

The Roles and Responsibilities of School Social Workers in the African Context: A Scoping Review



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ABSTRACT

The profession of school social work has been acknowledged as being of critical importance on a global scale. However, little is known about the practice of school social work in the African context, specifically the roles and responsibilities of practitioners. This scoping review aimed to synthesize empirical studies conducted in the African continent on the roles and responsibilities of school social workers. Using Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-step framework, the search for articles was completed on six electronic databases: Sabinet African Journals, Scopus, ProQuest Central, CINAHL, SocIndex, Medline, and Education Research Complete. Eight articles met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that school social workers or social workers servicing schools are responsible for providing psychosocial support to learners experiencing social challenges; facilitating group work sessions focused on socialization and life skills; training and guiding teachers on ways to better support learners, developing and implementing school programs addressing issues such as bullying and teenage pregnancy; and forming partnerships with other professionals and organizations to support learners. This review concludes that there is a dearth of research dedicated to school social work or social work services in African schools. Future research on school social work should focus on unique challenges, best practices, and the impact of social work services in African schools. Governments and educational institutions should prioritize the integration of social work services within school systems. The review highlights the multifaceted roles practitioners play in creating supportive educational environments in African contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

School social work is the application of social work principles and practices within educational systems to provide holistic and supportive social work services to pupils, families, educators, and the school community.¹ The field has its roots in the early foundational work of scholars like Bronfenbrenner, who emphasized the ecological systems theory, and other scholars who focused on integrating social services

¹ Marelize Vergottini and Mike Weyers, "The Foundations and Nature of South African School Social Work: An Overview," *Social Work* 56, no. 2 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.15270/56-2-816>.

within schools.² School social work has been acknowledged as being of critical importance on a global scale and literature shows that it is practiced in more than fifty countries worldwide.³ Accordingly, school social workers use an ecosystemic approach to problem-solving, enabling them to respond quickly to individual needs and mobilize resources at multiple levels (individual, classroom, school-wide, home, and community).⁴ School social workers (SSWs) operate at various service points in their practice, including within schools, educational districts, non-governmental organizations, and welfare agencies.⁵ The specific functions of SSWs may differ depending on the context, but they typically include providing direct one-on-one counselling and family intervention, organizing and facilitating group work, conducting home visits, advocating for learners and schools, coordinating inter- and multidisciplinary teams, and developing preventative initiatives in classrooms.⁶

Despite its importance, school social work and its role are sometimes described as a complex construct or as a vague idea lacking a single, universally accepted definition. For example, there appear to be significantly different and often unclear tasks and responsibilities of SSWs in emerging and underdeveloped nations, particularly in the African context.⁷ Recent reviews have examined school social work using distinct conceptual and theoretical lenses, shedding light on how distinct ideas and practices are applied in educational settings.⁸ However, these studies frequently concentrate on particular countries or areas rather than being the outcome of a thorough analysis of the literature throughout the whole African region. Given the current emphasis on access to inclusive and equitable education and the vital role that school social work plays in promoting learners' well-being and academic accomplishment globally, a thorough mapping of the roles and responsibilities of SSWs across Africa is required.⁹ This review aims to address the following question: What are the roles and responsibilities of school social workers within the African context? Subsequent sections will cover the literature review, detailing the methodology used, presenting and synthesising the findings, discussing the results, providing recommendations, and concluding the review.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of school social work has evolved over the past century from a community/ school role to becoming one that is more focused on the day-to-day activities of the school with individualized and group support being more central to the role.¹⁰ Huxtable explains that the evolution of the practice has come because of changing needs and adapts to serve school children from many cultural traditions.¹¹ The first records of SSWs may be noted from as early as the early 1900s when the professionals were referred to as school attendance officers in the United Kingdom,¹² visiting teachers and known later as home and

² E. Chigondo, "A School Social Worker's Perspective on the Need for Social Workers in Zimbabwe's Schools," *Journal of Development Administration* 4 (2019); Jeffrey J Bulanda and Sulaiman Jalloh, "A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone," *International Social Work* 62, no. 1 (January 11, 2019): 240–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872817725144>; Marion Huxtable, "A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021," *International Journal of School Social Work* 7, no. 1 (March 16, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4148/2161-4148.1090>.

³ Marion Huxtable, "A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2013," *ERIC*, 2013, <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=Ag%3Bpbal+picture+of+school+social+work+in+2013&id=ED604915>.

⁴ Huxtable, "A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021."

⁵ Michael S. Kelly et al., "Assessing the National School Social Work Practice Model: Findings from the Second National School Social Work Survey," *Social Work* 61, no. 1 (January 2016): 17–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swv044>; Marelize Vergottini and Mike Weyers, "The Department of Basic Education's Expectations of Social Workers at South African Schools," *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development* 34, no. 3 (October 6, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/9423>.

⁶ Paula Allen-Meares, "Social Work Services in Schools: A Look at Yesteryear and the Future," *Children & Schools* 18, no. 4 (October 1996): 202–9, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/18.4.1202>; Huxtable, "A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021."

⁷ Huxtable, "A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021."

⁸ Malak Al-Rasheed, "Resilience-Based Intervention for Youth: An Initial Investigation of School Social Work Program in Kuwait," *International Social Work* 66, no. 3 (May 3, 2023): 655–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728211018729>; Xiao Ding et al., "Characteristics and Outcomes of School Social Work Services: A Scoping Review of Published Evidence 2000–June 2022," *School Mental Health* 15, no. 3 (September 16, 2023): 787–811, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-023-09584-z>.

⁹ Huxtable, "A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021."

¹⁰ Michael S. Kelly et al., "Practice in a Pandemic: School Social Workers' Adaptations and Experiences During the 2020 COVID-19 School Disruptions," *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 102, no. 3 (July 22, 2021): 400–413, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10443894211009863>.

¹¹ Huxtable, "A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021."

