affected by domestic violence. The importance of joint cooperation is central to providing effective family support services and safeguarding children. The research stated that the effective protection of safeguarding children could only be achieved through a clear recognition of everyone's responsibilities and partnership working (Holt, 2015). The research found that a multi-disciplinary response involving joint working and quality information sharing was considered essential to support affected children sooner and more effectively.

In one study, Clarke and Wydall (2015) conducted a multi-method research that explored practitioner's awareness of the needs of children and young people living with, and fleeing from domestic violence, the barriers to meeting those needs, and the reality of working practices. The research also explored the perceptions of service provision from families who had experience of domestic abuse. Professionals ( $n = 54$ ) drawn from social services, health, education, police, probation, housing, domestic abuse services and third sector organizations participated in semi-structured interviews. Two focus groups ( $n = 16$ ) were also conducted with a representative sample of practitioners drawn from the

above groups. Families who had experience of domestic abuse participated in case studies ( $n = 5$ ) focusing on their perceptions of service provisions. Results from the interviews indicated that practitioners have an awareness of, and sensitivity to children and young people who are living with and fleeing from domestic abuse. Practitioners also stressed the importance of ensuring that children are provided with opportunities to talk openly and that their feelings are validated. Practitioners stated that there is a need for a shift towards more direct working with children and that current policies focus on monitoring risk rather than address risk through systematic safety planning directly with children. In response to developing working strategies, results found that across professional groups, a multi-disciplinary response involving joint working and good quality information sharing is needed. The results from Clarke and Wydall's study are relevant to the current study in discuss responses needed to support children affected by domestic violence.

### **Importance of School Setting**

The school environment offers an ideal setting in which to work with children affected by domestic violence because children have regular contact at school and have access to school mental health resources. Due to the consistent contact with students, schools are in a position to identify worrying changes in behavior or circumstances of a child. Many of the urgent mental health needs of children are first recognized and addressed in the school setting (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). School social workers and mental health professionals in a school often provide preventative and responsive interventions to student needs in order to help them succeed academically, socially and personally. This is important because the majority of families in the general population

do not receive clinical services (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). As a result, many children who are affected by domestic violence may not receive therapeutic services. In order to reach the vast number of children affected by domestic violence, supportive services should be provided in the school setting (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). Services in the school setting reduce limitations of accessibility, transportation, and scheduling that are often an obstacle when children are in need of services.

Although school social workers and mental health professionals often cannot change the home and community environments in which a child affected by domestic violence lives, they can create a safe environment for the development of affirmative and encouraging relationships, emotional and academic support, and healthy models of interaction styles (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). Schools offer an environment that is safe and secure relative to the violence that may be going on at home, thus providing much needed support and protection. Schools can be seen as a protective or resilient factor against the effects of domestic violence on children (Byrne & Taylor, 2007). Schools have a strong potential to act as an ally for children, a guarantee of basic protection, a capacity builder and a base from which to explore ones self and the world (Byrne & Taylor, 2007). The school environment has a strong supportive value for children experiencing difficulties in their lives. After family, school is the most powerful influence on children's development (Byrne & Taylor, 2007). Schools play an integral part in strengthening resilience and promoting healthy academic and social successes for children affected by domestic violence.

In one study, Byrne and Taylor (2007) conducted qualitative research that explored the perspectives of Education Welfare Officers, child protection social workers,

and teachers in post-primary schools involved in dealing with children suffering from the effects of domestic violence. Education Welfare Officers ( $n = 4$ ), social workers ( $n = 4$ ), and school teaching staff ( $n = 4$ ) participated in semi-structured interviews used to explore their perspectives on the effects of domestic violence on children's educational attainment, the current services available, and the potential development of support services. Results from this study indicated that the impact of witnessing or experiencing domestic violence affects a child's behavior, self-esteem, relationships with peers, and academic work and behaviors. The findings also found that domestic violence affects all levels of a child's development: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. The three groups of participants stated there has been more significant attention around the issue of domestic violence in schools. The results from Byrne and Taylor's study are relevant to the current study in the importance of a school social worker in responding effectively to children in domestic violence situations.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Attachment Theory**

John Bowlby, a British child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, developed attachment theory in response to his observations of the effects on young children from separations and losses of caregivers. Attachment theory explains the role of attachment across the lifespan, the transferal of attachment patterns across generations, and the influence of attachment in both healthy development and emotional disturbances (Hazelton & Stalker, 2008). An important part of healthy development is having a close and caring relationship early with one's caregiver. A baby's brain development, wellbeing, relationships and interactions are dependent on the relationship between infant and their caregiver throughout their lifecycle (Buchanan, 2013). Secure early attachments with a caregiver offer the optimum conditions for an infant to grow into their full potential.

A central premise of attachment theory is providing children with a secure base. A secure base is provided through a relationship with one or more sensitive and responsive attachment figures who meet the child's needs and to whom the child can turn as a safe haven, when upset or anxious (Hazelton & Stalker, 2008). Caregivers are the source of protection, safety and security for a child (Bowlby, 1988). The proximity to the primary caregiver and comfort figure, assures a child protection against external dangers when responded to in a soothing and caring manner, as opposed to one whose lack of empathic response to their child's distress failed to buffer a perceived threat (Bowlby, 1988). Love and empathy from caregiver to child creates a secure attachment where the child can learn to internally self-regulate emotions and behaviors (Ryngala, 2003). When

caregivers are responsive and sensitive to a child's needs by providing an emotionally nurturing relationship experience, it establishes a secure base and a safe haven for which a child can explore the world (Hazelton & Stalker, 2008).

