

# School social work in South Africa: Roles, responsibilities, and challenges in the Free State province

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**Abstract:** The employment of social workers in South African schools has seen a significant upswing in recent years. However, the absence of standardised responsibilities poses challenges for these practitioners. A study was conducted to address the lacuna in formalised standards for social work services at the school level. Data were collected using a non-standardised questionnaire that focused on proposed functions, responsibilities, and challenges. Quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, while thematic analysis was used for written responses. The findings delineated a comprehensive profile of roles and responsibilities, along with the challenges encountered. As the first study of its kind in South Africa, it could serve as a foundational resource for establishing local practice standards. It could also benefit countries that are at a similar stage in the development of their school social work services.

**Keywords:** school social work; social work roles; expectations; responsibilities; challenges; South Africa

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## **Introduction**

An increase in the number of school social worker appointments in South Africa reflects the growing demand to address psychosocial challenges in school settings (Boboyi, 2024; Kemp, 2014; Vergottini, 2018). However, the lack of uniform expectations of school social workers across the country complicates the professional landscape (Morgan, 2017). This is not only a local problem. International authors such as Isaksson and Larsson (2017), Kellgren et al. (2022), Rafter (2022), and Tadam (2022) have indicated that a lack of clarity about the role, scope, and purpose of social workers in schools remains a global challenge.

In South Africa, the decentralised education system resulted in differing roles and responsibilities for school social workers in its nine provinces (Morgan, 2017). A 2017 survey conducted among senior management from the different provincial education departments reaffirmed this diversity of expectations (Vergottini, 2018). The survey, however, did not involve school social workers themselves and a follow-up study was done which included social workers in schools.

The follow-up study, on which this article is based, aimed to help address the lacuna in formalised standards and guidelines for the roles of school social workers in South Africa, specifically for those working within the Free State Province. It covered the perceptions of school-level practitioners - employed by the provincial education department and school governing bodies (SGBs) - of the requirements that they should meet. This approach could then provide a more substantiated priority ranking of their roles, responsibilities they had to perform daily, as well as of the challenges they faced.

## **Literature review**

South Africa is a diverse country with nine provinces and 12 officially recognised languages. The phenomenon of school social work in South Africa must be explained within the framework of the basic educational system.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) acts as an umbrella body and has various responsibilities, including policy formulation, strategic

development, legislative adoption, and the organisation of school social work (DBE, 2014). The nine provincial education departments have the responsibility to appoint school social workers in the respective provinces for service delivery to schools, educational institutions or district and circuit levels (Morgan, 2017).

The complexity of the situation is further worsened by the significant differences in the processes through which social workers are appointed across different provinces, as well as the expected scope of their practice (Kemp, 2014). Furthermore, SGBs in both mainstream schools and schools for learners with special educational needs have the authority to recruit and appoint social workers and eventually compensate them using their own budget (Kemp, 2014).

A study by Kemp (2014) found that there has been a substantial increase in the overall number of school social workers across South African schools, however, the outline of their roles and responsibilities remains unstandardised (Vergottini, 2018). This raises significant concerns, especially since the nine provincial departments of basic education need to ensure specific expectations of the social workers in their employ. From approximately 2010, certain provinces markedly increased the quantity of their appointed social workers, including the Free State province (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). However, the absence of uniform guidelines persists in the country (Boboyi, 2024; Vergottini & Weyers, 2020).

According to Section 28(1)(c) of the South African Constitution (1996), children are a vulnerable group with the right to social services. Furthermore, children have the right to basic education (Section 29 of the SA Constitution, 1996), and the education setting is therefore the perfect setting for access to social services. Reyneke (2024) elaborates on the importance of safeguarding children from neglect and abuse, as required by Section 100 of the Children's Act (38 of 2005). Furthermore, children have the right to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, and abuse or degradation according to Section 28 (1)(d) of the Constitution (1996).