¹² M. Huxtable, "School Social Work: An International Profession," *Children & Schools* 20, no. 2 (April 1, 1998): 95–109, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/20.2.95>.

school visitors in the United States of America,¹³ education welfare officers and educational social workers,¹⁴ school curators and later referred to as SSWs across the world.¹⁵ Throughout this evolution, SSWs have been responsible for varying, but similar roles in school settings across different nations. Early records of school social work roles and responsibilities reflect that the professionals were responsible for ensuring learners' school attendance, supporting learners at risk, helping learners cope with the emotional and social challenges they experience, providing a range of programs to meet the needs of the learners, and helping families keep their children in schools.¹⁶

Literature in the African context regarding the field of school social work and the services that these professionals provide is limited. Nevertheless, contextually, focus on African schools is paramount with the SSWs needed urgently. Pertinent to underdeveloped and low-middle income nations with specific attention given to the African context, children are faced with multiple intertwined problems that impact their school progress and overall developmental well-being. For instance, the high number of out-of-school children is an issue with Roser reporting that there are 58.4 million out-of-school children globally, with 33.8 million residing in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁷ To provide some statistics on these issues, Nigeria records that children affected by this issue are 10.5 million,¹⁸ Ethiopia records 2.1 million,¹⁹ Mozambique records 1.2 million²⁰ and Tanzania records 1.8 million.²¹ There are various contextual reasons for the persistence of these issues which include high poverty rates in African states which make it challenging to improve school attendance and the overall education system.²² The researchers argue that poverty is one reason that cuts across multiple dimensions of the children's lives, therefore, contributing to other socio-geo-political issues such as teenage pregnancy, drop-outs, mental health, inadequate professional teachers, corruption, poor learning outcomes, poor policy implementation, lack of funding, etc.²³

These issues are pertinent and need addressing as per the United Nations' vision and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim to create a world free from violence, poverty, hunger, and diseases while promoting social protection, equitable access to education, healthcare, and other essential elements for current and future generations.²⁴ 191 countries agreed to achieve the goals by 2030, making this a very significant blueprint that aims to create a more prosperous and sustainable future for

¹³ Paula Allen-Meares, "School Social Work," in *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (NASW Press and Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.351>; M. S. Kelly, *The Domains and Demands of School Social Work Practice: A Guide to Working Effectively with Students, Families and Schools* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ M. Huxtable and E. Blyth, "School Social Work Worldwide," *National Association of Social Work*, 2002.

¹⁵ Huxtable, "School Social Work: An International Profession"; Huxtable, "A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021."

¹⁶ Allen-Meares, "Social Work Services in Schools: A Look at Yesteryear and the Future"; Huxtable, "School Social Work: An International Profession"; Kelly, *The Domains and Demands of School Social Work Practice: A Guide to Working Effectively with Students, Families and Schools*.

¹⁷ M. Roser, "Access to Basic Education: Almost 60 Million Children of Primary School Age Are Not in School," *OurWorldInData.org*, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/children-not-in-school>.

¹⁸ K. Oyekan, A. Ayorinde, and O. Adenuga, "The Problem of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria," *portal.sds.ox.ac.uk. RISE Insight*, 2024, https://portal.sds.ox.ac.uk/articles/online_resource/The_Problem_of_Out-of-School_Children_in_Nigeria/23686470/1/files/41565972.pdf.

¹⁹ UNESCO, "Leaving No One behind: How Far on the Way to Universal Primary and Secondary Education?," *The Global Education Monitoring Report. UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, 2016, <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gemreport/files/LeavingNoOneBehindReference.pdf>.

²⁰ UNICEF, "Situation Analysis of Children in Mozambique 2014," *UNICEF Mozambique*, 2014.

²¹ Science and Technology Development Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, "Zimbabwe National Qualifications Framework," 2019.

²² Rose Ingutia, Anthony N. Reztis, and John Sumelius, "Child Poverty, Status of Rural Women and Education in Sub Saharan Africa," *Children and Youth Services Review* 111 (April 2020): 104869, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104869>.

²³ Gift Khumalo, "Exploring the Psychosocial Challenges of Adolescent Learners: Opportunities for School-Based Psychosocial Support in Public Schools," *The International Journal of Health, Wellness, and Society* 14, no. 2 (2024): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2156-8960/CGP/v14i02/1-19>; Niyi Jacob Ogunode, Chinwuba Mary Adanna, and Victor Olugbenga Ayoko, "Out of School Children in Nigeria: Causes, Social Implications and Way Forward," *International Journal on Integrated Education* 5, no. 12 (2022): 82–91; Mazvita Cecilia Tawodzera and Mahlapahlapana Themane, "Schooling Experiences of Children Left behind in Zimbabwe by Emigrating Parents: Implications for Inclusive Education," *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. Supplement 1 (September 30, 2019): S1–13, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39ns1a1797>; Amelia Rock et al., "Social Networks, Social Participation, and Health among Youth Living in Extreme Poverty in Rural Malawi," *Social Science & Medicine* 170 (December 2016): 55–62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.10.005>.

²⁴ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, "When Indicators Fail: SPAR, the Invisible Measure of Pandemic Preparedness," *Policy and Society* 41, no. 4 (November 10, 2022): 528–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puac024>.

everyone.²⁵ The study locates the specific practice of school social work under the education goal: to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.’ To ensure that this goal is achieved, nations need to target several educational areas, including but not limited to i) ensuring that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes, ii) eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education..., iii) build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all, iv) ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, etc. The relevance of social work to the vision of the United Nations is noted as to collaborate and partner with government and other organizations, and aspire to improve the quality of life of individuals, families, and communities by interacting with people and environments. These are consistent with the functions of SSWs.

Previous studies on school social work in the African context indicate that there is a shortage of SSWs or social workers providing services to schools.²⁶ Another challenge is school social work recognition. Chigondo mentioned how some schools in Zimbabwe have been offering the services on an informal basis, school social work is not a widely known service.²⁷ From an international viewpoint, many schools in Western countries or developed countries have been able to incorporate social workers in educational settings as evidenced in studies by Franco, Kelly et al., and Kjellgren, Lilliehorn and Markström.²⁸ This deployment is at a district level or school level with their responsibilities including enhancing collaboration between the home, school, and community environment of the children and ensuring that the school districts meet their academic mission. Moreover, their roles as outlined by Huxtable may also include reaching out to families within the communities to enrol their children and also link them to the necessary services available within the educational system when needed.²⁹ Lieberman, Poland, and Kornfeld stated that SSWs should provide preventive efforts to address suicide-related issues among learners and that they should promote belonging and a culture of connectedness.³⁰ In some instances, as noted by Franco,³¹ SSWs can form groups focused on the psychosocial functioning of the learners, such as those related to PTSD, depression, and anxiety symptoms related to the migration process and slowly normalizing exposure to trauma. Studies have reported that SSWs have a responsibility to develop collaborative relationships with other professionals in the school setting.³² For instance, collaboration with teachers is more likely to contribute to a positive school ethos where SSWs would train teachers on how to better care for and support children.³³ Although collaboration with other professionals, such as psychologists, speech therapists, and nurses fosters positive development for learners, their developmental needs will be supported and met.³⁴ Given the contextual issues faced by African children, a comprehensive mapping of the above-mentioned roles and responsibilities is ideal for understanding the support provided to learners and the education systems. However, it is concerning that no review on the

²⁵ Stephen Morton, David Pencheon, and Neil Squires, “Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and Their Implementation,” *British Medical Bulletin*, October 24, 2017, 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/ldx031>.