A child's attachment relationship with their primary caregiver leads to the development of an internal working model (Bowlby, 1969). This internal working model is a cognitive framework comprising mental representations for understanding the world, self, and others (Bowlby, 1969). Based on a child's subjective interactive experiences with their primary caregiver, they develop these inner representational models of the world, themselves and others, known as their internal working model (Hazelton & Stalker, 2008). These internal working models then guide feelings about self and others, expectations of self and others, and behavior in relationships with others (Hazelton & Stalker, 2008). These inner models reflect the quality of early attachment experiences and are largely unconscious and consequently do not change easily but can be revised and updated in response to experiences that do not support a working current working model (Hazelton & Stalker, 2008). Both positive and negative experiences can result in change, with adverse experience, if severe enough, resulting in an insecure working model despite earlier experiences that were generally positive and generated a sense of security (Hazelton & Stalker, 2008). These mental representations guide future social and emotional behavior as the child's internal working model guides their response to others in general.

Children's development is expected to unfold within a secure and nurturing environment. When the environment is affected or attachment is ignored or dismissed, all normal tasks of growing up are likely to be adversely affected, resulting in emotional or

behavioral problems or even long-term psychological or physical harm (Ryngala, 2003). Children are more likely to be deprived on quality parenting when domestic violence is present. When a child is affected by violence, they do not develop a consistent or coherent strategy for obtaining help and comfort from their attachment figure and may not develop a sense of trust or security (Ryngala, 2003). Children who have been affected by domestic violence are at a much greater risk of having difficulty throughout their lives (Ryngala, 2003). Therefore, this research information illustrates the importance of Bowlby's attachment theory and its connection to the issues of domestic violence.

### **Object Relations Theory**

Object relations theory also builds the framework for the current research. This theory deviates from the classical psychoanalytic theory that emphasizes interpersonal relations, primarily in the family and especially between mother and child. Object relations theory serves as a cornerstone for the ways in which people view human development and human interactions. Object relations theory suggests that humans are motivated from their earliest childhood by the need for significant relations with others; "others" are referred to as "objects" within this theory (McCluskey, 2010). This theory suggests that the child's early experiences in his or her relationship with their primary caregiver set the stage for the development of stable, enduring, internalized, mental representations of oneself, others, and the emotional experiences that are attached to the relationship between oneself and others (Zosky, 1999). In essence, object relationship theory proposes that individuals develop mental representations of themselves, others, and the relationships between themselves and others beginning in infancy and childhood; these

mental representations carry over and influence interpersonal relationships throughout life (McCluskey, 2010).

A child's first years of life are extremely important for individuals to ensure the development of adequate emotional health later in life. Individuals who lack sufficient nurturing during infancy and childhood may find it difficult to maintain healthy self-esteem, regulate their emotional responses, and manage anxiety later in life (Zosky, 1999). Unmet dependency needs in childhood persist into adulthood, often accompanied by a variety of emotions that one's needs were not met. As a result, the search to fulfill dependency needs as an adult becomes both desperate and demanding (Zosky, 1999). Object relations theory is significant to one's primary, maternal relationship in individual development and future relationship formation.

Mother's play a monumental role in their child's development. For a child to develop a healthy, genuine self, as opposed to a false self, object relations theorists believe the mother must be a "good enough mother" who relates to the child with "primary maternal preoccupation" (McCluskey, 2010). Donald Winnicott, a psychoanalyst, felt that a good enough mother allows herself to be used by the infant so that he or she may develop a healthy sense of self. Winnicott said that in order to develop a true sense of self, the child must experience "good enough mothering," a mother who is usually in tune with what the child wants and needs, but not always (McCluskey, 2010). If the mother is in tune with the child, then child will feel "omnipotent," as though they can effect changes in the work around them. However, if the mother is not in tune with the child, the child will not develop a sense of omnipotence, the child will feel frustrated because they are unable to get their needs met consistently, the child will start to focus on



what the mother wants in order to get their needs met, and the child will begin to develop a false self instead of true self (Zosky, 1999). The formation of this false self is the self that proceeds through the life course and conceals the true self with artificial representations of personality and relationships (Zosky, 1999). The mother's capacity to mother, is of unparalleled importance in the future psychological and cognitive development of the child.

Donald Winnicott was also influenced by what he saw as the nurturing emotional environment that a loving mother provides to her child. This holding environment is important for a child's development. Winnicott believes that a loving mother holds her child, both physically and emotionally, and is attuned and attentive to the child's needs by showing love and protecting the child from physical or psychopathology (McCluskey, 2010). The holding environment includes the management of the child's experiences and processes and is determined by the awareness and empathy of the mother (McCluskey, 2010). This holding environment is seen as a "safe space" offering the security children need to engage life and encourages them to explore the world (Zosky, 1999). He also believes that the child's environment either support, or fails and traumatizes and child's development. When the child's environment is interrupted and there is a failure of environmental provision it could result in the destruction of the child's development. Winnicott also believes that the environmental interference can cause sufficient mental distress and could create further psychopathology (McCluskey, 2010). A child's holding environment is important to a child's development and assists in the way they experience and see the world.

### **Personal Lens**

Development of this research grew out of my personal passion for helping children in need, especially around the issue of domestic violence. The potential for numerous challenges that a child faces after experiencing or witnessing domestic violence raises a serious concern. This has motivated me to research the best interventions to improve the lives of children affected by domestic violence.