South Africa has a very high crime rate, and crimes against children are rife. According to a media release in Parliament 'in the first quarter of 2024/25, 314 children were murdered, 424 murders against children were attempted, and 1 596 children were assaulted with the intent to cause grievous bodily harm' (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2024). Furthermore, the phenomenon of bullying in schools has increased in severity and prevalence. A research study conducted in South Africa by Boboyi (2024) revealed that social malaises, including bullying, mental

health disorders, socioeconomic hardships, and substance dependency, are prevalent and profoundly detrimental to students' educational outcomes and comprehensive development.

Unfortunately, the continued lack of uniform appointments of school social workers throughout the country, as the well as lack of standardised roles and responsibilities, hinders appropriate support (Boboyi, 2024).

## Research design and procedures

This article is based on a smaller study that formed part of a bigger research study. It started with a literature review, nationwide inputs from managers within the Department of Education that informed the study on which this article is based. To ensure representativity, the survey targeted *all* social work practitioners within the Free State province who worked at school level. The questionnaire covered aspects such as their responsibilities within the school system, basic infrastructure requirements, the need for school social work, and the challenges faced by them at the grassroots level. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the provincial Department of Education and the snowball technique (Turner, 2020).

Written permission was obtained to conduct the study from both the South African National DBE and the Free State's provincial Department of Education. It was also approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the North-West University (NWU) during December 2016. All participation was voluntary and willing participants had to sign an informed consent form. It was also deemed necessary to obtain the written consent of the managers and employers for the investigation. The study was a low-risk study.

All data generated by the study was captured and encoded by NWU Statistical Consulting Services using IBM SPSS version 24 (Ellis, 2017). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the responses generated by the components of the questionnaire was calculated to determine reliability (Field, 2009). In terms of acceptable reliability levels, Kline (in Field, 2009) notes that although the generally accepted value  $\alpha \geq 0.8$  is appropriate for cognitive tests such as intelligence tests, the  $\alpha \geq 0.7$  threshold point 0.7 is more appropriate for ability tests. He adds that when it comes to psychological constructs, values can be expected to be even lower than  $\alpha \leq 0.7$  due to the diversity of measured constructions. However, for the purposes of the

study, a  $\alpha \geq 0.7$  was accepted as a satisfactory reliability coefficient.

The survey participants were divided into three groups: the 16 practitioners employed in special schools, five workers appointed by the SGB of mainstream schools in unsubsidised posts, and seven employed at the district level at the Department of Education. It should be noted that 75% of the participants were school-based (worked in mainstream and special schools) and that only three of the entire school social workers in the province at that time did not participate. The social workers in unsubsidised posts are posts that were created by SGBs of the schools and the salary is paid from the school's budget.

## Survey results

The contents of the questionnaire were based on all available data on the requirements that social workers should meet at the school level, particularly in South Africa. The questions had to be tailor-made to reflect current practices and standards.

Table 1: Sections of the survey questionnaire discussed in this article.

Section	Aspects covered	Questions
Section 1	Responsibilities of social workers at the school level	1.1 Scale 1: Responsibilities toward learners 1.2 Scale 2: Responsibilities towards educators/teachers 1.3 Scale 3: Responsibilities relating to the social work profession, education, and policy 1.4 Scale 4: Responsibilities concerning multidisciplinary teams and life orientation 1.5 Scale 5: General responsibilities 1.6 Comments
Section 2	Factors that influence school social work practice	2.1 Basic infrastructure required 2.2 Growing need for school social work 2.3 Challenges

Although this study included other aspects such as socio-demographic information and general requirements for social workers to be appointed to schools, the main sections dealt with the responsibilities of school social workers in schools, the need for school social work, and certain general challenges that may affect how school social work is carried out in order to achieve the aim of the study. This document deals with the responsibilities

of practitioners and factors that can affect the way social work is conducted at school level (see Table 1 above).

The data produced by the questionnaire and the conclusions drawn are discussed next.