²⁶ Chigondo, “A School Social Worker’s Perspective on the Need for Social Workers in Zimbabwe’s Schools”; Huxtable and Blyth, “School Social Work Worldwide”; Bulanda and Jalloh, “A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone.”

²⁷ Chigondo, “A School Social Worker’s Perspective on the Need for Social Workers in Zimbabwe’s Schools.”

²⁸ Diana Franco, “Trauma Without Borders: The Necessity for School-Based Interventions in Treating Unaccompanied Refugee Minors,” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 35, no. 6 (December 29, 2018): 551–65, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-018-0552-6>; Maria Kjellgren, Sara Lilliehorn, and Urban Markström, “The Counselling Practice of School Social Workers in Swedish Elementary Schools. A Focus Group Study,” *Nordic Social Work Research* 14, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 18–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2022.2041467>; Kelly et al., “Assessing the National School Social Work Practice Model: Findings from the Second National School Social Work Survey.”

²⁹ Huxtable, “A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021.”

³⁰ Johanne Renaud et al., “Suicidal Ideation and Behavior in Youth in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Brief Review of Risk Factors and Implications for Prevention,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13 (December 6, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.1044354>.

³¹ Franco, “Trauma Without Borders: The Necessity for School-Based Interventions in Treating Unaccompanied Refugee Minors.”

³² Kelly et al., “Assessing the National School Social Work Practice Model: Findings from the Second National School Social Work Survey”; Aaron M. Thompson, Andy J. Frey, and Mike S. Kelly, “Factors Influencing School Social Work Practice: A Latent Profile Analysis,” *School Mental Health* 11, no. 1 (March 22, 2019): 129–40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-018-9279-y>.

³³ Khumalo, “Exploring the Psychosocial Challenges of Adolescent Learners: Opportunities for School-Based Psychosocial Support in Public Schools.”

³⁴ Bich Thi Ngoc Nguyen et al., “Collaboration Between Social Workers and Educational Forces in Schools: Advantages, Objectives, Content, and Form,” 2022.

latter exists in Africa, to the knowledge of the authors. In light of the identified need to identify the roles and responsibilities of SSWs, a thorough review of school social work literature is needed to better understand these roles and responsibilities within the African context. A scoping review is relevant for this type of research as it is defined as “a type of evidence synthesis that aims to systematically identify and map the breadth of evidence available on a particular topic, field, concept, or issue.”³⁵

METHODOLOGY

A scoping review was chosen as the most suitable type of review as it provided the researchers with a framework to summarize a wide range of literature related to the roles and responsibilities of SSWs in the African setting. Additionally, it offered an opportunity to identify gaps in existing research, guiding future investigations.³⁶ The selection of this type of review allowed for a thorough examination of the field of school social work, mapping out available literature on professional roles. Importantly, the review has practical implications for both research and practice in the African context.

The study team comprised three researchers: a social work academic and PhD student (GK) with an interest in school social work and two researchers (NN and MS) who are senior academics with vast practice experiences and expertise in academic social work. Drawing on the varied expertise of different researchers is endorsed by Levac et al. for enhancing the review's thoroughness.³⁷ The researchers employed Arksey and O'Malley's five-step framework, a widely accepted and organized approach for conducting a scoping review.³⁸ These steps included identifying the research question, and relevant publications, selecting studies, charting data, and compiling, summarizing, and presenting the findings. It is worth noting that the quality of the articles chosen for the review was not assessed, following guidelines by Peters et al.³⁹ As a team, the researchers reached a consensus on the study question, the databases to be searched, and the specific search words to be used, detailed in the subsequent sections.

Identifying relevant publications

Following the scoping review guidelines outlined by Arksey and O'Malley, the primary author, GK, devised the research protocol.⁴⁰ A thorough search was conducted in six electronic databases, namely, Sabinet African Journals, Scopus, ProQuest Central, CINAHL, SocIndex, Medline, and Education Research Complete. The selection of these databases was based on their comprehensive coverage of regional and international literature related to the field of school social work. Boolean search techniques were applied to each database, incorporating phrases such as "school social workers" OR "school social work" AND "roles" OR "responsibilities" OR "duties" AND "Africa."

Selecting studies

This review considered publications published in English-language peer-reviewed journals, given the lack of funding for professional translation personnel and tools. The inclusion criteria included empirical publications that provide a complete depiction of school social work services and responsibilities within the school environment. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods publications were exclusively considered for this review. Excluded were publications that deviated from the research question and overarching objective, as well as reviews that focused on generic social work services for children, rather than specifically within the school environment.

³⁵ Zachary Munn et al., “What Are Scoping Reviews? Providing a Formal Definition of Scoping Reviews as a Type of Evidence Synthesis,” *JBI Evidence Synthesis* 20, no. 4 (April 2022): 950–52, <https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-21-00483>.

³⁶ Danielle Levac, Heather Colquhoun, and Kelly K O'Brien, “Scoping Studies: Advancing the Methodology,” *Implementation Science* 5, no. 1 (December 20, 2010): 69, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-5-69>; Munn et al., “What Are Scoping Reviews? Providing a Formal Definition of Scoping Reviews as a Type of Evidence Synthesis.”

³⁷ Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien, “Scoping Studies: Advancing the Methodology.”

³⁸ Hilary Arksey and Lisa O'Malley, “Scoping Studies: Towards a Methodological Framework,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 8, no. 1 (February 2005): 19–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>.

³⁹ Micah D.J. Peters et al., “Updated Methodological Guidance for the Conduct of Scoping Reviews,” *JBI Evidence Synthesis* 18, no. 10 (October 2020): 2119–26, <https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-20-00167>.

⁴⁰ Arksey and O'Malley, “Scoping Studies: Towards a Methodological Framework.”

Charting data

All citations were imported from the databases into Rayyan, a free web app that helps speed up the initial screening of abstracts and titles by utilizing a semi-automatic method while also incorporating a high level of usability.⁴¹ This web app greatly facilitated a systematic approach to data management. Duplicate citations were automatically removed.