### **Professional Lens**

Development of this research also grew out of my professional experience working with victims of domestic violence. I have seen the impact that domestic violence has on individuals and its severe consequences and ramifications. I am currently working in a school where I see the impact that attachment has on a child's life and how that can affect one's development. Therefore, I had a desire to merge my the two concepts together in an attempt to best support and meet the needs of children affected by domestic violence. As a future social worker, I will use this research to find the best practices and interventions for school social workers that are working with children affected by domestic violence to better improve the lives and development of these children.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine how school social workers support children impacted by domestic violence. The exploratory nature of this study allowed participants to answer questions in a way that reflects their own opinions and perceptions about the responses to affected children. Results from this study were used to help inform school social workers on the best practices with students affected by domestic violence. This section addressed: the sample and recruitment process; the protection of human subjects; data collection; procedures, data analysis; and data analysis.

### **Sample and Recruitment Process**

Sample-wise, six licensed school social workers were interviewed for this study. An inclusion criterion for this sample was licensed school social workers currently practicing in the state of Minnesota with at least one year of experience in the field. Exclusion criteria for this sample were those who are not licensed school social workers with one year of experience and those not currently practicing in the state of Minnesota.

In terms of recruitment, the researcher for this study contacted potential licensed school social workers via email (see Appendix A), through the use of publicly available email addresses on school websites, explaining the purpose of the study and asking for their voluntary participation in this study. The researcher contacted licensed social workers until six agreed to participate.

## **Protection of Human Subjects**

Due to the nature of this study, confidentiality was of utmost importance. Participation in this study was voluntary and skipping questions or stopping the interview at anytime was optional. The protection of the participants was ensured through the approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas. A Collaborative Institution Training Initiative was required prior to research approval from the Institutional Review Board focusing on the protection of human subjects. A consent form (see Appendix B) was reviewed and signed by the participants if they chose to participate in this study. The consent form stated that there were no risks and benefits to this study. All records were kept confidential. The semi-structured interview questions were reviewed and developed in consultation with the literature, the researcher's committee and chair.

## **Data Collection**

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (see Appendix C) to collect data from the participants. The interview consisted of nine open-ended questions with the flexibility of answering all of the questions. The questions for this study were developed based on the information presented in the literature review of this study. Questions covered areas including work experience, encountering children impacted by domestic violence, barriers, supports, resources, and interventions employed. The interview took place at the participant's office or location of their choosing and was take no longer than an hour.

## **Procedures**

Prior to completing any research for this study, the process and methods were reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas to safeguard the participants from any form of undue harm. Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative was required prior to research approval from the Institutional Review Board focusing on the protection of human subjects. An informed consent form (see Appendix B) was used to explain the purpose of the study, why the individuals were selected, the procedure and how the information from the study would be used, risks and benefits, issues of confidentiality, and finally the voluntary nature of the study. The consent was emailed to the participants prior to meeting and verbal consent was obtained during the interview.

When meeting with the participants, their interview was no longer than an hour. The participants were provided with the opportunity to ask any questions about the study and their involvement before and after the interviews took place. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed (see Appendix D). The transcriptions were be coded and quotes were used from the interview. A coding reliability check was done with a colleague on the transcription from the study to see if we agree on the overall themes found. To keep the participants confidential, any identifying information from the transcript was deleted. The transcription and audio recordings were locked on a password-protected file on the researcher's personal computer. All audio and transcribed information will be destroyed on May 15, 2020. The records from this study will be kept confidential.

## **Data Analysis**

After the transcription of the interview, data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is the analytic process consisting of the comparisons of interrelated concepts to provide a description and explanation of the social phenomena investigated (Bohm, 2004). It is a step-by-step process researchers take to get close to the data while still remaining objective. For this research, the use of grounded theory principles provided an explanatory framework for understanding the perspectives of the licensed school social workers on domestic violence and meeting the needs of students affected by these situations.

Coding is a step-by-step process that takes place during the data analysis to analyze the information gathered. Open coding is a step-by-step process that analyzes the textual content to develop concepts based on the data (Bohm, 2004). Open coding was used first to analyze the data gathered to identify common words or themes from the interview transcriptions. Axial coding is a step in the analyzing process that refines and relates core concepts to each other to decide a common theme (Bohm, 2004). Axial coding was then be used to group the themes together, creating larger themes found. The themes were analyzed further for sub-themes to form concepts directly related to the research question. A coding reliability check was done with another colleague to analyze the data to see if overall themes were agreed upon. The content from this analysis was reported in the results section and further analyzed in the discussion section of this study.

## **Description of School Setting and Location**

For this study, participants were asked what type of school setting they worked in and the location of their school. Demographic questions were asked pertaining the type of

location where participants worked. Only one participant reported working in a rural area, 3 participants reported working in an urban community, and 2 participants reported working in a suburban area.