## **Section 1: Responsibilities of social workers at the school level**

The first section of the questionnaire consisted of five scales. These dealt with participants' responsibilities towards learners and educators, responsibilities related to the social work profession, education and policy changes, responsibilities related to multidisciplinary teams and life orientation, and general responsibilities. Results will be provided in a narrative.

### *Scale 1: Responsibilities toward learners*

Scale 1 covered four core responsibilities that educators at the school level may have toward learners within the South African school system. These include the development and implementation of an Individual Support Plan (ISP) for each learner, participation in multidisciplinary meetings regarding learners, the implementation of crisis intervention programmes, and the assistance and support of learners in disciplinary hearings. The ISP forms part of the policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (2014), and every professional in the multidisciplinary team should complete their part of the ISP form.

Two elements, namely, 'participation in multidisciplinary meetings' and 'offering crisis intervention programmes', fell into the category 'critically important', while 'development and implementation of individual support plans (ISP)' was rated as 'very important'. Social workers also rated 'assist and support learners in disciplinary hearings' as 'very important'.

In the open section of the questionnaire, a participant recommended adding the responsibility to 'screen and evaluating learners who are sexually, emotionally, verbally, or (who are) neglected'. According to the Children's Act (38 of 2005), all suspected abuse and neglect is mandated to be reported to designated social workers for further investigation. Therefore, screening can take place at school. This raised the question whether the current local profiling of direct services to learners is adequate and comprehensive enough. This should become one of the foci of future research.

### Scale 2: Responsibilities towards educators/teachers

In terms of responsibilities towards educators or teachers, the key functions have been assigned priority based on their perceived importance, the corresponding average scores, and standard deviations reflecting the degree of variability between responses.

The most important role identified is to assist in early identification of learning needs, as demonstrated by the high average score of 5.38 and a relatively low standard deviation of 0.74, demonstrating a general consensus on the importance of this role. The role of liaising between learners and staff regarding social work issues was followed closely, with an average of 5.14 and a standard deviation of 0.91, showing some degree of variability, but reflecting a firm agreement on its relevance.

Another notable responsibility is assistance in reporting and supporting learners experiencing social barriers to learning, which received an average score of 5.15 and a higher standard deviation of 1.11, suggesting a greater variability in perception of this obligation. Likewise, the empowerment of teachers on social issues such as bullying and violence relevant to the curriculum is considered important, as shown by the average score of 4.95 and the relatively low standard deviation of 0.81.

In the context of educator empowerment in terms of policies, legislative frameworks, and legal issues, the responsibilities assigned showed a mean score of 4.86; however, the responses revealed a higher degree of variation, as indicated by a standard deviation of 1.20. Facilitation of support for teachers during teacher support meetings is evaluated with an average score of 4.81 and a standard deviation of 0.87, which represents a moderate level of importance.

A significant responsibility in the field of teacher empowerment in the field of classroom management is perceived as slightly less important, as evidenced by an average score of 4.00 and a significantly high standard deviation of 1.45, demonstrating considerable variation in perceptions. The support provided to educators during consultations with parents reaches an average score of 4.48, accompanied by a standard deviation of 1.03, which indicates a moderate importance with a certain degree of variability.

Finally, engagement in the professional development of teachers, in particular in accordance with the SIAS policy, is assessed with an average score of 4.62 and a standard deviation of 1.02, reflecting recognition of their importance while also indicating some differences of opinion.

*Scale 3: Responsibilities related to the social work profession, education, and policy*

All South African social workers must meet certain continuous professional development (CPD) requirements (Social Service Professions Act, 1978, p.110). In the case of a school social worker, this responsibility is limited not only to developments within the profession itself, but also in the broader educational field. Both these two facets were covered by Scale 3.

In the context of obligations relating to professional, educational, and social workers' policies, the associated functions are highlighted, accompanied by their corresponding mean scores and standard deviations, which show the degree of consensus between the responses provided.

