

THE ROLES AND EXPERIENCES OF BLACK SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS: ARE THEY
PREPARED TO FILL IN THE GAPS FOR BLACK YOUTH IN K-12 SCHOOL SETTINGS?

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Policy Studies
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

Illinois has the largest number of school social workers in the country; yet their roles and areas of expertise are still unclear to many. The disproportionate disciplinary action taken against Black students and the persistent academic achievement gap that remains between Black and white students continue to plague many schools. Historically, Black social workers have stepped in to fill in the gaps suffered by poor and disadvantaged Blacks in the past that encompassed economic needs, health needs, as well as educational ones within the Black communities (Bell, 2014). The purpose of this research is to understand if the responsibility to address the needs of Black students is still a high priority for Black school social workers as well as examine how their social work role have evolved in the 21st century. This research focused on the lived experiences of 12 Black school social workers in Illinois and described their roles in the school setting, where they often advocate for themselves even as they advocate for the students they serve. This qualitative study explored this phenomenon through in-depth, focused interviews. Ecological systems theory, which is at the heart of social work practice, and critical race theory in education were used as theoretical guides for this study. This study yielded 6 salient themes: early experiences of race, gender, and class; graduate school training; membership in the school community; obligation to Black youth; negative experiences in the workplace; and career satisfaction. The findings suggested that the Black school social workers felt satisfaction in their careers assisting youth in direct practice (micro-level work) but that the knowledge and skills necessary to create systemic change (macro-level work) and address racial inequities in the school settings were lacking.

Keywords: school social work, critical race, social work practice, culturally congruent pedagogy, Black, African American, education

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I need to thank my mother, Toni V. Jensen, who has always been my rock. She has always believed in me, and her unconditional love has allowed me to do all the things that I have done. Slurp, Mommy.

To my daddy, Alford Bilbo Gholson, who my mom always says I got my personality from—I hope I made you proud! You always said “Pretty is as pretty does. If pretty don’t do nothing, pretty ain’t pretty no more.” Well, I did it!

A big thank you to my kids—Haley, Claire, and Zakk—who were in elementary school when I started this process and are now all beginning their adult lives in college. My wish for you is that you find your passion like I did and keep striving for that—and know that mommy will have your back all along the way! You all motivate me to be my best me and have given me purpose throughout my adult life. I love you all!

Many thanks to my advisor, Dr. Yoon Pak, for your support throughout this process. You understood my roles as a full-time mother, full-time social worker, active community member, and a non-traditional student. Thanks also to my committee: Dr. Adrienne Dixson, for being my soror and friend and imparting incredible knowledge in the realist ways possible; Dr. Anjale Welton, for being the professor who challenged my classmates in our practitioner studies and encouraged the difficult conversations around race to happen; and Dr. Martell Teasley, whose intense questions and challenges pushed me to examine social work like I never had before.

Thank you to all of my sorors—but especially Alpha Nu and, most notably, my 1991 E.S.S.E.N.C.E. line, who have all strived for excellence in their chosen fields. I would not be me if not for Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and the values that were instilled in me. I learned how to first conduct research and prepare for interviews in my pursuit of Delta and I learned how to

be a leader and strive for excellence in scholarship within this sorority. There is a long lineage of excellence, scholarship, and sisterhood here—the ones before me, the ones who will come long after, and the ones who will remain with us in spirit.

To my school social workers—keep fighting the good fight! There is so much good work you do and so much more to be done. Stay steadfast and take care of yourselves. “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” Matthew 9:37

To the Black social work pioneers, I especially value you, acknowledge you, and support you. “Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki” literally translated, this means “it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot,” and I will never forget the work, love, and sacrifice that was offered to better our people. I salute you.

Lastly, to all of my friends—near and far—who have encouraged me, distracted me, supported me, assisted me, cried with me, toasted with me, prayed for me, traveled with me, pushed me, provided resources for me, stayed up all night with me, comforted me, and fed me! I thank you from the bottom of my heart!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The social work profession is a diverse and varied field that provides assistance and resources to individuals, families, and communities who need support for individual and societal issues. School social work is a specialty within the larger profession of social work. School social workers collaborate with families, schools and communities to help foster school and family settings that are appropriate for learning, so that students can achieve academic success. They assist students, school staff, and parents to identify needs that interfere with learning and school success. They often work with general and special education students and their families to resolve social, emotional and behavioral problems through assessment, consultation with school staff and community providers, through development and implementation of behavior management plans, and by providing indirect and direct services. Their jobs vary and are flexible to the needs of the students, school, and communities where they work (McCullaugh, 2002). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2015) stated that although there were more than 650,000 people who held social work degrees in 2014, the profession is lacking in racial/ethnic diversity; only about 7% of social workers are Black or African American. This reflects a significant underrepresentation of Blacks in the social work profession, as Blacks constitute 12% of the national population according to a survey conducted by the Center for Workforce Studies in (NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2015).

The number of school social workers is tallied differently state by state according to the numerous professional organizations but it is noted that the state of Illinois has the largest number of school social workers in the country—3,544 (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013).

Black school social workers and Black social workers who work in school settings represent a small fraction of this population—347, or 10% (ISBE), it roughly coincides with the proportion of Black students in K–12 school settings in the United States—16% (National Center of Education Statistics, 2012).

As the education workforce continues to remain predominantly white and female, the classrooms across the country are becoming more diverse. Many classrooms in the United States today are filled with students from different races, cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, religious beliefs, and family structures. Some speak different languages in the home and others practice different traditions. Each student has his own individual personality, abilities, and experiences. To address these changes, the education profession has begun to make efforts to embrace multicultural teaching using culturally responsive instruction. This approach is sometimes referred to as “culturally responsive instruction” (McIntyre, Hulan, & Layne, 2010).

This work is also often referred to as being “culturally congruent”, “culturally competent” and “culturally synchronized” (Irvine, 1990). All are used to describe a student-centered approach to teaching in which the students' unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student's cultural place in the world (Lynch, 2011). Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students. Gay also describes culturally responsive teaching as having these characteristics:

- It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.

- It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.
- It uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.
- It teaches students to know and praise their own and each other's' cultural heritages.
- It incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools (p. 29).

These terms challenged the earlier traditional trends of pedagogy in classrooms and attempted to cater to the increased diversity of students in classrooms across the country. As a shift in education reform occurred, it demanded that educators provided an enriching environment for all students of varying races and culture in the classroom. Despite that work, culturally responsive teaching has not been the answer to the persistent educational inequities that continue between white students and students of color, specifically Black youth.

Educational Inequities

Miksac (2014) wrote in a policy brief that U.S. public education has failed in its aim to provide rich and poor, Black and white, and immigrant and native-born students with equal opportunities for success. He stated that U.S. public education has failed in this aim as evidenced by the persistent differences in academic performance between groups of students, also known as achievement gaps. Academic achievement gaps are often measured using standardized tests but can also be measured using high school completion rates, early childhood and college readiness measures, and college completion rates. The United States has been discussing educational reform for decades but in 1983, a publication that is considered to be a landmark event in modern American education history was released. *A Nation at Risk* decried a “rising tide of mediocrity”

in education and called for sweeping reforms. In 1989, then-President George H. W. Bush and the 50 governors announced a set of national goals that included ranking first in the world in mathematics and science by the year 2000. No Child Left Behind set targets and created sanctions for schools to drive achievement and to close the gaping gaps in performance between groups of students beginning in 2001.

Though many education reforms have been put into place over the years, there are numerous and complex issues that contribute to these educational inequities including inadequate funding, schooling and resources. Though the issues are complex, there has been research to show that with the appropriate measures, these gaps can be closed. For instance, when forced segregation and efforts to equalize school funding was put in place beginning in the 1950s, studies showed the educational gaps began to decrease by the 1970s and on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the scores of African-American students climbed 54 points between 1976 and 1994, while those of white students remained stable. Despite those hopeful statistics, the inequities still exist decades later (Darling-Hammond, 2014).

Linda Darling-Hammond states that:

Nearly two-thirds of U.S. middle-school teachers work in schools where more than 30 percent of students are economically disadvantaged. Ignored by our current education policies are the facts that one in four American children lives below the poverty line and a growing number are homeless, without regular access to food or health care, and stressed by violence and drug abuse around them. Educators now spend a great deal of their time trying to help children and families in their care manage these issues, while they also seek to close skill gaps and promote learning. The assumptions that undergird this debate miss an important reality: educational outcomes for minority children are

much more a function of their unequal access to key educational resources, including skilled teachers and quality curriculum, than they are a function of race. In fact, the U.S. educational system is one of the most unequal in the industrialized world, and students routinely receive dramatically different learning opportunities based on their social status. Researchers have shown that access to equal opportunity and curriculum as well as skilled teachers, can close the achievement gap—also known as the “opportunity gap” by some educators (Ravitich, 2011) but educational disparities continue from the classroom and spill over into the school itself. The racial disparities related to school discipline continues to be a concern for many according to a recent collaborative study was presented by a group of researchers, educators, and policy analysts. The Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2014) were based on a review of numerous research studies on discipline practices in public schools as well as an analysis of U.S. Department of Education data on suspension and expulsion rates for the 2009-10 school year. Their findings suggested that schools have a long way to go to close these gaps in education.

Among the findings:

- There is no evidence that racial disparities in discipline – which occur most frequently for African American boys – are due to higher rates of offenses or more serious misbehavior by those students.
- Suspensions are most often used for conduct that is not a threat to safety.
- Middle class African American students are disproportionately suspended compared with middle class white students.

- Positive relationships among students, teachers and parents are more important than neighborhood crime and poverty at predicting school safety.