The participant’s school setting was also reported. The participants in the study came from a variety of school settings. One participant reported working in a preschool through third grade school setting. Two participants reported working in a preschool through eighth grade setting. One participant works in a kindergarten through fifth grade school. Another participant reported working in a sixth through ninth grade setting. And one participant reported working in a sixth through twelfth grade school setting. The current location and type of school setting can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Description of Participants’ School Setting and Location*

n = 6 (%)	
Location of school	
Rural	n = 1 (16.7%)
Suburban	n = 2 (33.3%)
Urban	n = 3 (50%)
Type of school setting	
PreK-3	n = 1 (10%)
PreK-8	n = 2 (20%)
K-5	n = 1 (10%)
6-9	n = 1 (10%)
6-12	n = 1 (10%)

*Note: PreK-3=Pre-Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade; PreK-8=Pre-Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade; K-5= Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade; 6-9= 6<sup>th</sup> grade through 9<sup>th</sup> grade; 6-12= 6<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade*

## **Findings**

The following is a presentation of the findings from the qualitative research conducted with school social workers ( $n = 6$ ). The purpose of the research is to determine how school social workers support children impacted by domestic violence. As a result of the interviews, four themes were discovered. The primary themes that were discovered are as follows: (1) interventions used by school social workers to support children experiencing domestic violence; (2) barriers to supporting children affected by domestic violence; (3) resources that help school social workers; (4) supports school social workers obtain when working with children affected by domestic violence. Subthemes were found within one of the main themes. Within the theme 'barriers' were two subthemes, institutional barriers and job related barriers. The themes can be seen in Table 2.



Table 2.

*Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses Among School Social Workers*

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Category	Thematic category	Sample response
<i>Theme 1: Interventions used by school social workers to support children experiencing domestic violence</i>		
		Really, its always checking in with that child and figuring out how I can best support the child when they are here at school.”
<i>Theme 2: Barriers to support children affected by domestic violence</i>		
	Institutional barriers	The issue of domestic violence is not a visible issue, but rather hidden, and most people are pretty private about this stuff and don’t want to talk about it.
	Job related barriers	In the schools, we are not a therapeutic situations. Our goal is that we want the student to be in their classroom, we are not providing therapy.
<i>Theme 3: Resource that help school social workers</i>		
		If the family needs something, you know, we can access shelters and see if they have room, or we can connect them with our homeless program and they can help with that too. And then whatever else the family needs, you know, if they communicate it with us.”
<i>Theme 4: Support school social workers obtain when working with children affected by domestic violence</i>		
		Using the people around you, and not just social workers, but also sometimes talking with the administrative staff or whoever, even though they don’t have the mental health training and background that we do as social workers. They are acting from a different perspective and they can be helpful too.”

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**Interventions**

Over the course of their interviews, participants discussed the nature of interventions used to support children experience domestic violence in a variety of ways.

All of the participants ( $n = 6$ ) in the study stressed the importance of utilizing one-on-one, short-term counseling to support students who are experiencing or affected by domestic violence. Participants reported that this provided the opportunity to build trust with the student, obtain more information, assess their safety and needs, so that they can best support this child. Building a trusting relationship with a child was talked about by all participants ( $n = 6$ ) in terms of helping the child know there is someone to turn to, someone who will listen and give them a chance to tell their story. One participant stated, *“I think a lot of times it’s building that relationship with that child, teaching them that there is somebody they can trust.”*

Four out the six participants reported the significance of assessing safety and whether a report needs to be made when working with students in these situations. One participant talked about how crucial it is to assess the child’s danger and safety as being one of the first steps in order to know if they have been harmed in anyway and if a child protection report needs to be made. One participant stated, *“We need to make sure that the child is remaining safe in these situations.”* While the importance of assessing safety was stated by participants, the need to assess ones need was also addressed.

All six participants in the study discussed assessing a child’s need when involved in domestic violence situations and doing whatever they need to try and help them. One participant stated it this way, *“Really, its always checking in with that child and figuring out how I can best support the child when they are here at school.”* Another participant said, *“It’s so important to know where the kid is at and how intense their needs are.”* All participants in the study stressed supporting the child while they are at school so that they can engage in learning.

## Barriers

**Institutional barriers.** The participants not only discussed the interventions they employ but also the barriers that challenge their capacity to support children affected by domestic violence. Four out of the six participants talked about the taboo subject of domestic violence being a major barrier in their work around these situations. One participant stated, *“I think this stuff can be very personal, scary and very shameful for individuals.”* Another participant said it this way, *“The issue of domestic violence is not a visible issue, but rather hidden, and most people are pretty private about this stuff and don’t want to talk about it.”* These four participants agreed that most individuals do not want to talk about the domestic violence that may be going on. Another participant said it this way, *“The secrecy is a huge barrier, and I think that’s always kind of the first one, the stigma and the fear of parents in that situation. Also, the lack of community education around the issue of domestic violence.”* Another participant discussed barriers in this way,

*This is a taboo subject and people don’t want to talk about it. I also think that the parent’s fear that this issue is going to be brought into the school is another reason that they don’t talk about it and just try to deal with it on their own.*

These four participants agreed that the taboo subject of domestic violence greatly challenges their capacity to support children affected by domestic violence.

**Job related barriers.** Along with institutional barriers, participants recognized job related barriers that affect their ability to support children affected by domestic violence. Two out of the six participants discussed the issue of time working in a school setting. One participant said it this way,

*Time is a big one, depending on the age of the kiddo, and trying to get them pulled out of class so that I can meet with them. A teacher may not want me to*

*pull them out during an academic time, so I only have a short time that I can meet with these kiddos.*

Another participant talked about time this way, “*Sometimes time gets in the way because these situations can be very time consuming.*” Both of these participants agreed that time created an issue in their capacity to support these students.

While time was reported as an issue, two participants in the study reported the setting of the school and their role as a school social worker around these situations has created a barrier. One participant stated, “*In the schools, we are not in therapeutic situations. Our goal is that we want the student to be in their classroom, we are not providing therapy.*” These two participants discussed working in a school setting around the issue of domestic violence has created a barrier in their work to support these students.