Title and abstract relevance screening

By the recommendations of Blanco et al., the search and screening of publications was carried out by two researchers, GK and NN. In the initial screening phase, GK and NN independently examined the retrieved articles at the title and abstract level to determine their alignment with inclusion requirements.⁴² The studies that passed this initial screening were then subjected to a comprehensive review of the full text in the subsequent phase. During the full-text review, researchers GK and NN continued to independently examine the complete articles to confirm their eligibility for inclusion in the final analysis. In cases where conflicts arose regarding independently included articles, the authors deliberated on the differences, focusing on whether they met the inclusion criteria, and reached resolutions. Figure 1 shows a PRISMA flowchart for the literature search, retrieval, and inclusion process.

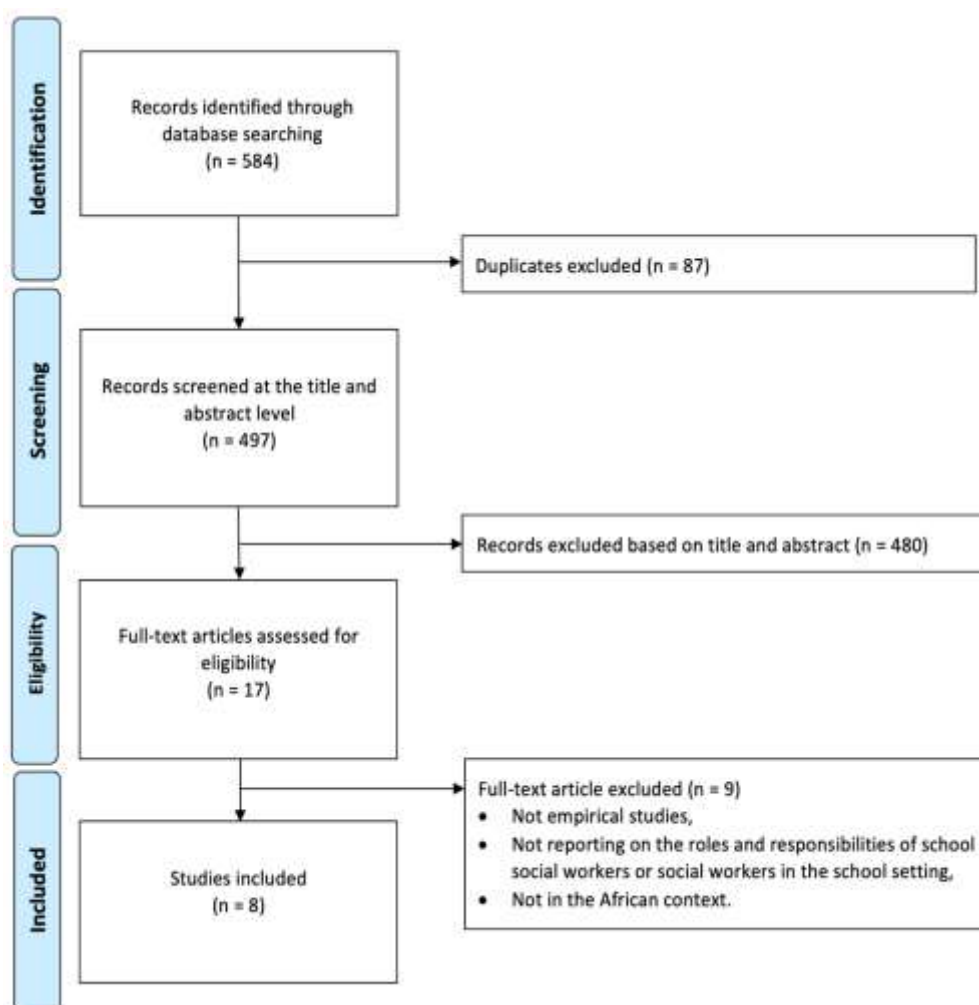


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram describing the process of study selection

⁴¹ Mourad Ouzzani et al., “Rayyan—a Web and Mobile App for Systematic Reviews,” *Systematic Reviews* 5, no. 1 (December 5, 2016): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-016-0384-4>.

⁴² Dennis Vicencio Blanco and Rogelio Alicor Panoa, “Caring for the Orphan in the Philippines: A Policy-Capacity Review,” *Child & Youth Services* 40, no. 1 (2019): 65–92.

Data characterization

This process included describing and understanding the properties and attributes of a dataset. Therefore, after the researchers extracted and reviewed relevant studies on the roles and responsibilities of SSWs in the African context at the full-text level, GK developed a data extraction spreadsheet to methodically gather information from each article included. The spreadsheet contained specific study details, including author/s, publication year, study title, context (country), study population, methodology, and findings (depicted in Table 1). Additional publications were excluded if they did not meet the specified inclusion and exclusion criteria developed by the researchers.

Author	Title of Publication	Context	Aim of Publication	Study Type/Source (methodology)	Population	Sample Size	Findings
Bulanda, J. J. & Jalloh, S. 2019	A needs assessment for school social workers in Sierra Leone.	Sierra Leone	This study sought to learn teachers' and administrators' perspectives on the social and emotional challenges facing their students, the ways schools respond to students with learning needs, and their perceptions of the field of social work.	Mixed methods approach	Teachers and school administrators	105 teachers and 30 principals	The study found that SSWs could significantly benefit learners, teachers, and the school community as a whole. SSWs could provide individual and group counseling to learners, helping them develop self-esteem, manage difficult situations, and improve academic performance. They could also collaborate with teachers to understand the social factors that affect learners' behavior and develop supportive strategies. SSWs could play a crucial role in protecting children's rights by advocating against corporal punishment and modeling positive behavior management techniques for teachers. Due to the lack of formal systems for supporting learners with disabilities and suggested that SSWs could take the lead in developing Individualized Education Plans to ensure all learners have the opportunity to succeed.