What this suggested was that disciplining students, building relationships, and supporting students and teachers within the classroom settings are paramount in closing these inequities and that the achievement gap will not close if the discipline gap does not close (Losen, Hewitt, & Toldson, 2014). The researchers found that schools with diverse faculty and staff and relevant curriculum both lower the suspension and discipline rates. Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, (2014) stated “racial discipline disparities are a consequence of U.S. history, of the biases and stereotypes created by that history, and of the still-strong divisions in lived experiences between groups that we call ‘races’”. (p 2)

Nishioka (2014) stated that racial disparities in terms of school discipline across the country continue to be an educational concern for many. Being removed from classroom instruction for behavioral reasons is a common experience for many students of color. Nationally, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students experience more frequent and longer suspensions than their white peers. One out of 6 Black students is suspended, more than three times the rate than for white students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Nishioka, 2014).

Frey (2000) and Spencer (1998) suggested that culturally-competent, school-based practitioners are lacking skills necessary to implement true change and school social work education programs should focus more attention in this area. This suggested that though there have been movements to push culturally competent work into education training programs and K-12 school settings, the perceived level of competence by school social workers and satisfaction of training opportunities is an area in need of more research and therefore the success of cultural competency work remains unclear (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Allen-Meares, 2007;

Hendricks, 2003; Teasley, Archuleta, & Miller, 2014). What has been made clear through research is that a cultural competent lens is not sufficient to close educational inequities in the schools but that the educators learning, introducing, and implementing the work must be active participants throughout the process.

Studies have shown that Black students suffer when similar communication styles and social, emotional, and cognitive needs are not met during the school day (Brown, 2003; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Henfield & McGee, 2012). Teasley (2005) suggested,

School social workers assist and advocate for children's welfare and educational needs; inform teachers of differences in cultural values; engage in program development; act as liaisons between families, teachers, and school administrators; engage in training teachers; advocate for resource procurement for children; promote diversity; contribute to the social work professional knowledge base; provide information for school systems; examine school-related social environmental factors identified as important and develop relationships with neighborhood and community agencies. (p. 22)

More importantly, work targeting African-American students and their issues in specific context has not been addressed adequately (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1996; Frey, 2000; McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992; Pollock, 2008; Spencer, 1998; Teasley M., 2005). There are a host of researchers who believe that the examination of cultural and institutional bias are central to understanding why many African-American students have problems achieving academic success. Good, culturally responsive work teaches the whole child, not just the importance of academic achievement but also heritage and identity (Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Ladson-Billings G., 1995; Lipman, 1995). Again, Black school social workers can be the bridge in that work.

Given that a majority of teachers are white women, as research shows, the biggest obstacle to successful culturally responsive instruction for most educators is disposing of their own cultural biases and learning about the backgrounds of the students that they will be teaching. Black educators, in general may have a better predisposition to understand the issues Black youth face in classrooms today and therefore, Black school social workers in particular may be in a position to educate, train, and support those learning gaps more successfully.

However, these duties are difficult to execute with culturally incongruent barriers in place. In light of the importance of having a culturally congruent pedagogy and the continuing disparities and lack of representation of Black school social workers; Black school social workers may find themselves in situations where they are advocating not only for Black students but also for themselves. Black school social workers often play a dual role when working with Black students. This is especially evident when examining the persistent educational inequities between Black and white students in schools across the United States. It is important to note that this is a vicious cycle within teaching that education reform must address in broader strokes. Not only must culturally competent work be integrated into the K-12 school system, the education and school social work training programs must implement the work at the same time.

School social workers have not been recognized and are virtually non-existent in the educational literature for their roles and acknowledged for their accomplishments working with disadvantaged youth in K-12 school settings. Part of that responsibility lies with graduate school social work programs that do an inadequate job of teaching cultural competency in their curriculum and empowering school social work students to address oppressions, privilege and racism in their future workplaces. Continued educational inequities are hurting our youth and the school social work profession (which is available to address those issues within schools) are not

being utilized. Because of the significant contributions Black social workers have made in the past concerning disadvantaged Blacks, the roles played by Black school social workers in the 21st century educational setting must be documented and understood within K–12 schools to consider their potential impact on educational disparities across a variety of school communities and settings in the future.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this research:

1. What are the roles and experiences of Black school social workers in K–12 school settings?
 - a. How might race and racism influence delivery of social work services and social workers' career satisfaction?
 - b. How might different K–12 school settings influence delivery of social work services and social workers' career satisfaction?
 - c. How do social workers articulate a commitment to working with Black youth?

Purpose of Study

In this study, I examined the roles and experiences of Black school social workers including the factors that facilitate or hinder Black school social workers' effectiveness in a variety of K–12 school settings across the state of Illinois. Through a qualitative approach consisting of in-depth, focused interviews analyzed through critical race theory in education and ecological systems theory, I sought to examine whether the participants provided services and had the skills to improve the educational disparities that exist for Black students in school. The data collected provided evidence of the roles and realities, experiences, challenges, and coping strategies Black school social workers face when working in a variety of school settings. The

findings of this study (a) explain the training and education received in school social work programs, (b) document how Black school social workers cope despite challenges and adversities and how they use protective factors to be successful and remain satisfied in their careers, and (c) describe social workers' relationships with students in their schools and the impact of educational disparities in their workplaces.

Significance of the Study

Black school social workers are in a position to provide a unique perspective on their experiences in K–12 school settings across the state of Illinois.

A school social worker's job is to advocate for students. Often, however, Black school social workers are also victims of racism. Research in this area is necessary in order (a) to position an understudied professional group in the literature of school social work and educational leadership; (b) to inform graduate social work programs about perceptions and gaps in training; and (c) to inform K-12 school districts on the roles of school social workers that are not being utilized. Therefore, this research will inform graduate school social work programs on better practice, research, and policy as well as encourage better recruitment of Black students and faculty to influence and inform the work they are ultimately trying to achieve. It will also inform school districts on the roles and expertise that school social workers can provide to assist in closing the educational achievement gaps that continue to persist in many K-12 schools.

Autobiographical Roots of the Research/Reflexivity

As a Black American and former Black school social worker in a small urban school setting, I often wondered if other Black school social workers had experiences similar to mine. Although I found anecdotal evidence of these experiences, I never had the opportunity to be in the presence of a number of Black school social workers at the same time to gauge whether these

experiences were shared. Therefore, I chose to study this topic in order to delve systemically into the world and the unique experiences of Black school social workers. This research sheds light on a difficult profession made even more challenging by the color of social workers' skin.

For the last 15 years, I was a school social worker at an urban high school. While there, I have experienced and witnessed many challenges related to the social work profession. As the years have progressed, I have become more cognizant of how my skin color has opened some doors and shut others, literally and figuratively. In a school district with 18 schools and as many school social workers, there were only 4 Black school social workers who worked there during my tenure. The lack of racial diversity often situated us as the spokespeople for Blacks and as the token representatives on certain committees and leaders of diversity initiatives. Given the racial disparity and my desire to gain other perspectives on this phenomenon and to find and connect with other Black school social workers across the state of Illinois, I decided to examine and document these experiences.

Early Experiences

I grew up on the south side of Chicago in two low-income, working class areas called Garfield and South Shore. My white mother is of Danish descent and was raised in an elite, two-parent home of physicians. She began her profession as a special education schoolteacher in inner-city Chicago after graduating from Northwestern University. My Black father, 20 years her senior, was born in poverty to a teen mother in Memphis, Tennessee. He spent more time in juvenile detention centers than in school and never received any formal education after sixth grade. I was raised in a household full of contrasts. I was financially, educationally, and socially exposed to nearly every aspect of what American society offers. This bicultural experience has been a tremendous asset to me in life, in my profession, and in my research and though I value

those unique experiences, I have always identified as a Black woman and have honored and valued what that identity means.

Education was a focus in my home. For most of my K–12 education, I attended a Montessori preschool, Episcopalian middle school, and Catholic elementary and high schools. (The one year I attended the public school where my mother worked, I learned a host of new lessons—mostly how to physically fight.) I received a strong core education, but when I reflect on the lessons I learned about my Blackness or race and the experiences of Blacks in the United States, I feel I was denied a substantive education. Although I had not heard the term “colorblindness” to describe the concept of treating everyone equally (in theory) and not judging or identifying individuals by their racial characteristics, I have come to realize that I learned about myself through a colorblind lens, and that lens guided my formal education. It was not until I attended college that I began to see how socioeconomics, barriers of inequity, gender, and institutionalized and structural racism affected Blacks, other Americans, my family, and my life.

Graduate School Social Work Training

In my graduate school social work experience, I do not recall race and its impact on society ever being fully addressed, even though social workers are expected to cope with the aftermath of these structural and institutional practices within school settings on a regular basis. Because of that, I shied away from heated and passionate discussions about race in the workplace, in daily life, and in intellectual spaces until later in adulthood. Through my doctoral program and with the assistance of classes, professors, discussions, and research articles, I have now learned a new language and a new way to address race.

Workplace

In 2001, I was hired as a social worker at a high school in a small urban school district. Initially, I had a mentor who had been a school social worker for several years at the high school across town. My relationship with this Black school social worker was ideal as we also attended college together, pledged into the same sorority, tackled many issues together, and practiced school social work as a united front. During those early years, our district was also involved in a consent decree and was very close to a lawsuit that would end up changing school policy for the next 10 years. The allegations stated, among other things, that there were too many Black students receiving special education services and not enough Black students in AP and honors classes. Therefore, my work with the Black students in the high school was often welcomed and seen as necessary during that time.