Lack of control and rapport was another job related barrier that three participants addressed in their interview. One participant said it this way, “*One barrier is that if we don’t have a good working relationship, or I’ve never met them, sometimes that lack of rapport gets in the way.*” Another participant said it this way, “*The lack of control over what parents are going to choose or whether or not they are going to get the help they need, or whether they are going to choose to have a healthy household is a barrier for me.*” These barriers were said to really affect their role to support students affected by domestic violence.

## **Resources**

In order to promote and facilitate their work around domestic violence situations, all of the participants in the study ( $n = 6$ ) recognized the importance of using community resources. Participants discussed the use of resources to support their work as well as

assisting and meeting the needs of students and families. One participant talked about it this way,

*We have a variety of resources available in the district. We have cultural liaisons, translator and interpreter services, we also have the resource center, which is a part of our district office. So what they do is work with the families and students in the district and kind of act as a social worker for the family. So not an official social worker, but helping family's access resources in the community.*

Another participant stated that she uses these resources to promote her work in this way,

*If the family needs something, you know, we can access shelters and see if they have room, or we can connect them with our homeless program and they can help with that too. And then whatever else the family needs, you know, if they communicate it with us.*

Another participant discussed the use of domestic violence resources in her work around these situations, *"I make a lot of referrals to our local domestic violence agencies and use them quite a bit. I also make referrals to other addiction services.* While all of the participants discussed using community resources, two participants discussed using other resources in their work around domestic violence situations. One participant talked about using other resources this way,

*I pull from a lot of curriculum to help teach kids small vocab and the feelings within themselves so that they can react appropriately and expectedly. I use a lot of this curriculum from the social thinking website and I find it to be a good resource in my work with these children.*

Another participant discussed using community resources to address and do some early intervention and prevention things with students. She discussed it this way,

*I refer a domestic violence agency in our community to come in and do school wide presentations starting in kindergarten and going through sixth grade. This program is setup so they come in and do two different sessions where they will read a book, like 'Hands Are Not For Hitting' or 'Words Are Not For Hurting' and then do an activity with the kids. So they just kind of talk about that preventative and safety piece. I've got a big push for this prevention piece*

*because I think the more we can address it and do some early intervention and prevention stuff with kids is an important piece.*

All of the six participants from the study agreed that the use of resources was important in helping promote and facilitate their work around domestic violence situations.

### **Supports**

In order to do their work effectively participants recognized the importance of obtaining and gaining support when working with domestic violence situations. All of the participants in the study ( $n = 6$ ) recognized and stressed the importance of using other school social workers to obtain support around domestic violence situations. One participant described it this way,

*There are other school social workers in the building that I regularly connect with, bounce ideas off of, and problem solve together. And just in terms of when I run into conflict situations and there is not right or wrong path that I can go down, I talk it through with another social worker and letting them know, this is what I'm thinking. This is an extremely helpful support.*

Another participant stated gaining support from other school social workers in this way,

*Working with the school social workers in the district can be a helpful resource. We have peer groups that we go to and bring cases or really tough situations that we need help with. This is really important because we are always going to come across situations that are really challenging and we don't know what to do and have no experience with before. In these peer groups with other school social workers, someone is going to have experience with it or they are going to know where to direct me to get help.*

Collaborating and consulting with other school social workers was discussed by all participants, whether through email, phone, or in person. All participants also reported obtaining and gaining support through all school personnel such as administrators, school counselors, the school nurse, the school police liaison officers, principals, behavioral

support staff, teachers, and cultural liaisons. One participant talked about obtaining support this way,

*Sometimes these conversations about domestic violence change, depending on who you are talking to. So it is important that when those conversations come up that you always run it past the key players, like your principal, police liaison, administration, etc. because things change over time.*

Another participant described it this way,

*Using the people around you, and not just social workers, but also sometimes talking with the administrative staff or whoever, even though they don't have the mental health training and background that we do as social workers. They are acting from a different perspective and they can be helpful too.*

All participants in the study stressed the importance of using their team of school social workers, along with other school personnel to communicate, consult and collaborate in order to obtain support when working with domestic violence situations.

## **Summary**

Participants in this study expressed many aspects related to their role in supporting children impacted by domestic violence. Overall, there were many themes in which the participants agreed upon especially as it relates to intervening and supporting these students. The majority of the participants employed one-on-one, short term counseling with students because it provided the opportunity to build trust, obtain information, and assess ones safety and needs. The majority of the participants expressed institutional barriers as well as job related barriers around the setting and role of a school in their work. Participants also identified a wide range of community resources used to promote and facilitate their work around these situations. They also discussed the importance of consulting, collaborating and communicating with other school social

workers and school personnel to gain support when working with students impacted by domestic violence.



## **Discussion**

This research examined how school social workers support children impacted by domestic violence. The participants in the study both supported and deviated from the current literature. This section will focus on examining both the similarities and differences between this research and previous research. The themes will be further examined in relation to the literature review.

With the complexity of domestic violence and the growing recognition of children involved in these situations, two different lenses were utilized in order to understand this topic. The first lens is the Attachment Theory of John Bowlby (1988), which allows school social workers to see the influence and role of a child's attachment when domestic violence has occurred in relation to their development. Participants in this study utilized this lens in order to understand the impact of domestic violence on a child's attachment with their caregiver as well as their development. The second lens was the Object Relations Theory, which allows school social workers to better understand and view a child's development and their human interactions. This theory also helps one understand many of the key developmental issues and struggles a child is experiencing. Through these two lenses themes were developed.