<p>Ntombela, N. H., Tshuma, C., & Van Wijk, H. C. 2022</p>	<p>Problems experienced by school going children: a school social work perspective</p>	<p>South Africa</p>	<p>This study aimed to explore the developmental perspectives of school social work with special reference to the extent to which it would benefit children.</p>	<p>Qualitative and quantitative approaches</p>	<p>Educators, principals, education managers, social workers, directors</p>	<p>45 educators (teachers and principals), 5 education managers, 45 social workers, 15 Welfare Organisations directors, 2 NGO directors</p>	<p>The study found that SSWs play a vital role in identifying and supporting learners facing social problems. They assess learners' social wellbeing, counsel them and their families, and can refer them to specialists like psychologists for further help. This support extends to tackling tough issues like domestic violence and child abuse that can hinder a child's ability to learn. SSWs visit homes to better understand situations and advise individuals experiencing social difficulties. Educators appreciated the SSWs' role in helping learners focus on academics by addressing these social problems that can disrupt learning and school harmony.</p>
<p>Ogina, T., A & Ramare, N., M. 2019</p>	<p>Accountability of school stakeholders in ensuring orphaned children's school attendance</p>	<p>South Africa</p>	<p>This study aimed to explore the perspectives of school stakeholders on managing the school attendance of orphaned learners.</p>	<p>Qualitative research approach</p>	<p>Teachers</p>	<p>9 teachers</p>	<p>In supporting orphaned girls who have experienced sexual abuse, educators often reach out to social workers for support since they lack the appropriate words to console the victims. Social workers, in turn, visit schools to monitor the attendance of orphaned</p>

							learners, emphasizing the importance of structured accountability measures to ensure their regular attendance. Participants highlighted the collaborative effort between volunteer organizations, social workers, and educators in the community to address the needs of orphaned children. They emphasized the necessity for social workers' involvement in facilitating access to social grants for basic necessities and essential documents such as birth certificates. Social workers presence in the school prompted the learners' guardians' involvement and engagement within the school system.
Van Sittert, H. W., & Wilson, L. 2018	School social workers' perceptions of their role within the framework of inclusive education	South Africa	The study aimed to explore and describe the perceptions school social workers have of their role within the framework of inclusive education.	Qualitative research approach	School social workers	10 school social workers	The study found that SSWs see themselves as a strong support system within the school. They work directly with learners through individual therapy and group work, addressing emotional barriers and promoting overall well-being. They collaborate and network with external professionals (e.g., psychologists, teachers,

							and even student interns) for referrals and develop preventative programs to tackle issues like bullying, substance abuse, and social media concerns. They also empower educators through training and knowledge-sharing, ensuring teachers can best support learners. SSWs assume responsibility for keeping up-to-date with legislation and policies regarding child protection. They actively involved parents. Ultimately, SSWs believe their knowledge and skills, combined with these collaborative efforts, allow them to significantly contribute to the well-being of the school community.
Haffejee,S., Mbowa, S., & Patel, L. 2023	An integrated multisectoral and multidisciplinary community of practice collaboration to enhance child wellbeing in South Africa	South Africa	The study aimed to describe the lessons learnt from a multisectoral and multidisciplinary community of practice established to strengthen social systems to ensure	Qualitative research approach	Teachers, nurses, social workers	540 Teachers, 55 social workers, 51 nurses working in the school/community	SSWs played a key role in providing ongoing support and monitoring for children in participating schools, working alongside foundation Phase teachers and department heads. Collaboration with health professionals proved to be valuable. SSWs refer children facing academic challenges to psychologists and those with health issues to

			child wellbeing outcomes.				clinics, easing their own burden and ensuring children receive specialized help. This teamwork allowed them to share perspectives and develop well-rounded solutions for the children they supported.
Vergottini, M. & Weyers, M. 2022	The Department of Basic Education’s Expectations of Social Workers at South African Schools	South Africa	The survey aimed to produce a detailed and prioritised list of the responsibilities and functions that these practitioners are expected to perform	Quantitative approach	School social work management cadre or population	27 senior managers	The study found that SSWs view a wide range of tasks as crucial to their role. These include addressing social problems like bullying and teenage pregnancy, referring learners to external services for serious issues like child abuse, and developing preventive programs to tackle these problems before they arise. Building strong connections with external resources is also seen as essential. SSWs view the establishment and support of school-based support teams as critical, along with implementing and monitoring social-emotional programs. Crisis intervention and participation in multidisciplinary meetings are considered especially important. SSWs find that creating individual support plans and assisting learners in

							disciplinary hearings are very valuable. They highlight the importance of identifying learner needs early, supporting those facing social barriers to learning, and acting as a liaison between learners, staff, and external professionals on social work issues. Equipping educators with knowledge of social issues, policies, and legislation is another key responsibility. SSWs believe that their role extends to participating in professional development for educators and collaborating on school-based, circuit-based, and district-based support teams. Data management, collaborating with external social workers, and managing school crises are also considered vital aspects of the job. SSWs view presenting workshops and facilitating parent evenings on various social issues as an important way to support the broader school community.
Smith, E. 2016	The need for social work services and the significant role of women in the	South Africa	This study concentrated on the need for and existence of experts like social	Qualitative approach	Social work students, school principals and Life	Not stated	The study found that student SSWs picked up special cases that showed there needed to be continuous engagement and also highlighted a need for

	<p>school system of the North West Province</p>		<p>workers, most especially women, to deal with the menace.</p>		<p>Orientation teachers</p>	<p>SSWs in every school. The group sessions provided a safe space for learners to discuss sensitive topics like teenage pregnancy, drug abuse and gambling. They suggested implementing programs akin to those initiated by student social workers themselves and that they be offered more frequently throughout the school year, and also suggested that these programs be incorporated into the curriculum at an early age to equip learners with social and life skills. They believed social workers, particularly female social workers, could better connect with learners on these issues. Students felt social workers could provide a trusted confidante outside of the teacher role and offer crucial intervention for social problems impacting learner's well-being. The study also suggests students believe social workers could help learners develop coping skills and work more independently, and support teachers by providing them with tools and strategies to better handle</p>
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							learner issues and improve learner-teacher relationships.
Kim, S. 2018	Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa.	South Africa	The study aimed to investigate the need for social workers in the early childhood development centers (ECDCs) and schools of Eastern Cape, South Africa.	A triangulation mixed-methods research approach used in the study	First-year university students, social work interns	96 first-year university students, 8 social work interns	The study found that student participants highlighted a significant need for social workers in schools. They shared experiences in which students faced challenges like family dysfunction (absent parents, substance abuse), poverty, neglect, and even violence at home and in the community. Students felt uncomfortable or unable to confide in parents or teachers about these problems. Lack of support and guidance left them feeling unheard and disadvantaged. The social work interns echoed these concerns, witnessing situations like child abuse, neglect, prostitution among parents and teenage pregnancy that required professional intervention. Overall, the study participants' experiences painted a picture of learners needing a safe space to speak openly about their struggles and access professional help to navigate difficult home environments and social issues.