The highest rating of responsibility is the commitment to attend and participate in CPD activities, with an average score of 5.38 and a minimum standard deviation of 0.50, which is a strong and consistent agreement on the importance of staying current in professional competencies and knowledge.

According to the strictness of the responsibility to be knowledgeable about relevant policies and new trends affecting learners, which reached an average of 5.29 and a similar low standard deviation of 0.72, the need for professionals to remain informed of changes that may affect their interactions with students has reached a widespread recognition.

The task of attending and providing feedback to the school principal on workshops and conferences is also considered significant, as evidenced by an average score of 5.05 and a moderate standard deviation of 0.87, suggesting a significant level of consensus, although with slightly greater variability than other responsibilities.

Finally, the act of attending and participation in the social work district subcommittee is assessed with an average of 4.48 and a higher standard deviation of 1.25, which indicates a broader range of opinions regarding the importance or priority of this obligation. Although it retains its importance, it is perceived as marginally less critical compared to other responsibilities, with greater variability in how respondents evaluate its importance.

Overall, the scale produced an acceptable Cronbach alpha of = 0.719. Three of the four items were in the category of 'critical importance'. The fourth, '2. Participate in the Social Work District Subcommittee', with an average of only 4.48. This result, combined with a standard deviation of 1.25, could indicate that there are committees that may not work effectively in all regions. This is a question that the authorities concerned should address.

*Scale 4: Responsibilities with respect to multidisciplinary teams and life orientation*

In numerous countries, school social workers operate within multidisciplinary teams, as noted by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (2015). South Africa also adheres to this practice. It is also possible for local practitioners to contribute to the 'life orientation' segment of the school curriculum and the formulation of a school's code of conduct, owing to the inherent nature of their profession. In the area of multi-disciplinary teams and life orientation responsibilities, several key functions have been defined, with mean scores and standard deviations indicating their perceived importance and the degree of consensus between participants.

The highest responsibility is the participation of a multidisciplinary team in the screening and assessment of new admissions, with an average score of 5.60 and a low standard deviation of 0.68. This result suggests a strong consensus on the essential role of social workers in facilitating comprehensive assessments of new learners.

Similarly, engagement in the development of life skills programmes, materials, and information to support life-oriented learning areas is equally important. This responsibility has obtained an average score of 5.24 and a standard deviation of 0.77, indicating that respondents agree largely on the need to contribute to life-oriented education. Another essential responsibility is to participate as a member of the school-based support team, circuit-based support team or district-based support team. This role received an average score of 5.19 and a higher standard deviation of 0.93, meaning that the respondents' perceptions of the need to participate in these teams vary slightly.

The contribution to assist in the development of the school code of conduct is regarded as a little less important, as evidenced by an average score of 4.86 and a standard deviation of 1.11, which indicates an increased variability in perspectives on the significance of this obligation. Although it is considered beneficial, it is considered less urgent than direct involvement in multidisciplinary teams and life-oriented programmes. On the fourth scale, the Cronbach's alpha is = 0.257, and the average correlation is 0.170. Thus, the generated data can only be analysed at an individual level.

In particular, the item addressing the screening and evaluation of new admissions received a high rating (Question 2: mean = 5.6), highlighting the significant role practitioners often play in the screening process. The mean = 5.25 rating of potential contributions to the component of life

skills (life orientation) (Question 3) underscores valuable impact that social work could have on this education component. Participation in various multidisciplinary teams was also categorised as ‘critically important.’

*Scale 5: General responsibilities of school social workers*

Thirteen general responsibilities, ranging from developing programmes, addressing barriers to learning to liaising with external professionals, were explored.

The Cronbach alpha of  $\alpha = 0.8.55$  indicates that the scale as a whole could be viewed as highly reliable. The implications of the responses to only some of the 13 questions will be highlighted.

In terms of general functions, a wide range of tasks and responsibilities for school social workers are imperative, with different degrees of significance determined by mean results and standard deviations.