Understanding the participants and the impact of domestic violence on a child's development is essential when comprehending this research. The participants were very similar in their view of how to support and meet the needs of children impacted by domestic violence. The characteristics of the participants are important to note in understanding their response to questions. It can be noted that one of the six participants worked in a rural setting, two out of the six worked in a suburban community, and three

out of the six worked in an urban setting. This variety of school settings led to many diverse experiences when working with children affected by domestic violence and yet, common themes still emerged.

### **Interventions**

The first theme when looking at supporting student's impact of domestic violence in the school setting was related to interventions employed by school social workers. The findings from my study reported the use of one-on-one, short-term counseling with students, the importance of building trust, obtaining information, and assessing the safety and needs of student affected by domestic violence. Overall the results were consistent with the previous research. Much of the previous research reports providing opportunities for children to talk freely and discuss domestic violence, how that is affecting them while validating their accounts, and this was echoed by the participants in my study (Clarke, & Wydall, 2013; Holt, 2015; Miller, Richardson, & Stanley, 2012). Another intervention discussed in the previous literature was assessing and child's safety and the importance of providing them with a safe environment to receive support and develop trust, which was also discussed by the participants in my study (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Clarke & Wydall, 2013; Holt, 2015; Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012).

With the participants in my study, the importance of obtaining information from children impacted by domestic violence was stressed, which was not articulated in previous research. In the study by Thompson & Trice-Black (2012), they focused on utilizing small group counseling with children impacted by domestic violence which is in contrast to how the participants in my study felt about the importance of using one-on-one, short-term counseling with students in these situations. Previous research also

discussed effective information sharing with practitioners and other school personnel so that the child can be better supported and sooner, which is in contrast to how the participants in my study felt about maintaining confidentiality when working with domestic violence situations (Clarke & Wydall, 2013; Holt, 2015).

The importance of intervening and supporting children impacted by domestic violence was stressed by the participants in my study and reported in the previous research. My study and previous research suggest that children affected by domestic violence should be provided with a safe environment and supported by a trusting individual who will listen and valid their experiences (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Clarke & Wydall, 2013; Holt, 2015; Miller, et. al., 2012). The previous research found small group counseling to be effective but the participants in my study reported utilizing one-on-one, short-term counseling (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). The findings of this study stressed the importance of intervening and supporting students affected by domestic violence, and thus further research should continue to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions.

## **Barriers**

**Institutional barriers.** The findings from this study and previous literature report that school social workers face many challenges in supporting children impacted by domestic violence. As my finding report, participants voiced that the taboo subject of domestic violence has caused a barrier for social workers to work with these situations, which is consistent with the previous research. Much of the research reported that the shame, stigma, and embarrassment of domestic violence has deterred individuals from disclosing and seeking help and this was also voiced by the participants in my study

(Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Clarke & Wydall, 2013; Miller, Richardson, & Stanley, 2012).

Another issues facing school social workers is secrecy of this issue and the fear of provoking further violence and being taken from their family which was a barrier discussed in past research and also by the findings in my study (Clarke & Wydall, 2013; Miller, et. al., 2012). The reluctance to disclose and the taboo subject of domestic violence have been well supported in my research findings as well as the previous literature.

With the participants in this study, the lack of community education on domestic violence has created barrier in their work to support students, while in the previous research community education was minimally reported. The study by Byrne & Taylor (2007) discussed cultural barriers hindering the role of school social workers meet the needs of children affected by domestic violence, which was never stated by the participants in my study. The findings of this study suggest that the taboo subject of domestic violence has created a barrier in supporting and meeting the needs of students impacted by domestic violence as well as the need for increased community education and awareness.

**Job related barriers.** The findings from my study and the previous research have also identified varies job related barriers that challenge school social workers capacity to support children affected by domestic violence. Participants from my study discussed the their role and the lack of time as barrier in working with these situations, which was minimally reported in the previous research (Byrne & Taylor, 2007). The article by Clarke & Wydall (2013), talked about the lack of establishing a trusting relationship with children and parents has hindered their ability to receive information and support these

individuals, which was also supported by participants in my study. While the lack of rapport was addressed in the previous research, my study also found that the lack of control of what parents are going to choose in regards to these situations was another barrier. In the study done by Byrne & Taylor (2007), the issue of confidentiality around these situations prevented school social workers from informing other school personnel about domestic violence circumstances which was not discussed by my participants in my research. The findings of my study and the previous research both indicate that there are various job related barriers hindering school social workers from supporting children impacted by domestic violence, and thus further research should continue to evaluate the impact.

### **Resources**

Another theme was resources that promote and facilitate school social workers role in supporting children impacted by domestic violence. Overall the results were congruent with the previous research. Much of the previous research reports using a wide range of community resources and agencies to help assist families and students in seeking support and meeting their needs, and this was echoed by the participants in the study (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Miller, Richardson, & Stanley, 2012; Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). Another resource that was discussed in my findings was using school-based mental health resources to reduce limitations of accessibility and scheduling that can be an obstacle when children are in need of services, which was also discussed by the participants in my study (Miller et. al., 2012; Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). The participants in the study stressed the importance of utilizing early intervention and prevention programs and resources with children around this issue of domestic violence

and safety, which is also cited in the previous research (Miller et. al., 2012; Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012).