The other social worker at the school and I sponsored African American clubs at our schools that focused on teaching Black students Black history and culture, and providing these students the opportunity to participate in educational discussions, events, and field trips. As school social workers, we also felt that we had a purpose or higher calling to run these student organizations. I knew that my work as a school social worker would allow me to interact with students and families from many different socioeconomic statuses and values. I knew it would give me special access to support the individuals who did not enjoy privilege because of the color of their skin or their circumstances.

In addition, I have always felt it important to give everyone access and a voice, as this is the duty of school social workers. Although I successfully carried out my duties—paid and volunteer—I often felt isolated within my building. Unlike the majority, I did not have the benefit of having members of my racial and cultural group available for support and kinship. I

often felt like I had to explain my perceptions or experiences to others because they did not already have a frame of reference. Although I had good relationships with my colleagues, these relationships were still guarded. Throughout the workday, I sometimes did not benefit from or enjoy experiencing simple cultural nuances that I might have if I had been around others like me. At the same time, I knew I was contributing positively to my work setting in a variety of ways.

I perceived serving as a “cultural bridge” to advocate for students who were often victims of racism and to enlighten others on different cultures and ethnicities as an essential role for me during my time at the high school I was working at. Although many Americans would stand up to overt racism, many are often silent to colorblindness, passive racism, and other practices that are manifested in schools every day. I chose to stand up against covert racist acts. (Dixson, 2003) conducted a study of African American teachers and their work toward social justice for their African American students and community. “For the purposes of sensitizing their white colleagues to the needs and behaviors of African American students, African American teachers willingly serve as cultural conduits by sharing knowledge of African American culture with them” (p. 218). That is how I viewed my role as a school social worker, as a parent, as a researcher, and as a Black woman.

I understand that my research is not a neutral or objective stance. I believe that all research, and mine in particular, is informed and shaped by the researcher’s perspective. I also know that I have shortcomings due to my own social work graduate school education or lack thereof concerning this topic. However, my focus on the issues of racism, power, and privilege is intentional because I have personally experienced my own and others’ discomfort in discussing issues openly, and I am committed to trying to change that through this research.

Definition of Terms

The purpose of this work was to explore what I believed to be the most salient issues related to Black school social workers' experiences. While many of these issues relate to the experiences of other school social workers of color, I have chosen Black school social workers due to (a) my personal experience as a Black school social worker and (b) the strong but underrepresented association throughout history between Black social workers and educational progress. As Ladson-Billings (2009) described her personal work within her book *Dreamkeepers*, I too have chosen to integrate my scholarly tools with my existing knowledge of my culture and my personal experiences.

Before entering the literature review portion of this study, I must explain the use of some of the terminology. To stay true to the research and the authors who wrote it, I will leave the terms that describe race intact since they may have a specific historical or constructed meaning in the study they were used in. Therefore, a host of terms will be used to define school social workers and students. The terms used to characterize individuals in this study include *African American*, *Black*, and *person of color*. They are used interchangeably depending on the context and the participant's voice.

My preference throughout the study was to use *Black* with a capital B, recognizing the work of the Black Power movement and the long-term impacts the movement had on the Black community, including the creation of collegiate Black studies programs; the development of Black organizations; the celebration of Kwanzaa; and changes in literature, style, and fashion. "Despite what historians and others have argued, it was Black Power, not the dream of a racially integrated America, that ultimately became a dominant expression among African Americans"

(Bell, 2014). I acknowledge the variations in terminology throughout literature discussing race and in the language that individuals use to refer to themselves.

Terms such as cultural congruent, culturally responsive, cultural synchronization, culturally competency are all used to describe student-centered approach to teaching in which the students' unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student's cultural place in the world (Lynch, 2011). Any of these terms will be used interchangeably to describe this phenomenon.

Another factor to note is that school social workers are, in fact, educators. Although they do not earn teaching credentials, they are certified with master's degrees and receive specialized training to provide support youth in a school context. They are employed or contracted by school districts or other educational institutions in order to help students cope with personal and psychological issues that affect their school performance, behavior, and socialization. School social workers address issues relevant to the student population they serve, such as school attendance, illegal drug or alcohol use, teen pregnancy, and adjustment to the social setting of the school. They also might assist teachers and administrators in dealing with behavioral or attitude issues by communicating with students to find the causes of their distress. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Therefore, although the terminology for school social workers is used interchangeably in this study, school social workers should be recognized as educators for this study and throughout the educational literature.

Lastly, I must address my focus on race without delving into the construction of race, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Although there have been numerous discussions of racial groups and the distinctions between races, as well as the dismissed notion that there are biological differences among the races, there continues to be persistent and profound differences

between racial groups in terms of socioeconomic status, the criminal justice system, wealth and power, and education (Davis, 1991; Frederickson, 1988; Khanna & Harris, 2009; McIntosh, 1988; Ogbu, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1986; Tatum, 1992; Valdez & Valdez, 1998). Smedley and Smedley (2005) asserted, “Immutable differences between racial groups underlie social and economic racial hegemony which requires a very different response from government than scientific perspectives that place race in a social and historical context” (p. 16). Therefore, this work centers on race as woven into the fabric of American society and as guiding the experiences, training, and work of Black school social workers.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the statement of the problem, the research questions, the purpose and significance of the study, the background and role of the researcher, and the definitions of terms. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature. The goal of this chapter is to provide a review of the literature in four areas. Part 1 addresses the research on the role of the school social worker. Part 2 examines the literature on school social work training. Part 3 examines the workplace dynamics including coping mechanisms and the impact of the school community location. Part 4 examines the literature surrounding school social workers and their work with Black youth. This chapter also provides the theoretical and conceptual framework that allowed me to understand the nuances of Black school social workers’ experiences in their school settings.

Chapter 3 briefly reviews the research questions, the rationale for the methodological design, the selection and demographics of the participants, the setting, the data collection procedures, the data analysis procedures, and the instrumentation. I also include a section on the limitations of the methodology. Chapter 4 will present descriptions of the participants as well as

the study's findings including the data analyses for the research questions. Chapter 5 will provide a summary of the entire study and the discussion of the findings. It will also include implications for practice and future research, the limitations of the study, and the conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Since the early years of the social work profession, school social workers have been placed in schools to deal with some of the barriers to education that students experience. In the United States, school social work has grown from a few “visiting teachers” working in community schools in Boston, New York, Hartford, and Chicago in the early 1900s to a profession that now numbers over 20,000 (Raines, 2008). Currently, school social workers are trained in many graduate programs to utilize a strength-based, ecological approach that views clients and organizations as parts of a system. The functioning of and relationships within and between systems are enhanced to improve individuals’ lives. The mission of school social work is to assure academic success, educational equity, and social justice for every student by reducing or eliminating the social, economic, and environmental barriers that may interfere with students’ ability to benefit from their education. This literature review examined the role of school social workers and the challenges they face when dealing with the changing landscape of schools and the changing face of students.

This chapter allowed me to explore the literature and to understand the role of Black school social workers in the K–12 school setting. The goal of this chapter was to provide a review of the literature in four areas and to address the research on the role of the school social worker, on school social work training, on workplace dynamics including coping mechanisms and the impact of the school community location, and finally on school social workers and their work with Black youth.

The Historical Role of Black Social Workers

Social workers have helped with the downtrodden for centuries, but prior to the Progressive Era, social work was simply considered a reform activity (Gordon, 1991). As the services grew and adapted to the changing needs of society, it became difficult to pinpoint when social work actually became a profession. Although the earliest forms of documented, mainstream welfare may have originated with the English Poor Laws (1601–1834), the United States began providing some support to the poor, to children, and to the mentally ill before the American Revolution. By the early 19th century, however, towns and counties began to provide more structured assistance. This often took place through apprenticeships, indentured systems, poorhouses, orphanages, orphan trains, and foster care across the early United States (Dupper & Evans, 1996) and eventually through the help and support of private, benevolent societies and organizations that would become the predecessors to social service agencies in the 21st century (Glicken, 2011). In the early 1900s, there was little concern for the emotional well-being of people, and only their basic needs of food and shelter were provided for. As the profession evolved and matured, industrialization became widespread in the United States, and social dislocation resulted in the relocation of millions of families, social work began to address the medical health, housing, and financial needs of the people in the community (Karger & Stoesz, 1994). The impact of poverty, mental illness, and war-related issues caused many families to struggle with diseases, crime, prostitution, run-down tenement houses, overcrowding, unsanitary factories, and other social ills.

The focus of social welfare shifted under each new U.S. president as his government programs attempted to address the needs of the time. As the nation became more industrialized, worker's compensation laws appeared as early as 1908. Other notable social welfare programs

were the 1935 Social Security Act, which provided benefits to retirees and other workers; the National School Lunch Program, which began in 1946; the introduction of Medicaid and Medicare in 1965 for the health care industry, and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in 1996.

Even as history books documented the progression of social work history, the major publications often excluded the unique social welfare needs of Blacks in early American society and the lack of aid provided to them. An example of this disparity is the New Deal, which was a series of programs put in place between 1933 and 1938 in response to issues surrounding the Great Depression. Many textbooks do not describe how most New Deal programs discriminated against Blacks. For instance, the National Recovery Association (NRA) not only offered whites jobs first, but it also authorized a separate and lower pay scales for Blacks. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) refused to guarantee mortgages for Blacks who tried to buy homes in white neighborhoods. Most of the reform movement was aimed at white immigrants. Axinn and Levin (1975) confirmed that “since Blacks were excluded from participation in many activities affected by reform, their lives were barely touched by the social reform of the Progressive Era” (p. 120). Because of that, the Black middle class and Black social workers often stepped in to fill in those gaps and to assist other Blacks as they navigated their communities and society.