The highest rating includes liaising with external social workers and other relevant professionals, which achieved an average rating of 5.67, accompanied by a low standard deviation of 0.58, reflecting a strong consensus on the essential nature of interprofessional cooperation. The task of record-keeping is also highly appreciated, as evidenced by an average score of 5.48 and a standard deviation of 0.75, highlighting its critical role in ensuring accurate and complete documentation.

Another important responsibility includes assisting with management of trauma and disaster situations within the school and direct community, which has a score of 5.38 and a standard deviation of 0.81, demonstrating its crucial importance during crises. Participation in consultations with provincial or district social workers on social work-related issues also receives an excellent score, with an average of 5.00 and a relatively large standard deviation of 0.95, which indicates some variability in the perceived significance of this task.

The formulation of a strategic plan for service delivery (average 4.95, *SD*: 0.81) and the creation of an annual plan to guide the functions and operations of social work (average 4.85, *SD*: 0.81) are considered to be responsibilities of moderate importance with comparable results and levels of agreement. Workshop presentations on social issues for students, staff, parents, and other groups (average: 4.81, *SD*: 1.03) and development of programmes aimed to address specific barriers to learning (average: 4.81, *SD*: 0.60) are also recognised as important, although perception differences are slightly greater for workshops.

Facilitating parents’ events (average: 4.76, *SD*: 0.77) and applying

behaviour modification interventions (average: 4.71, *SD*: 0.90) are emphasised slightly less, although still considered significant.

The roles of mental health experts and provision of consultation services on related issues (average 3.90, *SD*: 1.09), alcohol and drug abuse specialists (approximately 4.19, *SD*: 1.47) and violence prevention specialist (average 4.19, *SD*: 1.29) are considered to have the lowest priority among the general responsibilities and show a greater variability in perception. This observation implies that, although these specialised roles are necessary, they cannot be universally regarded as critical in all educational settings.

The overall internal consistency of these responsibilities is encapsulated in the Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.855, signifying a high degree of reliability in the obtained ratings.

## **Section 2: Factors that Influence School Social Work Practice**

The questionnaire contained a second section that all participants had to complete. It covered three themes: the basic infrastructure they required to function effectively; the question of whether there was a need for (more) social workers within the education system; and the nature of the challenges they faced.

### *Infrastructure and equipment required*

There is a general agreement among practitioners that the effective functioning of social work services requires some basic infrastructure and equipment (Morgan, 2017). When considering the infrastructure and equipment requirements for social work at school, several crucial requirements arise, with different levels of priority as indicated by mean results and standard deviations.

The requirements that received the highest rating were office accommodation that is accessible and facilitate confidentiality, as evidenced by an average rating of 5.92 and a remarkably low standard deviation of 0.26, indicating an almost universal consensus on the indispensable need for a private and accessible working environment. Similarly, filing cabinets designed for secure record keeping are considered essential, reflecting an average of 5.86 and a low standard deviation of 0.59, highlighting the importance of secure document storage.

Computers also received a high degree of importance, with an average score of 5.78 and a standard deviation of 0.63, emphasising the crucial

role of digital tools in promoting operational efficiency. Other forms of communication, including telephones, e-mails, and Internet connectivity, are considered vital, with an average of 5.71 and a standard deviation of 0.71, thereby ensuring effective communication both within and outside the school environment. Similarly, photocopiers and printers have an average score of 5.71 and a standard deviation of 0.66, which further illustrates their importance for the distribution of documents and resources.

Basic stationary is classified as another essential prerequisite and attains an average point of 5.71 and a standard deviation of 0.71, thus ensuring that social workers have the tools needed to perform their daily tasks. The appropriate furniture for interviews and the facilitation of group activities is slightly under-emphasised, but it remains important, with an average score of 5.42 and a standard deviation of 1.00, reflecting some variability in its perceived importance.

The lowest assessment is for transport, with an average of 4.86 points and a higher standard deviation of 1.65, suggesting that while it is recognised as important for home visits and other activities, opinions about its necessity vary greatly and may be influenced by the specific needs of schools or districts. Experts agree that effective functioning of social work services requires some essential infrastructure and equipment (Morgan, 2017).