With the participants in my study, using curriculum was another resources used with students impacted by domestic violence, while in previous research this was never reported. The importance of providing and utilizing trainings on a regular basis around domestic violence signs, symptoms, and supports to effectively understand and empathize with child affected was stressed in the previous resource and was minimally reported by the participants in my study (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Holt, 2015; Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). In the study by Holt (2015), information sharing within the school and other agencies provided a resource for all parties involved to help support children and families sooner, whereas participants in the study discussed confidentiality around these issues and being aware of how much is shared with the key players.

The importance of accessing and utilizing resources to promote and facilitate their work around domestic violence situations was stressed by the participants in my study and reported in the previous research. My study and the previous research suggest that providing regular trainings and having access to resources within the school setting are important to support students impacted by domestic violence (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Holt, 2015; Miller et. al., Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). The findings of this study stress the importance of using a variety of resources to promote and facilitate their work around domestic violence situations, and thus further research should continue to evaluate the access and availability of these resources.

## **Supports**

The final theme that resulted from this research was supports obtained by school social workers to help them in their work around domestic violence situations. The findings from my study were consistent with the previous research. Much of the research reports that when working with students impacted by domestic violence obtaining support is necessary, and this was stressed by the participants in my study (Byrne & Taylor, 2013; Holt, 2015; Miller, Richardson, & Stanley, 2012; Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). The participants in my study recognized the importance of communicating, consulting, collaborating and problem solving with other school social workers in order to do their work effectively around these situations which was also discussed in past research (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Holt, 2017; Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). Another support identified by the participants in my study was connecting and problem solving with other school personnel, such as principals, administration, teachers, behavioral staff, nurses, and police liaisons and was also cited in previous research (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Holt, 2015; Miller, et. al., Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012).

In the previous research the importance of regular staff meetings and multi-disciplinary groups to identify and keep up to date on discussing these issues in school creating better communication and support was discussed, and was an aspect that participants in my study never touched upon (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Holt, 2015). The value of obtaining and gaining support when working with domestic violence situations was stressed by the participants in my study as well as past research in order to effectively work as a school social worker.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

The qualitative study examined in-depth of how school social workers support children impacted by domestic violence. One strength of this research study was that the interview process allowed the participants to give understanding and depth to this field of study. The knowledge gained by this study will enhance the research already present on the subject and will allow more understanding of the role and impact of school social workers on children affected by domestic violence.

The qualitative nature of the study is another strength because it allowed for participants to fully engage in the research process. Given the open-ended nature of the questions, participants were able to add more information and the research was allowed to clarify and expound the information given by the participants. Another strength was that the school social workers, who participated in this study, came from a variety of school settings, location, and had differing numbers of years of experience in this field. Also, as the research presented this topic and issue, the participants expressed and discussed the importance of this topic, especially around the child's safety, success in school, and most importantly, their development.

Although the research has its strengths, it also has its limitations. One limitation is the sample of the research. The sample is a convenience sample, meaning the results cannot be implicated for all school social workers. Another limitation was the type of sample for the research, the majority of the participants were females and therefore there is a gender inequality in participants. Another limitation is that the qualitative nature of this research does not allow for a large number of participants, so the research contained only six participants. The qualitative nature impedes the research process because all



interviews were conducted face to face with the researcher, which does not allow for complete anonymity of the participants and may have impeded some of their sharing.

### **Implications for Clinical Social Work Practice**

Millions of children are exposed to violence yearly and these rates are alarming because of the relation between violence exposure and negative outcomes (David, LeBlanc, & Self-Brown, 2015). This study's findings emphasize the significance that school social workers hold within the school setting around domestic violence situations. School social workers are responsible for providing specific support services to students and families. A large amount of the social worker's time is spent addressing social and psychological issues that can hinder a student's success in school and providing direct support to help one overcome these difficulties (Holt, 2015). It is important that social workers are supporting and advocating for a child's safety when one is affected by domestic violence. It is imperative that school social workers are aware of the challenges and difficulties for children who are at-risk due to domestic violence. Increasing awareness and its importance as well as providing a safe and supportive environment is essential. School social workers need to continually obtain and gain support, as well as using resources when working with domestic violence situations so that they can best address and support these students. School social workers play a crucial role in making sure that a child's welfare is a priority.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Even though some research has been performed in the realm of children and domestic violence, there is a lack of research on what has been effective in supporting these children in the school setting. Past research discusses the effects of domestic

violence on children and the importance of a school setting when working with these children, but does not outline best practice and effective interventions. Studies have found that schools can be seen as a protective or resilient factor against the effects of domestic violence on children, but nothing addresses specific interventions and support employed by school social workers (Byrne & Taylor, 2007). The research that has been done is qualitatively and no quantitative data has been established (Holt, 2015).

Given the information that participants shared about how they support children impacted by domestic violence and a lack of specific interventions found to be effective in their work, it is importance that further research in this area is done on a larger scale. In general, because more information is needed about support children impacted by domestic violence in the school setting, it is useful to continue utilizing qualitative methods to increase knowledge. Conversely, it may also be useful to undertake a larger quantitative study that can look at wider trends and larger groups of school social workers and thus be more generalizable. This may also allow participants to share more openly if they are non-identifiable and are not sitting face-to-face in an interview with the researcher.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of domestic violence and the impact on children has shown to have negative consequences; therefore understanding the needs of these children and intervening and offering support is crucial. The current research adds new and valuable information in regards to supporting children impacted by domestic violence in the school setting. Much of the literature focuses on the effects and impact of domestic violence on children exposed, the importance of identification, providing opportunities

for disclosure, response to children affected, and the importance of a school setting. The findings from my study add significant information regarding interventions used to support children impacted by domestic violence, barriers to their work, resources used, and supported gained in order to work effectively as a school social worker in supporting children impacted by domestic violence. Similarly, the research solidified the importance of these findings. The literature has not examined further the effectiveness and outcomes of these interventions and supports for children impacted by domestic violence, and more research needs to be performed in this area in order to effectively support children and improve their functioning. This area of focus will provide information to assist school social workers that encounter domestic violence situations and work with children affected.