Strand 1: Role of the Black School Social Worker

Although Black social workers have not always been recorded in history, they have historically been pioneers in the social welfare movement. Unfortunately, they are less well known and have often been excluded altogether from the history of the social welfare movement or, at the very least, less recognized than their white counterparts. Although these forerunners were instrumental in developing programs and services in the African American community,

they are often not acknowledged because their programs were not universal or mainstream (Carlton-LaNey, 2006). In some cases, social policy educators have even indicated that African American social welfare activities were residual in nature and therefore should not be considered social welfare activities at all (Peebles-Wilkins, n.d.).

Despite this marginalization, many Black social workers were instrumental in early social work education, settlement houses, community development organizations, and women's club movements. These Black social workers focused on racial uplift, integration, northern migration, and urban problems.

Rapid urbanization in an increasingly segregated society during the Progressive Era created new social problems and needs for Blacks. The segregation and exclusion of Blacks by organized charities led to the initiation, financing, and administration of Black charitable organizations in northern urban centers. (Jackson, 1970, p. 400).

It also led to increased need for organizations such as the Chicago Urban League, YWCA, National Association of Colored Women, and Black sororities and churches to provide leadership opportunities and support for early Black social workers (Jackson). Despite the development of these programs under parallel systems, their impact on the community, students, the disabled, and the ill was vast. Unfortunately, the number of Black social workers has not been recorded throughout history.

Child labor laws passed in the early 1900s eventually allowed children to attend school instead of work, and by 1918 every state had compulsory school attendance laws. However, there was not an influx of children into schools until the Great Depression forced adults to compete for jobs occupied by children. Even before the formal push for education, education became a common area of activism among Black social workers who valued literacy and

education (Bell, 2014). Although Black social workers made many efforts, there is little historical literature that lists their accomplishments. Their stories need to be told.

A few notable Black school social workers with a passion for education and a desire to work with at-risk youth include Mary Church Terrell, a social worker and the first Black woman appointed to a school board, and Thyra Edwards, a lifelong social worker with a multinational focus on helping at-risk populations and women and children. Lester Blackwell Granger was the first Black man to serve as president of the National Conference of Social Workers. He campaigned internationally for civil rights reform that included education work. For many, reform took place with the establishment of schools, from kindergartens to colleges. For instance, Ida B. Wells and her woman's club established a kindergarten in Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1893, long before there were kindergartens in public schools (Wells, 1972). Along with Jane Addams, who was a white pioneer in social work and settlement homes, Wells blocked the formal creation of segregated schools in Chicago.

Because of the behind-the-scenes work of many Black social workers who focused on education, their work as early pioneers to educate Black children is difficult to recount since it has been excluded from many history books. In addition to their systemic work in the field, they participated in direct practice and often raised money and solicited donations to supplement the meager money that states gave to the schools to buy items such as soap, clothes, and school supplies. In some instances, school social workers assisted with building repair and supplementing teacher salaries (Gordon, 1991). Although Black school social workers were one of the earliest groups of educators, they have been rarely documented (Bell, 2014; Carlton-LaNey, 2006).

Williams, Simon, and Bell (2015) examined the perceptions of social workers by administering surveys in a predominantly African American community. They found that though social workers as a whole were perceived as helpful, they were not perceived to be sensitive to the needs of the African American community. Further research should explore the relationship between Black social workers and the African American community. There is virtually no historical empirical research on Black social workers, and there is very little contemporary literature that identifies the roles of Black school social workers within their profession.

Although Black social workers face new and different challenges daily, there has been no documentation to connect the challenges that they face, even though many of the same issues persist. These issues include discrimination, at-risk youth, lack of substantial school facilities, and home and community issues that impact schooling. There is also no comprehensive data nationally on Black social workers except through the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), which records data on approximately 2,000 members. However, it does not account for Black social workers in the profession who are not a part of the organization.

Although Illinois is touted as having the largest number of school social workers in the country, the Illinois Association of School Social Workers (IASSW) only recently began collecting demographic information in 2013 on its members. Therefore, even though Black social workers have been discussed in some literature for supporting and empowering their race and community, there is no empirical literature to support the historical accounts.

Strand 2: Graduate School Social Work Training

If the social work profession is going to impact schools, assist the most marginalized students, and provide successful schools for all students, social work graduate programs need to become more culturally responsive and more culturally relevant. For this to happen, researchers

must gather specific information from social workers to examine if they were taught all of the tools necessary in their graduate programs to combat racism and racist policies and practices in the K–12 school system. Bowie and Hancock (2000) examined students' motivation to attend graduate school. Although they found a small, positive movement toward addressing diversity issues, their major findings suggested that the motivation behind graduate school enrollment is primarily related to career advancement goals and only to a lesser degree to creating social change.

There have been few studies on graduate-level social work pedagogy. These studies identify several shortcomings in school social work practice intervention with urban children and youth (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1996; Frey, 2000; Teasley, 2005). In addition, other studies have stated that though the CWSE and NASW have clearly delineated the need for more culturally responsive work, the mandate is a complicated challenge and is easier said than done. "Attention needs to be directed towards the implementation of professional development seminars that address the transfer of knowledge from the classroom to the real world of social work practice" (Petrovich & Lowe, 2005, p. 175). For instance, Hall & Theriot (2007) conducted an exploratory study on the effectiveness of a multicultural course using a multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills survey. They found that though the course was successful to some degree, it was difficult to measure because the students had no real-world, practical experience.

More empirical studies on social work education are needed. (Blunt, 2007) stated that migration across national borders has resulted in demographic changes in the United States, making it imperative that educators are skilled in understanding the various racial identities and issues in society. She suggested that transformative learning occurs when learners develop an

enhanced awareness of how their knowledge and values guide their own perspectives. Although such studies are a good starting point, few have tracked social workers' implementation of their training and knowledge in their job. Lastly, there are some research studies showing that cultural competency training, often provided in graduate school, is insufficient for students to understand the systemic forms of racism that continue to exist.

The impetus for this cultural competence model in social work was in part formed by the civil rights movement. The cultural competence model promotes an understanding of different races and culture, as well as an acceptance and tolerance of cultures and traditions. Cultural competence is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individual groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of service (Davis, 1997). Since the NASW and the CSWE mandated the inclusion of cultural competence into the social work profession and social work education programs (CSWE, 2001), a robust body of literature has developed on the cultural competence model. Many researchers have stated, however, that this body of literature is insufficient.

Numerous empirical studies have examined cultural competence models quantitatively through surveys (Blunt-Williams, Meshelemiah, & Venable, 2011; Colvin-Burque, Zugazaga, & Davis-Maye, 2007; Petrovich & Lowe, 2005; Teasley, 2005; Teasley, Archuleta, & Miller, 2014). No studies have delved deeper into the cultural competence model and how race is taught in graduate schools using qualitative methodology. Teasley (2005) stated, "Mental health referrals, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment; best practices implications for facilitating academic achievement; and knowledge of community dynamics and family functioning are all areas of concern." (p. 228). Culturally competent school social workers in urban school settings

must understand how teacher pedagogy and curriculum content affect academic outcomes. However, they must also be aware of urban community dynamics, family functioning, social welfare history, and service delivery systems. Further, they must be able to identify and design intervention plans based on an understanding and assessment of neighborhood and community risks and protective factors (Winters & Gourdine, 2000)).

Petrovich and Lowe (2005) found that personal awareness and skill competency do not necessarily translate into the confidence to apply what has been learned about diversity into new settings. All of the diverse cultures that make up the learning community need acknowledgement and inclusion in the learning process. Workplaces and academic cultures are, at times, in conflict. The discovery and celebration of commonality is as vital as awareness of difference. Theories are unlikely to be retained or thoughtfully applied unless they are encountered on a personal level. Further, skill development is a necessary precondition for the application of diversity competence, and students benefit from diversity among peers, faculty, and community. Finally, social work educators are always teaching by example, whether consciously or not. Therefore, greater emphasis on these factors may assist social workers in acquiring new levels of cultural competence to address the issues they are likely to face in the workplace.

Researchers in this field state that there are five essential elements that contribute to a system's ability to become more culturally competent. The system should (a) value diversity, (b) have the capacity for cultural self-assessment, (c) be conscious of the "dynamics" inherent when cultures interact, (d) institutionalize cultural knowledge, and (e) develop an adaption to service delivery in order to reflect an understanding of diversity between and within cultures (King, Sims, & Osher, 2000). Culturally competent practice has become a cornerstone of social work since the 1970s and some graduate education programs are seeking to become more culturally

responsive and more culturally relevant. Though, as previously stated, there is little empirical research to show the effectiveness of this work.

Ewalt, Freeman, Fortune, Poole, & Witkins (1999) asserted that there is a need to develop new practice models and multicultural programs that address the increasing racial and ethnic diversity found in school settings. Teasley (2005) stated that there is a need to research the link between social work education programs, postgraduate professional development programs, and the need to improve and monitor practitioners' preparation for culturally competent practice in urban school systems. Studies have shown that school social workers often note on surveys that they do not receive much education in cultural competence even after they are in their profession. For the social work profession, the development of culturally competent school-based practitioners presents an ongoing challenge (Allen-Meares et al., 2007).

A review of the literature suggests that school social workers lack appropriate knowledge in this area, particularly in terms of working with urban minority youth, because of inadequacies in social work education programs (Frey, 2000). Dupper and Evans (1996) maintained that the current model for training does not prepare school social workers for practice in school systems within low socioeconomic minority communities. They further explained that school social workers need more multicultural and diversity training to combat the "growing mismatch between linguistically, culturally, economically, and racially diverse children and a U.S. public school system designed to serve a monolingual, white, Anglo, middle-class culture" (p. 188). Professional development and in-service training are paramount for continuing education related to the school social work profession. School social workers continue to be thrust into roles of negotiating racial situations (e.g., managing classroom achievement levels, disciplinary

consequences, and special education placement related to race) and must have the adequate tools to navigate those terrains knowledgeably.