With the exception of transport (Question 2: mean = 4.86), all other infrastructure and equipment received a 'critically important' rating. These were the highest levels in the whole study. The lower average for transport indicates that there may be differences in travel requirements between social workers in different school environments.

Morgan (2017) emphasises that school social workers often face challenges in environments where managers (such as school principals and SGBs in South Africa) may not fully understand the infrastructure necessary to ensure optimal functioning. This emphasises the importance of addressing and meeting the diverse infrastructure needs of practitioners in educational environments, as participants prioritised. Deficiencies in this area can have a serious negative impact on the provision of services and on the practitioner. A case is the office space that does not allow confidentiality.

### *The need for school social workers*

The questionnaire allowed participants to express their opinions on the need for school social workers in especially the Free State province and to substantiate their views in writing.

Interestingly, 100% of the participants stated that school social workers

are indispensable and that more appointments are required. A thematic analysis was used to analyse their written motivations. This produced the six themes that will be covered next.

#### *Enhanced support for learners*

A predominant theme that emerged from the participants was the urgent need for additional school social workers to strengthen the support of the students. Their articulated requirements extended beyond the confines of the questions contained in the survey and indicated that more school social workers were needed to be effective.

- Identification and resolution of the emotional barriers to learning experienced by numerous learners.
- Provision of therapeutic services to learners from families unable to afford private therapeutic interventions.
- Implementation of comprehensive educational programmes throughout the academic year, in agreement with the Department of Education's assertion that schools play a crucial role in furnishing psychosocial support.

#### *Strengthening support for parents*

The participants underscored the vital role of parents within the educational ecosystem, highlighting that many lack essential parenting skills. Advocating for greater participation of school social workers, participants proposed inclusive approaches such as involving parents in therapeutic processes and providing them with education. This aligns with Pretorius (2015) who emphasised the importance of considering parents, guardians, and caregivers as integral components of school social worker intervention.

- *Support for educators*  
The responses reaffirmed the need for school social workers to provide support and guidance to educators struggling with various challenges. The consensus was that collaboration with teachers is paramount to facilitate early identification and intervention. The importance of this partnership was highlighted due to the daily interaction with learners and their consequent ability to enable early identification of those in need.
- *Addressing psychosocial challenges in communities*  
The participants posited that the prevalence of the challenges facing

learners, such as crime, substance abuse, and social deterioration, underscores the imperative need for school social workers. These sentiments align with the DBE's (2016) advocacy for psychosocial support in schools, acknowledging its correlation with high dropout rates.

- *Mitigating the shortage of school social workers in mainstream schools*  
An identified concern was the scarcity of school social workers in main schools where appointments are dependent on the capabilities of the SGB. Participants proposed an urgent expansion to alleviate the burden on the school social workers in the overwhelmed district office. The shortage was viewed as compromising effective service delivery and affecting the learner-social worker ratios.
- *Preventing unnecessary placement in specialised schools*  
Although not explicitly addressed in the questionnaire, participants emphasised the potential role of school social workers in preventing the unwarranted placement of some learners in special schools. Early identification of barriers to learning and therapeutic interventions was highlighted as crucial in ensuring accurate assessments and avoiding misplacements.

#### *Challenges faced by school social workers*

Participants were given a platform to articulate the daily challenges facing them within the education system. The following five key challenges emerged from a thematic analysis of their written responses.

- *Lack of professional supervision/consultation*  
A recurring theme was the need for improved professional supervision/consulting services. Participants advocated for qualified social work supervisors and consultants. They expressed concerns about the absence or inadequacy of direct supervision provided by principals and other functionaries within the school system.
- *Lack of understanding of school social work roles*  
The participants highlighted a lack of understanding among educators about the scope of school social workers and the roles that practitioners had to perform. This lack of clarity was identified as a source of conflict and a factor that negatively impacts the effectiveness of their service delivery.