Data summary and synthesis

Data were compiled in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for inductive thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke.⁴³

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

As shown in Table 1, eight articles were included in the final analysis. These papers presented empirical data using different types of methodologies, namely: four employed qualitative methods, one used quantitative method, and three used mixed methods. Geographically, seven studies were conducted in South Africa and one in Sierra Leone. All of these were published between 2016 and 2023. The studies were conducted with different groups of participants and overall, highlighted the roles of SSWs and the perceived roles of SSWs within African contexts. Access to SSWs according to the reports from the articles varied with 62.5% of the articles indicating that participants had access to school-based social work services through qualified social workers, 12.5% had access to school social work services through a student social worker, 12.5% indicating that while some schools had access to school social work services, others did not, and 12.5% did not have access to school social work services.

The review confirmed that the problems experienced by learners impacted their school performance and highlighted the significance of school social work services in the arena of supporting learners with these problems. In doing so, the learners would then be able to concentrate on their academic work.⁴⁴ This, in turn, would positively impact teaching and learning and further assist in ensuring the harmonious running of schools and equitable education systems. Other studies found it useful to have SSWs. For example, Ogina and Ramare found that social workers were called upon when orphaned learners and those who have been sexually abused, with social problems missed classes and to ensure their school attendance in a rural South African school.⁴⁵ We show that the deployment of social workers in educational settings is significant for the realisation of educational equity and justice, especially in settings where learners are exposed to contextual situations that make them vulnerable. These situations, as highlighted in the studies included in this review, are domestic violence at home, child neglect and abuse, dysfunctional families, exposure to drugs, and being orphaned.⁴⁶ We recognise that some African nations may already have social workers from communities and welfare agencies responding to these specific issues but to streamline services and ensure effective service provision, there should be specific social workers servicing schools. Bulanda and Jalloh posit that SSWs play a crucial role within Sierra Leonean schools in addressing the prevalent practice of corporal punishment which affects learners' emotional and psychosocial development and can have ripple effects on their commitment to education.⁴⁷ They argue that SSWs can contribute to safeguarding children's rights by modelling compassionate behaviour management strategies for teachers. As such, school social workers, as human rights professionals and agents of social justice, have a role to play in the education system to ensure that children's rights are protected and advocated for and that the methods of learner discipline used are not harmful.

⁴³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Toward Good Practice in Thematic Analysis: Avoiding Common Problems and Being a Knowing Researcher," *International Journal of Transgender Health* 24, no. 1 (January 25, 2023): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>.

⁴⁴ Ngenisiwe Henrietta Ntombela, Cherpet Tshuma, and Hester Carolina Van Wijk, "Problems Experienced by School Going Children: A School Social Work Perspective," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 1 (2022): 18691–706.

⁴⁵ Teresa A. Ogina and Norman M. Ramare, "Accountability of School Stakeholders in Ensuring Orphaned Children's School Attendance," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 9, no. 1 (August 28, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v9i1.672>.

⁴⁶ Ntombela, Tshuma, and Van Wijk, "Problems Experienced by School Going Children: A School Social Work Perspective"; Kim Schmidt, "Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa," *Children & Schools* 40, no. 4 (2018): 199–210; Ogina and Ramare, "Accountability of School Stakeholders in Ensuring Orphaned Children's School Attendance"; Melissa K. Tibbits et al., "Longitudinal Patterns of Active Leisure among South African Youth: Gender Differences and Associations with Health Risk Behaviours," *World Leisure Journal* 58, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 60–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2015.1089317>; Elizabeth Smith, "The Social Work Services Need and the Significant Role of Women in the School System of the North West Province," *Gender and Behaviour* 14, no. 2 (2016): 7290–7300.

⁴⁷ Bulanda and Jalloh, "A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone."

Thematic analysis of eight empirical research studies included in the current review underscores the multifaceted role of SSWs in addressing a wide array of social and emotional challenges faced by learners. As a result, the following themes emerged, i) providing psychosocial support to learners and their families, ii) facilitating group support sessions iii) training and guiding teachers to support learners iv) developing preventive programs, and v) forming partnerships with other professionals and organizations. The rest of the findings of the scoping review will be presented under these five themes.

Providing psychosocial support to learners and their families

The articles included in this review noted that the role of SSWs is to provide individualized psychosocial support.⁴⁸ Bulanda and Jalloh, and Smith reported that SSWs were in a good position to support the psychosocial development of learners as they are exposed to many issues and often are not provided the necessary support, beyond teaching and learning from teachers.⁴⁹ In this regard, SSWs would be responsible for visiting schools to identify learners with social problems (i.e., domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, parent neglect, HIV/AIDS, and extreme poverty) and emotional problems (i.e., suicide and stress). Similarly, Smith's study reported that as part of their university training, student social workers placed at school to support learners were found to be responsible for identifying special cases that required further social work intervention services. Once learners with social and emotional problems were identified, the studies by Ntombela, Tshuma, and Van Wijk, Van Sittert and Wilson, Bulanda and Jalloh reported that social workers would provide counselling and therapy to those learners.⁵⁰ To further this specific responsibility, participants in the study by Kim expressed that learners at school often did not have anyone to listen to their emotional stories and even at home, they rarely spoke to their parents as they were afraid to talk to them. Therefore, emphasizing the significance and need for school social work services.⁵¹

This review also found that once counselling was provided, where necessary, the social workers would then link the learners with relevant stakeholders for further specialized interventions through referrals. These stakeholders included various specialists such as psychologists, and remedial practitioners as evidenced in studies included in this review. Specific to learners living with disabilities, the study by Ntombela, Tshuma and Van Wijk found that social workers referred to relevant resources such as schools for the Blind, Deaf schools, and mental health rehabilitation.⁵² Other referrals were to optometrists for eye tests and occupational therapists.⁵³ The ability to refer learners for further intervention and support proved to not only enhance effective psychosocial support but also contribute positively to the caseload of SSWs as Haffejee, Mbowa, and Patel found that the professionals felt less burden on them as they knew that other organizations were there in the community to support the learners.⁵⁴

Three articles highlight that psychosocial support provided to learners extended to SSWs that support parents and families and help foster positive child-parent relationships and conducting home visits.⁵⁵ Specifically, Smith stated that SSWs facilitate parents' evenings on parental guidance programs

⁴⁸ Sadiyya Haffejee, Sonia Mbowa, and Leila Patel, "An Integrated Multisectoral and Multidisciplinary Community of Practice Collaboration to Enhance Child Wellbeing in South Africa," *Journal of Integrated Care* 31, no. 4 (December 6, 2023): 401–16, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JICA-04-2023-0021>; Ntombela, Tshuma, and Van Wijk, "Problems Experienced by School Going Children: A School Social Work Perspective"; Hester Van Sittert and Lizane Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education," *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development* 30, no. 2 (September 3, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.25159/2415-5829/2944>.