So though there have been several quantitative or conceptual studies on the effectiveness of cultural competency work in graduate school social work programs, there are few that have added depth to the topic through qualitative work. Additionally, some researchers found that personal awareness of race and culture are not enough to build confidence for workers to translate that work into their internships and workplaces and that cultural competency is difficult to achieve and measure. For those reasons, more work in this area must be done.

Strand 3: Workplace Roles and Interaction with the Community

Much like early social work pioneers in general, school social workers in particular encountered unique battles. As the school social work profession worked to achieve its goals, racism had already implanted itself firmly within education. The South dealt with racism in education in specific ways, including the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. This was not the case for schools in the North, where residential barriers restricted where Blacks lived, schools lacked funding for needed resources, good teachers were rejected, and remedial education prevailed (Neckerman, 2007). IQ assessments, tracking, and remedial classes caused further division between Blacks and whites. African Americans and their white allies understood that separate-but-equal schooling never meant equal (Fraser, 2004) and that school social workers were most often the educators who dealt with the repercussions. Leaders of the civil rights movement of the 1950s believed that if the schools could treat children as equals—if segregation could end and a quality education could be provided for every child—then significant strides could be made toward creating a larger society of freedom and justice for all. As education and

social work programs became more formalized, the NASW and the CSWE established policies designed to combat racism within schools and the profession as early as 1969.

In the early years, white social workers and reformers tended to help immigrants who were also white. In contrast, Blacks tended to support more universal needs for all in their communities. After all, for Blacks, different classes of people often lived in the same communities because wealthier Blacks were still denied living spaces in many areas. Therefore, for Blacks, there was less difference between the helper and the helped than for whites. Even Sadie Alexander, who was the first Black woman to earn a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, had to take a job as a secretary at an insurance company because she could not find a job in her field. This example that shows that educational pursuits were different for Blacks and others and that Blacks often lived in the same community despite class and socioeconomic differences because of residential segregation. Even though there has been a statewide decline in Black-white residential segregation, African American students continue to often be concentrated in racially segregated schools within urban districts (Lleras, 2008).

Nevertheless, residential segregation is a seldom-discussed missing link that may explain poverty among Blacks and the development of the Black underclass (Farley & Frey, 1994). Historically, certain actions have perpetuated segregation in certain areas. City ordinances, fire bombings, restrictive covenants, and biased lending and real estate practices all played a role in discrimination and forced Blacks into more undesirable and concentrated areas. The result was substandard community living and education programs. Howard (2010) noted,

The race-based achievement gap in public education today is the demographic embodiment of our history of white social, political, and economic dominance. We are living in a dangerous, confused and troubled work—that needs leaders, educators,

classroom teachers, and school social workers, who can bridge impermeable cultural, ethnic, and religious borders, envision new possibilities, invent new paradigms, and engage in personal transformation and visionary action. (p. xi)

Some literature suggests the importance of relearning basic ideas about geographic location and school boundaries and how they impact policy and practices. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) identifies school communities by designating locale codes which are derived from a classification system originally developed by NCES in the 1980s to describe a school's location ranging from "large city" to "rural." In 2005 and 2006, NCES supported work by the Census Bureau to redesign the original locale codes in light of changes in the U.S. population and the definition of key geographic concepts (ISBE, 2013). The current codes are shown in Table 1.

Even though the locale codes were updated in 2005 to adjust for increases in the population and changing demographics, perceptions of some of these communities remain the same, even though racial segregation and increasing poverty have often accompanied minority suburbanization. Diem, Welton, Frenkenberg, and Jellison-Holmes (2014) examined the discourses surrounding race and demographic changes in three suburban school districts that have been undergoing rapid changes and contain demographically distinct areas within their district boundaries. Through interviews, the researchers found that it is essential for school districts to address community resistance, to understand the local and state policies on framing race, and to be aware of the discourse surrounding rapidly changing demographics. These policy implications may be necessary to push work surrounding the communities that schools are located in and how their needs impact services differently than in other areas.

Table 1

New Urban-Centric Locale Codes

Code	Description
11 - City, Large	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.
12 - City, Midsize	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
13 - City, Small	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.
21 - Suburb, Large	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more.
22 - Suburb, Midsize	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
23 - Suburb, Small	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000.
31 - Town, Fringe	Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area.
32 - Town, Distant	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area.
33 - Town, Remote	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area.
41 - Rural, Fringe	Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
42 - Rural, Distant	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
43 - Rural, Remote	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster

Note. Adapted from (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

In a cultural competence study, Teasley (2005) found that urban and inner-city school social workers demonstrated significantly higher cultural competency scores in comparison to those from suburban and rural service areas in the areas He stated that it may be the case that school social workers practicing in urban and inner-city areas are more likely to prepare themselves through professional development to work with higher numbers of minority and other issues. Another quantitative study using census data examined learning differences between

suburban and urban areas to create the concept of “opportunity hoarding” (Rury & Saatcioglu, 2011). Therefore, those issues and others surrounding social borders, classification of school districts, and urban education must be explored further to remain current with the trends in education and how these concepts may impact students across the country.

In addition to geographic boundaries, insidious, covert acts of racism can impact educators of color and youth of color alike. The term *microaggressions* is often used in counseling and psychology research (Sue, Capodilupo, Lin, Torino, & Rivera, 2008) and in higher education (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010). Torres et al. (2010) used a mixed-methods approach to examine African Americans in doctoral programs and found that participants often experienced microaggressions such as assumptions of criminality, underestimation of personal ability, and cultural and racial isolation. The daily insults, jokes, and actions they experienced were so covert that others might not have been aware of the slight. Although the researchers termed the experiences they shared *microaggressions*, most did not have a label to use to name these experiences prior to the study.

Sue, Capodilupo, Lin, Torino, & Rivera (2008) stated that it is notable that “the confusing and disorienting nature of microaggressions can cause psychological turmoil for Black Americans who must constantly question the intention and message of perpetrators” (p. 330). Although microaggressions are by definition “subtle, covert, and innocuous,” they paradoxically make Blacks feel “jarred, overt, and harmful as well as sometimes paranoid. Some research has stated that the cumulative effects of microaggressions can sap the spiritual and psychological energies of Blacks in their everyday workplace” (Lopez, 2003).

Most people would rather not discuss racism because the topic itself is uncomfortable and unpleasant. In fact, most people view racism as the enactment

of overt acts—for example, name calling, burning crosses, hate crimes, and so forth—while ignoring the deeper, often invisible, and more insidious forms of racism that occur on a daily basis. This limited perspective, therefore, only protects white privilege by highlighting racism’s blatant and conspicuous aspects, while ignoring or downplaying its hidden and structural facets (Lopez, 2003, p. 82).

There are several empirical studies conducted on college campuses (Lewis, Mendenhall, & Harwood, 2013; Nadal, Yinglee, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) identifying pervasive and persistent microaggressions impacting coping skills, self-esteem, and experiences; there have been similar empirical studies that have examined microaggressions in K–12 school settings that have generated results similar to those of the higher education studies. For instance, Henfield (2011) conducted a small, qualitative study of 5 African American middle school male students and found that they experienced microaggressions similar to the experiences of African American students in the college setting. The middle school students shared that they experienced microaggressions in three primary ways: a universal Black experience or expecting them to present stereotypically (good dancer, thug behaviors), a propensity toward criminality, and expressing or perceiving the superiority of whites. Like empirical studies, conceptual studies such as by Allen, Scott, and Lewis (2013) have called for culturally affirming education for African American and Hispanic youth in light of continuing microaggressions in educational settings. The field of school social work lacks research on microaggressions and the skills or protective factors to cope with these daily assaults.

Although the term *microaggression* is a newer concept in the social work field, *resiliency* and *protective factors* are not. There is a growing body of literature that has focused on the resiliency factors of Blacks in schools and in the workplace. Several studies have discussed how students and professionals have displayed strong self-efficacy tools using peers, family, mentors, and spirituality to persist and excel despite impediments (Harper, 2006; Museus, 2011). The notion of resiliency is fitting here. Taylor (2005) stated that educators must have the competence and ability to adjust to the changing needs of their workplace and communities. Resilience in the workplace is designed as “the ability to adjust to varied situations and increase one’s competence in the face of adverse conditions” (Taylor, 2005, p. 2).

There is much work to be done in the school social work profession to establish legitimacy and to also be “visible, viable, and valuable” since the research has found several shortcomings to the school social work practice.

Strand 4: School Social Workers and Their Work with Black Youth

A qualitative study by Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, and Marshall (2014) examined the perspectives of students, their parents, and educators about their perceptions of Black students and suspensions. They found that there was room for social workers to reduce racial bias with a nonjudgmental, empathetic stance toward racial issues in school settings. There is a plethora of research that examines Black students’ struggles in school (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Barton, 2004; Conchas, 2006; Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lewis A, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Orfield, 2004). Howard (2010) discussed the persistent underachievement gap in the United States that continues to haunt culturally diverse and low-income students. He argued that it is necessary to look at race and culture in youths’ schooling

experiences. He also included research by (Lee, 2007) on teaching literacy skills to inner-city African American students and by (Rogoff, 2003) on how learning is embedded in communities.