- *Lack of clear guidelines on roles and responsibilities*  
Linked to role ambiguity, participants underscored the absence of clear and formal guidelines on what role players in the education system should expect from school social workers. This lack of delimitation and clarity was considered problematic, leading to confusion and challenges in service delivery.
- *Resource constraints*  
Participants expressed concerns about the resource inadequacies that hindered effective service delivery. The issues included challenges related to manpower, transport, and even stationery. These restrictions impeded the ability of school social workers to cater to the needs of more learners.
- *Other challenges*  
Individual participants mentioned several other challenges. These included the lack of parental involvement, strained relationships with other professionals, working in potentially dangerous communities that include dangerous and unpredictable behaviour from learners, and limitations in career development pathways.

## Discussion

The study on which the article is based was the first of its kind in South Africa. It covered two core components: the views of the participants from the Free State province regarding the responsibilities that they had to fulfil at the school level, and the factors that influenced their performance.

Firstly, this study produced a clear and prioritised profile of the roles and responsibilities of school social workers. Some of the responsibilities that received a priority rating included helping in the early identification of learners' needs, developing and implementing an ISP for each learner, offering crisis intervention programmes when needed, assisting in reporting on and supporting learners with social barriers to learning, participating in multidisciplinary meetings with learners, liaising between learners and staff about social work issues, participating in continuous professional development activities, participating in the screening and evaluation of new admissions, and liaising with external social workers and other

professionals when needed.

The responses and written comments of the participants also raised some questions. Firstly, the question was whether the current local profile of direct services to learners is adequate and comprehensive enough. From the generated and written responses, this did not seem to be the case. Therefore, this should become a focus area of future research.

Secondly, the study also provided details of the challenges that practitioners face. Some of these, as well as the steps that could be taken to address them, are covered briefly.

There are not enough social workers in most levels of the educational system. This has led to extremely high and seemingly unmanageable caseloads. Social work appointments in mainstream schools are limited to those institutions that can afford to pay for them from their own budgets. This has resulted in a lack of equity within the education system and sometimes in a situation where learners who urgently need social work services being deprived of it. It should be easier for mainstream schools to appoint school social workers in SGB posts. New entrants could benchmark with schools that have successfully employed social workers or consult with specialists in the field. It is also possible that two or more neighbouring schools could 'share' the services of one social worker. It remains an open question of why the provincial department of education could not (partially) subsidise these posts.

A second factor that negatively affects school social work services in the Free State province is inadequate supervision. Supervisors with a social work qualification and an understanding of the nature and scope of how it is practised in school settings should be appointed by the provincial education department to help fill this void. Their designated roles and responsibilities could be based on the results of this study.

The study also showed that the nature and benefits of the school social worker were not always understood by other functionaries within the education system and that this has had a detrimental effect on the delivery of services. Educational authorities should define the scope of school social work practice in schools in writing and distribute this information to all relevant stakeholders in the province. The results of this study could form the basis for such a document.

It was clear that the lack of infrastructure and equipment in schools had a major adverse impact on the delivery of services. Such deficiencies should be addressed in school and departmental budgets.

Finally, implications of these findings for social work practice include

that it can further inform the field of specialisation of school social work within the profession. Social work is a profession with a specific scope of practice and this study contributes to the outlining of this field.

## Concluding remarks

The study under review was conducted only in one of South Africa's nine provinces, and similar studies should be conducted in other provinces. Despite this deficiency, it still provided sufficient data to form one of the cornerstones of an MSW in School Social Work programme that is in the process of being established at North-west University, South Africa.

Looking ahead, the article urges policymakers, social workers, and researchers to prioritise and expand local school social work services. The holistic development of South African learners demands a concerted effort to navigate the complexities of the modern world. By investing in social work services, the nation can ensure that its schools become resilient hubs, fostering an environment in which learners thrive emotionally, socially and academically.

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