⁴⁹ Bulanda and Jalloh, "A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone"; Smith, "The Social Work Services Need and the Significant Role of Women in the School System of the North West Province"; Smith, "The Social Work Services Need and the Significant Role of Women in the School System of the North West Province."

⁵⁰ Ntombela, Tshuma, and Van Wijk, "Problems Experienced by School Going Children: A School Social Work Perspective"; Van Sittert and Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education"; Bulanda and Jalloh, "A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone."

⁵¹ Schmidt, "Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa."

⁵² Ntombela, Tshuma, and Van Wijk, "Problems Experienced by School Going Children: A School Social Work Perspective."

⁵³ Van Sittert and Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education."

⁵⁴ Haffejee, Mbowa, and Patel, "An Integrated Multisectoral and Multidisciplinary Community of Practice Collaboration to Enhance Child Wellbeing in South Africa."

⁵⁵ Bulanda and Jalloh, "A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone"; Haffejee, Mbowa, and Patel, "An Integrated Multisectoral and Multidisciplinary Community of Practice Collaboration to Enhance Child Wellbeing in South Africa"; Smith, "The Social Work Services Need and the Significant Role of Women in the School System of the North West Province."

and social issues (i.e., social media and bullying).⁵⁶ Although study participants in Bulanda and Jalloh's (i.e., principal) indicated that they needed the SSWs to conduct home visits for learners with social problems, Haffejee, Mbowa and Patel found that SSWs would explore the parents' perspectives on how they support their children and ways in which the support can be improved to contribute to positive school experiences for their children.⁵⁷ Moreover, Bulanda and Jalloh found that the need for home visits was due to noticeable problems pertaining to parents' lack of presence in their child's education which they speculated may be a result of limited exposure to formal education or not being literate.⁵⁸

Two South African articles specifically reported specifically on the role of SSWs in assisting children and their families to apply for and receive birth certificates and child support grants. The findings of the study by Ogina and Ramare and Kim's study suggest that there were perceived roles that teachers expected SSWs to fulfil.⁵⁹ These perceived roles included social workers who help orphans to obtain documents, such as birth certificates to access social grants with which to buy basic needs so that they can attend school. This service by SSWs appears to have led to children's parents' involvement in schools as such, teachers in the study by Ogina and Ramare's reported that parents only came to school if the name of the social workers was mentioned and that this appeared to be linked to the need to access social grants for their children, which they misused.⁶⁰ Kim's study also reported on the responsibility of the school social worker to ensure that learners do not drop out of school due to a lack of financial means at school and at home.⁶¹ In addition to supporting learners and families to gain access to social grants in the South African context, the study of Kim participants further speculated that social workers could also help get absent parents to pay child maintenance.⁶²

Facilitating group support sessions

Supporting learners in group settings was one of the ways that SSWs ensured that the majority of learners' cohorts were supported. They provided group therapy in order to promote the children's overall well-being, and awareness and empower the learners with necessary life and social skills. As part of these group programs, topics such as anger management and self-esteem were covered.⁶³ Groups were reported to be particularly important, as SSWs had the responsibility of supporting learners who knew little about various factors that could affect their social functioning and support their development of social skills and life skills. Smith's study participants expressed that in their responsibility of developing and facilitating group work, SSWs would discuss issues related to teenage pregnancy which appears to have captured learners' attention.⁶⁴ Their study found that participants felt that women social workers would be able to effectively facilitate such topics in group settings as they may be better able to identify with the pain of pregnancy and would be better placed to respond to how learners should handle it.⁶⁵ Although the study did not provide a critical argument for the female SSWs specifically, the student social worker participants suggested that they are key in addressing the issues faced by the learners at their respective homes. Although the study by Bulanda & Jalloh indicated that there were no school social work services in the specific school the study was conducted, the participants (i.e., teachers and school administrators) understood that these professionals were needed for 'class counselling' which can be termed as group work focused on social skills.⁶⁶ This finding was echoed by the participants because of the overwhelming number and severity of social problems identified (i.e., child labor, abuse/neglect, and profound poverty)

⁵⁶ Smith, "The Social Work Services Need and the Significant Role of Women in the School System of the North West Province."

⁵⁷ Haffejee, Mbowa, and Patel, "An Integrated Multisectoral and Multidisciplinary Community of Practice Collaboration to Enhance Child Wellbeing in South Africa."

⁵⁸ Bulanda and Jalloh, "A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone."

⁵⁹ Ogina and Ramare, "Accountability of School Stakeholders in Ensuring Orphaned Children's School Attendance"; Schmidt, "Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa."

⁶⁰ Ogina and Ramare, "Accountability of School Stakeholders in Ensuring Orphaned Children's School Attendance."

⁶¹ Schmidt, "Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa."

⁶² Schmidt, "Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa."

⁶³ Van Sittert and Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education."

⁶⁴ Smith, "The Social Work Services Need and the Significant Role of Women in the School System of the North West Province."

⁶⁵ Smith, "The Social Work Services Need and the Significant Role of Women in the School System of the North West Province."

⁶⁶ Bulanda and Jalloh, "A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone."

within the specific Sierra Leone school's context and that these groups facilitated by SSWs could be geared toward improving learner self-esteem, strategies for academic success, and coping skills in managing difficult home and school situations.