To address the persistent academic achievement gap, it is not enough to simply examine the academic performance of minority children. The achievement gap cannot be explained by the mere fact that certain children use a different language, dialect, communication style, cognitive style, or style of interaction. While cultural, language, and barriers to opportunity are important for all minorities, the main factor differentiating more successful individuals from less successful ones appears to be the nature of the history, subordination, and exploitation of minorities. The nature of minorities' instrumental and expressive responses to their treatment also factors into the process of schooling (Ogbu, 1987).

Hall & Theriot (2007) did not identify the racial demographics of the participants in their study but they did state that it was a small sample size of 23 social work students at a southeastern university. They stated that a student's self-awareness was important in gaining multicultural competency as well as time and real-life experiences. (Swank, Asada, & Lott, 2002) surveyed 437 undergraduates in a social work course and found similar results and also found that interracial exchanges and a social diversity class influenced their perceptions on privilege and race positively. Thompson and Crank (2010) examined climate, current trends and school interventions, and the changing role of school psychologists in the educational setting. Evans, Zambrano, Moyer, Duffey, & T (2011) examined the role of the school counselor. There are few studies of educators who specialize in support services (such as school psychologists and school counselors) in the K-12 setting and even fewer of school social workers. This is troubling in many ways as little about the profession and value of social workers is known. School social workers must remain visible, viable, and valued in order to help different stakeholders

understand the vast array of issues social workers deal with and support. Although research has addressed the role of Black educators, school social workers are absent from the literature. Though there has been extensive work in the area of education inequities, there is virtually no work tying school social workers to the solutions.

Summary of Literature

The history of schooling inevitably points to a concurrent history of racism that continues to plague many public schools in the United States. Despite high-profile rulings such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and legislation such as No Child Left Behind (2000) which purported to support disadvantaged students and effectively close the achievement gap, issues concerning Black students and their academic success persist. Nevertheless, the debate over the causes and consequences of racial differences in achievement has been at the heart of the nation's social and political life (Wiggan, 2007). Academic achievement lags and failures have long been associated with high juvenile delinquency, low occupational outcomes, low lifetime outcomes, high rates of mental illness, low marital satisfaction, short life span, high risk of teenage pregnancy, school dropout, gang involvement, welfare dependence, and drug and alcohol use (Taylor, 2005).

School social workers advocate for and support marginalized students in school. Once these workers enter school systems, they must often assist students addressing a myriad of issues surrounding race and culture such as special education identification, tracking systems, segregation, discipline policies, and more. It is important to record and document the experiences of Black school social workers as they assist students in navigating those issues. Their stories have not received sufficient scholarly study, and it is an injustice to compare their experiences to those of their white counterparts without evidence. Ultimately, the profession cannot be fully understood without the full perspective of Black school social workers. The omission of the

perspectives of “raced people”—individuals who “have faced discrimination because of race and/or class, and have been oppressed psychologically, physically, educationally, or economically”—is problematic (as cited in (Gooden, 2002, p. 135)). Without such perspectives in the literature, the fields of school social work and education will remain narrow and lack an inclusive framework.

Often, Black school social workers must transcend racial barriers, work despite being the “other,” advocate for the most disadvantaged students, navigate workplace situations without compromising their identity, and develop resilient behaviors to offset their workplace environment (Spencer, 1998). Although the literature discusses burnout and microaggression in clinical social work fields, it does not discuss school social work where workers must face intense client issues on a daily basis.

Throughout history, evidence has shown that Black social workers have filled in the gaps to assist other Blacks in time of need and when resources were absent or inadequate. This study attempted to summarize known triumphs from yesteryear and to document the current successes and challenges for Black school social workers in education. Historically, Black social workers have focused “on their own kind” because of identified need, geographical limitations, unspoken hiring restrictions, and lack of career advancement and opportunity, even for the highly educated. History suggests that the reasons Black social work efforts focused on religious activities, fundraising, and private institutions may still apply today. Even in a supposedly post racial society, many feel racism still exists; therefore networks, organizations, and supports created by Blacks continue to be essential (Bell, 2014). Throughout history, Black school social workers have made an impact on the education of Black students despite the challenges and barriers they have encountered as professionals.

Empirical studies describing school social workers are almost completely absent from the literature, and research focused on Black school social workers is virtually nonexistent. Most of the information on Black school social workers and their contributions to society has been sparsely located within historical contexts. This study helped to identify the strengths and weaknesses of graduate programs for school social work professionals by allowing social workers to self-identify how their graduate program and profession have shaped their racial and workplace identities. Therefore, these studies and the fields and topics they represent, led me to take on this work and build from what was already in the literature.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks I used to inform and guide my examination of the experiences of Black school social workers were critical race theory (CRT) in education and ecological systems theory (EST). These theories helped me to examine participants' roles and their work with Black youth in a variety of school settings. Bronfenbrenner's EST and the cultural competence model have been the standard frameworks used in social work practice for decades though the cultural competence model is inadequate for this study (and for contemporary social work training overall) and therefore will not be utilized.

Historically, the cultural competence model has referred to social workers' understanding of diverse populations who are of non-white racial, ethnic, or cultural origins. Over the years however, this concept has begun to encompass group differences pertaining to gender, sexuality, religion, age, ability, language, nationality, and others (Abrams & Moio, 2009). One negative aspect of the cultural competence model is that it has stretched beyond racial and ethnic categories, which has diluted the race issues at hand (Razack & Jeffery, 2002; Rothman, 2008).

This theory has encouraged the diffusion of race and therefore a colorblind mentality, which states that an individual's race does not matter and should not be considered.

Many whites believe they live in a world in which racial privilege no longer exists even though their behavior supports racialized structures and practices but critical race scholars contend that the principles actually normalize and perpetuate racism by ignoring the structural inequalities that permeate social institutions. (Le-Doux & Montalvo, 1999) stated another concern with the cultural competence model is how it creates a “multicultural umbrella” that teaches an often diluted curriculum that spans many groups that “gives a little something for everyone” (p. 49). For those reasons, the cultural competence model was not used for this study and deemed inadequate. This is where the use of CRT as an analytical tool helped frame the experiences of Black social workers in an out of school settings, including their graduate school experiences. I also apply Bronfenbrenner's EST theory to conceptualize the schooling contexts of Black social workers from direct practice to large policy interventions.

Ecological Systems Theory

EST explains how an individual's environment influences his or her development. In the social work field, it is often referred to as person-in-environment (PIE) theory. This theory states that there are four interrelated processes that include the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems and that an individual's social environment must be examined as a joint function of his or her characteristics. (Tripod, 2015) described systems or transactions intersect, maintain, and control behavior. The four systems are:

- The microsystem is the most basic system, referring to an individual's most immediate environment—the direct connection between the student and systems such as parents, school, friends and neighborhood.

- The mesosystem is a more generalized system referring to the interactional processes between multiple microsystems (e.g., the effects of spousal relationships on parent-child interactions). The mesosystem connects the various systems to form a relationship; for example, a student can view school as positive if reinforced by mentoring by a college student.
- The ecosystem is a system that indirectly affects family interactions on the micro and meso levels (e.g., the effects of parents' employment on family interactions). The exosystem does not have a direct effect on the student, however, it still has an influence. An example includes a parent going to prison thus limiting funding resources that result in emotional and financial stress or lack of basic necessities.
- The macrosystem is the most generalized force affecting individuals' and families' functioning (e.g., political, cultural, economic, and social systems). This would include a families' political and religious beliefs, and the laws and policies the family operates by.

This theory states that not only should the individual's immediate settings be explored, but the broader contemporary and historical contexts in which these settings are embedded must be addressed as well (Stewart, 2007). The social work profession has expanded Bronfenbrenner's EST to explain that an individual is "constantly creating, restructuring, and adapting" to the environment as the environment affects him or her (Ungar, 2002).

Though EST is abstract in its application within social work, it is a useful tool used to examine the experiences shared by the social workers and one they are familiar with as we talk about "person in environment" Ecological factors played a role in the experiences from the early

experiences surrounding race that they learned from their family members to the interactions they reported in graduate school and their workplaces. All three of the aforementioned factors are a part of the microsystem which directly influences career satisfaction. Moreover, macrosystems must be taken into consideration as well as curriculums and the adoption of the cultural competence model which guided social work graduate programs and school interventions such as zero tolerance and response to interventions which were adopted by K-12 school settings. For this study, I focused on the microsystems and the microsystems, though all four systems are interrelated. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory was used as a framework because cultural, environmental, and individual factors have been identified as influencing the experiences of school social workers.

Critical Race Theory in Education

Though the ecological and environmental factors were identified through EST, critical race theory was needed to identify the racial implications surrounding social workers' experiences. Although CRT began in the legal scholarship realm in the mid-1980s, it gained prominence in education in the early 1990s as a tool for explaining inequalities in education (Ladson-Billings, 2009). It has asserted that racism is alive and well within American education and this theory and analytical model allowed the examination of how throughout my study. "CRT has offered new visions for how to conduct qualitative research in education that is sensitive to the needs of marginalized communities of color" (Lynn & Parker, 2006, p. 270). Scholars have built on this scholarship and contributed meaningful work in this area focused on the legal foundation, the intersectionality of this scholarship, and the more recently, the curricular contributions this work can bring into school settings (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda,

Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Stovall, 2004).

CRT draws on diverse disciplines such as sociology, law, history, feminist and postcolonial studies, economics, political science, and ethnic and cultural studies. Abrams and Moio (2009) stated,

Although it may be comforting for many to think that we can afford to be “race neutral” in our analysis of social welfare institutions, policies, and practices, the existence of these disparities indicates that a color-blind mentality will not solve some of our most enduring and systemic social divisions and inequities. Social work is ultimately concerned with social justice issue and minimizing the potential of all humans to lead healthy, productive, and fulfilling lives. (p. 257)

CRT can help move society toward racial equality by negating the pervasive colorblind approach. More and more scholars have begun to use CRT in education as a conceptual lens in examining race and racism on Black students’ experiences in the K–12 educational system. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) suggest that researchers “utilize the full power of CRT, including whiteness as property, interest conversion, and the critique of liberalism” in order to better serve the most marginalized populations (p. 30). Not only did I use CRT as a tool for uncovering the pervasiveness of race within our educational walls but I also used it as a basis for critiquing the trend of multicultural and cultural competence education that has been supported in the social work field for decades.