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Introduction

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Kiah Dahlquist, and I am a Graduate student at the University of Thomas-St. Catherine's University School of Social Work. Prior to contacting you, I have been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas. My research chair, Dr. Kari L. Fletcher, is supervising my research study.

I am contacting you to ask if you would be willing to participate in my research study because of your profession and expertise. The purpose of my study is to determine how school social workers support children impacted by domestic violence. This study is a qualitative research study, meaning my research is primarily exploratory in order to gain and understanding of how to best meet the needs of students affected by domestic violence.

This study will use semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to collect the data. I plan to interview eight to 10 licensed social workers in the state of Minnesota. The interview is completely voluntary and if you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following: The consent form, which goes into more detail, is attached for you to review and sign prior to the interview. The interviews will take place at the location of your choosing and will be no longer than an hour. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, in which I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The data collected will be used to help inform school social workers on the best practices with student affected by domestic violence and the results will be presented to the University of St. Thomas.

If you choose to participate, I would love to schedule a time to meet with you at your earliest convenience. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Kiah Dahlquist  
Dahl3216@stthomas.edu

## Appendix B



### Consent Form [997035-1]

#### **Addressing Needs Among Students Affected by Domestic Violence: Social Worker's Perceptions**

You are invited to participate in a research study about the perceptions of school social workers on meeting the needs of children directly or indirectly involved in domestic abuse. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected and eligible to participate in this study because of your expertise and profession. 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 Kiah Dahlquist, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, University of St. Thomas and supervised by Kari L. Fletcher. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

#### **Background Information**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to determine how school social workers support children impacted by domestic violence. This qualitative study will use semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to collect the data.

#### **Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: The consent form will be emailed to you prior to the interview and I will ask for verbal consent at the time of the interview. The interview will take place at the interview office or location of their choosing and will take no longer than an hour. The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed. I will be using analyzing the data through coding and will use quotes from this research. I colleague of mine will view the data for a reliability check. The data collected will be used for this research and kept confidential.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

The study has no risks and no direct benefits.  
There are no direct benefits for participating in this study.

#### **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 audio recordings, typed notes, and typed transcripts of the interview.

Research records will be kept on my password-protected computer. I will also keep the electronic copy of the transcript in a password-protected file on my computer. I will delete any identifying information from the transcript. The audiotape and transcript will be destroyed on May 15, 2019. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of one year upon completion of the study. 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 the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used. You are also free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is Kiah Dahlquist. 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 [dahl3216@stthomas.edu](mailto:dahl3216@stthomas.edu) or you may contact my advisor, Kari L. Fletcher at [kari.fletcher@stthomas.edu](mailto:kari.fletcher@stthomas.edu). You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or [muen0526@stthomas.edu](mailto:muen0526@stthomas.edu) with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and give permission to be audio recorded during this study. I am at least 18 years of age.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Print Name of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**



## Appendix C

### Participant Interview Questions:

#### How do school social workers support children impacted by domestic violence?

- How long have you worked at this school?
- What is your role as a professional social worker?
- In your work, how have you encountered or worked with children who have witnessed or experienced domestic violence?
  - How has domestic violence situations come up?
- How have you tried to address and support children experience domestic violence this setting? What interventions and supports have you employed?
- What sort of resources help promote or facilitate you work?
  - Specifically around domestic violence situations?
  - What support services do you offer students and families involved in domestic violence situations?
- What kind of barriers challenge you in your capacity to support children affected by domestic violence?
- How have you obtained or gained support with this situations and or/who helps you with this work?
- Is there anything more that you would like to share with me that you think is important for me to know but that I did not ask about?
- Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix D

### Resources

<b>MN Day One Crisis Hotline</b> <i>Safe Housing and Support Services</i> 1000 E 80 <sup>th</sup> Street Bloomington, MN 55429	1-866-223-1111
<b>Domestic Abuse Project</b> <i>Therapy and Advocacy Services</i> 204 W Franklin Ave Minneapolis, MN 55404	612-874-7063
<b>Cornerstone Advocacy Service</b> <i>Youth Services, Adult Services</i> <i>Emergency Services, Advocacy Services</i> 1000 E 80 <sup>th</sup> Street Bloomington, MN 55429	952-884-0376
<b>Sojourner Project</b> <i>Crisis Services, Shelter,</i> <i>Community Legal Advocacy</i> Minneapolis, MN	952-933-7422
<b>Tubman Chrysalis Center</b> <i>Family Crisis and Support Services</i> 4432 Chicago Ave Minneapolis, MN 55407	612-871-0118
<b>Hennepin County Domestic Abuse Service Center</b> <i>Advocacy and Legal Services,</i> <i>Housing and Shelter Services</i> Hennepin County Government Center 300 S 6 <sup>th</sup> Street Minneapolis, MN 55487	612-348-5073
<b>Minneapolis Crisis Nursery Center</b> <i>Crisis Services, Counseling Services,</i> <i>Support Services</i> 4544 4 <sup>th</sup> Ave S Minneapolis, MN 55419	763-591-0100