Training and Guiding Teachers to Support Learners

Understanding that teachers were the first to come into contact with the learners, the articles included in this review highlight the unique role of SSWs in supporting and training the teachers. In Kim, it was noted that the SSWs were responsible for supporting teachers who could not cope with the problems experienced by learners as such, SSWs would discuss those problems with the teachers and contribute to improved learner-teacher relationships.⁶⁷ Other studies indicate that SSWs participate in the professional development of teachers to help them identify learners' social problems and learning barriers, and ultimately improve learners' well-being in schools.⁶⁸ According to Van Sittert and Wilson, the SSWs were responsible for providing the teachers with the knowledge and information needed to support learners, therefore ensuring that they acted in the best interest of the learners.⁶⁹ Part of the topics for teacher training included information related to the curriculum (e.g., bullying, violence), policy, legislation, and statutory matters.⁷⁰ Their study further revealed that SSWs believed that they were responsible for teachers' development in terms of understanding the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy, a South African "policy framework for the standardization of the procedures to identify, assess and provide programmes for all learners who require additional support to improve their participation and inclusion in school."⁷¹ Interestingly, the SSWs in the study by Van Sittert and Wilson believed that it was their mandate to fulfil this particular role, as they were of the understanding that they are the custodians of legislation and policies and that they were familiar with legislations relating to children protection and acting in the best interest of the child.⁷² Participants in Kim's study reported that training of teachers by SSWs was essential as "there are lots of blind spots or shortcomings between teachers and learners so teachers should be 'workshopped' on better skills to deal with learner problem as well as theirs."⁷³ Bulanda and Jalloh speculated that SSWs could help staff understand how social factors could affect the child's behaviour in class and work collaboratively to support the child.⁷⁴

Develop Preventative Programs

At the core of school social work, school problems are addressed that are linked to societal issues through developing preventative programs. Kim's study shared that preventative school programs are advocated for and can be done as part of the professional's community work and have the benefit of reaching all learners and the whole school.⁷⁵ In the South African study, the SSWs had this responsibility particularly for proactively developing programs related to anti-bullying, bullying and social media, discipline, substance abuse, the danger of gangsterism, and the use of drugs.⁷⁶ Smith's study advocated for the deployment of SSWs after school placement of student social workers and noted that the responsibility SSW to initiate such programs would benefit the learners because they would gain more insight into social issues and also become agents of social change in their schools, and insight into their social functioning amid these societal issues.⁷⁷ In another study included in this review, Schimdt speculated that due to issues of violence such as stabbing fellow schoolmates and rape encounters in the school setting, SSWs, through

⁶⁷ Schmidt, "Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa."

⁶⁸ Van Sittert and Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education"; Vergottini and Weyers, "The Department of Basic Education's Expectations of Social Workers at South African Schools."

⁶⁹ Van Sittert and Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education."

⁷⁰ Vergottini and Weyers, "The Department of Basic Education's Expectations of Social Workers at South African Schools."

⁷¹ Department of Basic Education, *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support* (Pretoria: DBE, 2014), 9.

⁷² Van Sittert and Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education."

⁷³ Schmidt, "Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa," 7296.

⁷⁴ Bulanda and Jalloh, "A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone."

⁷⁵ Schmidt, "Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa."

⁷⁶ Van Sittert and Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education."

⁷⁷ Smith, "The Social Work Services Need and the Significant Role of Women in the School System of the North West Province."

conducting preventive programmes, would be able to make the necessary behavioural changes among the learners.⁷⁸

Forming partnerships with other professionals and organizations

The articles included in this review reported that social workers collaborated with other professionals and community stakeholders to render effective services in schools.⁷⁹ In Ogina and Ramare, SSWs partnered with teachers and the larger community to ensure learners' school attendance.⁸⁰ Collaborations were also formed in participating in MDT committees or caucus teams as evidenced by Van Sittert and Wilson where SSWs were part of the School-Based Support Team which included school principals, headmasters, educators, educational psychologists, or psychologists.⁸¹ In these forums SSWs discussed with other team members issues that schools are concerned about and discussed learner cases. In some instances, SSWs collaborated with specific teachers in the school to provide services to learners in the foundation phase whereby they would jointly think through solutions to difficulties faced by children.⁸² To ensure learner academic support, the article by Bulanda and Jalloh reflected that SSWs would collaborate with teachers and school administrators on best practices for helping learners, and in their example, SSWs could help teachers talk to learners with behavioural problems and ensure that the learners are treated with respect.⁸³

Although the above findings summarize a range of studies related to the roles and responsibilities of SSWs in African contexts, they reveal that there is a lack of literature dedicated to exploring the practice of school social work. This dearth of information indicates that school social work services may mostly be non-existent in African contexts. We argue that the latter compromises goals of inclusion, equity and social justice in education systems, as advocated by the United Nations' SDGs, particularly SDG4 – Quality education. Moreover, the absence of literature may lead to unsupported scientific practices regarding the roles and responsibilities of school social workers which could affect the ultimate mandate for SSWs to contribute to the implementation of inclusive schools and fulfil their social justice roles. The absence may limit the utilisation and deployment of SSWs as governments may not know to what extent SSWs can help ensure quality education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the critical gap in the literature, the review recommends that further research be carried out on SSWs and their services within diverse African contexts. This research could dive into the unique challenges, best practices and the impact of SSWs in supporting learners and schools in the African context. This research can be conducted collaboratively by different scholars from various countries. Additionally, participation in global conferences where authors present their work on school social work would help close the knowledge, research and practice gap in the field.

Additionally, the findings of the review underscore the urgent call for countries to deploy social work services in schools to bolster learner support systems. Given the significant shift in school-related issues experienced by learners and teachers, this review recommends that governments and educational institutions prioritize the integration of social work services within school systems. Practically, this could include the allocation of resources to support the integration, and the training and deployment of qualified social workers to work alongside teachers in supporting the holistic well-being of learners.

CONCLUSION

Despite the limited research, the included studies in this review illuminate the multifaceted and complex roles occupied by SSWs. They demonstrate the ability of SSWs to address the problems of the learners in

⁷⁸ Schmidt, "Partnerships for Prosperity: A Need for Social Workers in the Early Childhood Development Centers and Schools of the Eastern Cape, South Africa";

⁷⁹ Ntombela, Tshuma, and Van Wijk, "Problems Experienced by School Going Children: A School Social Work Perspective"; Van Sittert and Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education."

⁸⁰ Ogina and Ramare, "Accountability of School Stakeholders in Ensuring Orphaned Children's School Attendance."

⁸¹ Van Sittert and Wilson, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Their Role within the Framework of Inclusive Education."

⁸² Haffejee, Mbowa, and Patel, "An Integrated Multisectoral and Multidisciplinary Community of Practice Collaboration to Enhance Child Wellbeing in South Africa."

⁸³ Bulanda and Jalloh, "A Needs Assessment for School Social Workers in Sierra Leone."

the ecological microsystem (i.e., the child's immediate relationships and environment such as family, peers, teachers, schools and community). Furthermore, the reviewed studies position SSWs as central figures in the promotion of the psychosocial well-being of learners and schools, ultimately supporting the core mandates of teaching and learning. The review concludes by emphasizing that while schools have traditionally focused on academic instruction, the value of social workers within these institutions, as evidenced by the research, is undeniable.

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