Critical race theory will be utilized as the framework for data analysis to determine if the Black school social workers’ experiences were informed by an awareness of the societal constructions of race. My work will begin to explore if once the ideology of racism is examined

and racist injustices are named, victims of racism can affirm and better identify the struggles they encounter in the workplace and school settings surrounding race. My goal is that they become better informed and more empowered in their work hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments are framed, and learning to make the arguments themselves. (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Although the EST model helped me to explain racial acts on the micro level, as well as the macro level, CRT helped me expand my understanding because it “offers insights, perspectives, methods and pedagogies that guide our efforts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom: (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 60).

CRT in education posits that it is important to critically examine and understand the contexts, thoughts, beliefs, interpretations, implications, and resistance toward school improvement and the school improvement planning process (Gillborn, 2008). Therefore, this study used a conceptual model to merge CRT in education with the ecological perspective to create a framework that explores the racism that persists in the K–12 through the graduate educational setting. The merging of these theories allowed Black school social workers to articulate their actions and to utilize a framework to understand their practices within the school setting. See Appendix A.

A century after the great American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois predicted that racism would continue to emerge as one of this country’s key problems, education researchers, practitioners, and students are still in need of a language that will provide the necessary tools for effectively analyzing and coming to terms with the impact of race and racism on education. ((Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002). These theories allowed my research to explore how

race affects my participant's career as a school social worker from their most immediate relationships to their communities and the policies that influenced them. Therefore, the link between CRT and education becomes even clearer when connecting CRT and school social work. To my knowledge, there has been no systematic analysis of the experiences of Black school social workers and their everyday experiences in school settings situated within CRT. It is the value of experiential knowledge and the lived experiences that CRT offers that may offer important opportunities for furthering research in this area. Therefore, I used critical race theory in education in conjunction with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to examine how race and racism is interwoven with their school day from the counseling they do with individual students to the committees that sit on to the community relationships they foster.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

The literature review highlighted the areas of inclusion and omission of Black school social workers from the research on social work and education. This study builds on the research and fills in the gaps related to the work that still needs to be done. The literature contains few examples of qualitative research on school social workers and is virtually devoid of the specific experiences or voices of Black school social workers. This work attempts to provide a safe space for their viewpoints to be shared and recorded while discussing their work in a K–12 school setting. The following questions guided my research:

1. What are the roles and experiences of Black school social workers in K–12 school settings?
 - a. How might race and racism influence delivery of social work services and social workers' career satisfaction?
 - b. How might different K–12 school settings influence delivery of social work services and social workers' career satisfaction?
 - c. How do social workers articulate a commitment to working with Black youth?

This study examines the unique experiences of Black school social workers including factors that facilitate or hinder their effectiveness as social workers in K–12 schools across the state of Illinois. Through a qualitative approach consisting of in-depth interviews analyzed through CRT in education and EST, I examined the experiences faced by social workers. The data collected provided evidence of the roles, realities, challenges, and coping strategies of Black school social workers who work in a variety of school settings.

This chapter is organized into six sections: (a) rationale for methodological design; (b) participants and setting; (c) data collection; (d) data analysis; (e) instrumentation, including validity, reliability, ethics; and (f) limitations and delimitations.

Rationale for Using Qualitative Research

Identification of the researcher's personal values, assumptions, and biases is required at the outset of the study (Fassinger, 2005; Hill, et al., 2005). Researchers have found that making potential biases known at the outset of a study is an effective safeguard of validity throughout the research process. Therefore, I noted my experience as a Black American and a former school social worker operating within a public school setting. My experiences included occasions when several Black workers would "posse up" to share about their experiences within the school building. These were not planned meetings; they were simply a time when lived experiences and shared feelings were welcomed and understood. Often, the gathering only happened for a few minutes. Sometimes, hours of work time was comprised. We would swap war stories, vent, offer strategies and support, and leave feeling empowered. Creswell (2008) stated that personal stories—intimate compilations of events and individuals who have influenced one's life—form bridges of understanding that permit insight into the lives of others. This is the heart of a qualitative study.

Therefore, a qualitative approach to this topic is highly appropriate to conducting research on a marginalized population, especially when contextualizing issues of power and privilege (Morrow & Smith, 2000). It is important to understand the benefits of a qualitative design and the use of culturally sensitive methodologies. The majority of the research conducted on school social workers has used quantitative methods—primarily surveys. It is equally important, however, for the voice of school social workers to be documented and affirmed.

Therefore, this study was framed to record the voices of participants and to conduct research in a culturally responsive way. This was captured by the researcher being a Black school social worker as well as having a general understanding of the participants' cultures, traditions, and communication styles. This allowed the detailed, rich experiences of the participants to be catalogued.

A qualitative design also supports culturally sensitive methodologies, which are necessary to document unique experiences. Culturally sensitive research practices are needed to upend deficient mainstream theories and to allow for the perspectives of diverse cultural groups who fight for equity (Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Ladson-Billings G, 1995) stated that “individuals who have lived through the experiences, of which they claim to be experts, are more believable and credible than those who have merely read and thought about such experience (p. 472). This methodology allowed Black school social workers to tell their stories in their own voices. Member checks ensured the validity of their descriptions. Educational research that explores issues of race and culture, especially the experiences of African Americans, must be culturally sensitive and position culture as central to the research process, thereby validating and acknowledging historical and contemporary experiences (Tillman, 2002).

Selection of Participants

The state of Illinois has the largest number of school social workers in the country: 3,544. Out of those, 347 (or 10% of the population) identified as Black or African American (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013). Given the small number of Black school social workers in the state of Illinois, nonrandom sampling techniques (purposeful and snowballing) were used to determine my target population. Creswell (2008) defined a target population as a “group of individuals with some common defining characteristic that the researcher can identify and study”

(p. 145). To this end, I sought out Black school social workers who work in K–12 school settings across the state of Illinois.

The recruitment process consisted of an advertisement on the Illinois Association of School Social Workers (IASSW) Facebook page and a letter and e-mail sent to all of the Black school social workers in the state. These social workers were identified using ISBE’s demographic data from 2013 and IASSW’s membership list from June 2013. (IASSW did not maintain demographic data on its members at the time so the initial contact included all members.) Self-identified potential participants were contacted by phone or e-mail to explain the study. Eight Black school social workers who were the most agreeable to the constraints of the study were chosen. I also used the snowball technique to recruit other participants. This technique began with the current participants reviewing the participant criteria and then recommending others who fit the description. Through that process, I identified 4 more suitable participants.

The participants met the following criteria:

- (a) Self-identification as African American or Black.
- (b) Employment in the state of Illinois as a school social worker.
- (c) Employment in a public school or charter school setting.
- (d) Use of Facebook on a regular basis (at least weekly).

The second criterion identified for my study (b) was purposeful. I chose the state of Illinois for two reasons. Illinois has the largest population of school social workers in the United States. In addition, as a board member with the IASSW, I had easier access to members across the state. The executive board of IASSW also agreed to assist with recruitment. Also, employment as a school social worker in the state of Illinois guarantees that individuals have a

master's degree in social work and have earned a specialization certification (Type 73) from the Regional Office of Education. This means that social workers must take two additional classes, participate in a yearlong internship in a school setting, and pass a test while maintaining professional development education credits. In many social work programs, documenting self-reflection and self-evaluation work is also a requirement. Therefore, the school social workers for this study were highly qualified and trained in this field.

Demographics of Participants

The participants in this study were 12 Black school social workers located across the state of Illinois. They ranged in age from 30 to 55 at the time of the study. Three were men and 9 were women. Their number of years employed as a school social worker ranged from 3 to 25, with the majority practicing 5 years or less. Table 2 summarizes this demographic information.

Data Collection

To address the research questions, I gathered data through two qualitative techniques that were guided by my conceptual framework. CRT and the EST directed the data collection procedures to “capture the stories, counter-stories, and narratives of marginalized people” (Fernandez, 2002, p. 52). Qualitative data collection involves using emerging questions to permit the participants to generate responses. Qualitative techniques are used to collect information from a small number of individuals and to gather data. Accordingly, the data collection for this study included in-depth, focused interviews. A data collection matrix is included in Appendix B.

Table 2
Demographic Chart

Demographic	Number of participants
Age	
30–35	5
36–39	1
40–45	2
46–49	1
50–55	3
Degrees and certifications	
Bachelor’s degree, a master’s in social work, and a Type 73 ^a	12
LCSW ^b	2
Another master’s degree	3
Type 75 ^c	3
Schooling	
University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign	7
University of Illinois–Chicago	2
Chicago State	1
Out-of-state university	2
Hometown	
Cook County/Chicago	5
Northern Chicago suburbs	1
Central Illinois	3
Southern Illinois	2
Out of state	1
Work location	
Cook County/Chicago	2
Northern Chicago suburbs	1
Southern Chicago suburbs	2
Central Illinois	5
Southern Illinois	2
Gender	
Female	9
Male	3
Geographic type	
Suburban	4
Urban	5
Inner city	3
Years employed	
0–5 years	5
5–10 years	2
11–15 years	2
15 years or more	3

a. Type 73 is the school social work endorsement. This endorsement is needed to practice social work in public schools in Illinois. It includes an internship, proficiency exam, continuing education credits, and other requirements for the ISBE.

b. A licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) must have at least a master’s degree in social work, undergo a supervised clinical field internship, have at least 2 years of postgraduate supervised clinical social work employment, pass a proficiency exam, and receive continuing education credits.

c. The Type 75 is an advanced administrative certificate required in the state of Illinois to work in administrative K–12 positions. The principal endorsement requires an applicant to hold a master’s degree in a related field of education, complete administrative coursework, complete 2 years of full-time teaching or school service personnel experience (Type 73), pass content exams, and receive continuing education credits.

Interviews

The interviews for this study were explained to the participants as opportunities for counter storytelling. Counter storytelling is the art of telling a story against the master narrative within the CRT framework. The master narrative or story, which is a term used in CRT, describes the stories of white supremacy. In the case of this research, the master narrative can be described as a white social worker from a middle class upbringing who never lived in the streets her students talked about, never got to know the communities they were from or the places of importance in their lives (Price, 2006) or how deficit thinking, teaching, and power undermines learning and how white educators use of multicultural educational tools influences their thoughts, actions, and communication to Black students (Milner, 2006). Therefore, counter stories, as mentioned before, contribute to the centrality of the experiences of people of color and challenge the story of white supremacy, continuing to give a voice to those that have been silenced by white supremacy. This is very important in preserving the history of marginalized groups whose experiences have never been legitimized within the master narrative (Dixson, 2003). Therefore, each counter story or interview took 1–2 hours, was tape recorded (with permission), and was conducted in a setting of the participant's choice. I used an interview protocol (see Appendix C) to take notes and identify themes. The interview protocol was guided by a review of previous studies conducted by school social workers and studies focusing on racial microaggressions (Constantine, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Lin, Torino, & Rivera, 2008; Teasley, 2005).

The semi structured, open-ended questions allowed the participants freedom and creative space to respond to each question while allowing me to further probe and seek elaboration based on the responses to the issues and topics raised. The interviews were audiotaped with the

participants' permission and later transcribed. I also summarized key points immediately following each interview. The use of tape recorders had several advantages related to recording the interview data for research. Audio recording “reduces the tendency of interviewers to make an unconscious selection of data favoring their biases and allows for reanalysis. It also allows another researcher to evaluate, classify and score responses, if necessary” (Sharma, 2005). The interview protocol and the other interview questions I used as prompts can be found in Appendix C.

The data for this study were collected from May 2013 to August 2014. As the sole investigator, I conducted the interviews at times that were convenient for participants. The interviews took place in their offices, in their homes, and in a private conference room at the IASSW 2013 annual conference in Lisle, Illinois. I received signed consent forms from each participant and transcribed and submitted each interview to most participants for member checking. Participants did not make any corrections to the transcripts beyond improving the grammar of some statements—a common event when spoken language is converted to written language.

Online Focus Group

Additionally, in order to encourage a supportive environment for Black social workers to share their lived experiences, I chose an online forum or virtual focus group as the most feasible forum to continue a healthy discussion across the state and to encourage regular, intimate dialogue. The anticipated outcome was that participants sharing in this forum would also contribute to their learning about self. The use of “self” as a social work practice requires that both students and practitioners know themselves as thoroughly as possible as a prerequisite to effective interpersonal helping (Maneolas, 1994). Therefore, my goal was to encourage racial

discussions while acknowledging the participants as racial beings. I assumed that this would be a new experience for some since exploring the self in racial terms is not a focus in most graduate programs.

I initially set up an online Facebook focus group for the Spring 2014 semester. My hope was that Facebook could be used to host a support group for social workers to share their feelings online in a private group. Although there has not been much work done in the area of online focus groups, focus groups in general have shown to be a solid qualitative measure. Focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among participants likely yields the best information and when participants are similar and cooperative with each other. It was my hope that the participants would stimulate a wider array of experiences and meaning among each other than would individual interviews. I assured the participants that protecting privacy is of the utmost importance in any focus group. Because maintaining confidentiality is not entirely under the control of the researcher, however, the participants had to be encouraged to be as honest and open as they could be while remaining mindful of the limits on the researcher's ability to protect confidentiality. This gave participants the ability to talk openly about their experiences in a technological comfort zone.

During the initial interviews, I explained the Facebook online focus group, the technical and confidentiality issues, and the format. Some Internet-based research experts have identified practices for describing confidentiality protections to subjects. Some of these best practices include an explanation of how data are transmitted from the subject to the researcher, how the researcher maintains and secures the data, and how there is no way to guarantee absolute confidentiality (Hamrell, 2012).

Data Analysis

I read each interview several times in search of patterns and causal flows to discover the everyday challenges faced by Black school social workers, specifically focusing on cultural nuances and the ways in which participants described their experiences. All data analysis took place through the lens of CRT in education and EST. I analyzed the data using constant comparative data analysis. Using this method, I gathered the data, sorted it into categories, collected additional information, and then compared the new information with the emerging categories. As I collected data from the research, I constantly examined and reexamined the data while looking for evidence that demonstrated how it impacted the conceptual framework in place which I continued until I had reached saturation and no new themes emerged.

The Facebook online group did not generate the data expected. I expected to obtain primary data and rich quotes from participant posts, but most participants were not on Facebook as often as they initially stated and most prompts did not stimulate a healthy discussion. My initial assumption was that the participants had similar viewpoints on the prompts posted and therefore, an engaging discussion and debate did not happen.

No data were collected through the Facebook online group. The initial proposal had a social media component in hopes that participants would discuss race issues related to education in a closed group on Facebook with weekly posts facilitating discussion. This was not a successful data collection measure. Although 9 of the 12 participants agreed to the Facebook component, the dialogue that I had hoped for did not happen. Most participants stated that they often agreed on the post and did not have any additional thought-provoking response to the material. They also felt a measure of structure and formality if they had to respond (since it

would be used for this work) instead of a free flow of thoughts. Therefore, no data from the Facebook group were used in this study.

Instrumentation

Validity

To ensure validity, all data were member checked by allowing the participant to read the transcript of their interview electronically as well as track changes made by this researcher that included emerging themes, ideas, and interpretation. Participants were asked to review the interview comments, if so desired. Only my changes or comments were submitted by 3 of the 12 participants. Member checking provided a useful review of the interview data and its interpretations to confirm that the researcher accurately portrayed them (Krathwohl, 1998). I also piloted the interview questions with two trained Black school social workers who were in the school social work field but left to go to higher educational settings. The feedback obtained from the pilot interviews clarified my questions further. Krathwohl stated that this process can be used to confirm that the researcher has conveyed what he or she intended with each question and that the responses may be interpreted as replies to what the researcher is asking.

Reliability

This study was a small but representative sample of Black school social workers across the state of Illinois. I kept my sample size small in order to capture the lived experiences the school social workers used for this study therefore, a larger sample size would not have been conducive to the information I sought. Though there is little qualitative research on Black school social workers in the literature, this study is supported by similar findings from Black teachers in K-12 school settings (Beauboeuf, 1997; Knight, 1998; Shippen, Curtis, & Miller, 2009).

Ethics

In general, there are many ethical issues to be considered when conducting qualitative research. I as a social worker and my participants are bound by our profession's code of ethics, which will support this research being conducted in an ethical manner. For instance, confidentiality is an ethical principle that all good social workers adhere to. It will be my responsibility to secure the data and maintain confidentiality throughout the research. It was also my responsibility to be competent in my research methodology and analysis and to continue to focus on my participants' self-worth, dignity, and relationships with each other in the online focus group. Additionally, I did not misuse any of the information I discovered, and I committed to upholding a moral responsibility. This study was approved by the University of Illinois' Institutional Review Board, and written consent was obtained prior to the interviews and the online focus group.

Limitations of the Study

This research design had the following limitations and delimitations:

1. The subset of (n=12) Black school social workers is relatively small it does provide representative experiences of what the participants' experience. It may not provide the generalizability that qualitative methods seeks though.
2. Due to time constraints and the limited focus of this work, only Black school social workers were used in this study, though other school social workers of color may have similar experiences. Therefore, generalizations cannot be made for other school social workers of color from this study.
3. This study examined the experiences of 12 Black school social workers in Illinois. Therefore, it does not allow cross-national comparisons to the experiences of other Black school social workers in other geographic locations within the United States.

Though other studies have shown similarities with racial experiences for Black educators, it is unclear how individuals in other regions of the country, their schooling, and the policies that guide their state may influence their work and career satisfaction.

All research studies can be discussed in terms of relative strengths and limitations. This research was limited to a small subset of the school social work population. Some school districts are fortunate to have even one social worker per school. Often, one social worker is used for an entire school district. Therefore, future research then should aim to replicate this study in other settings and with different population samples.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

I used the framework of CRT to assist me in understanding through interviews the structures, practices, and policies that formed the participants' lived experiences. CRT asserts that racism is endemic to American life and therefore the U.S. educational system. The following ideas helped to frame the analysis and to identify commonalities among the respondents:

- *The centrality of race and racism, both historically and in a contemporary sociopolitical context.* CRT recognizes race historically and in its current form using various interdisciplinary methods. It also notes that racism is an ordinary practice that manifests itself in multiple contexts.
- *The challenge to dominant ideology, maintaining the status quo, and colorblindness.* CRT challenges the traditional claims of objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. It often hides the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in the United States.
- *A commitment to social justice and praxis.* CRT at its core is committed to social justice that aims to eliminate all forms of racial, gender, language, and class subordination. Connecting theory to practice and tying research to the community are essential.
- *The influence of racial stratification and interest convergence on racial identity.* CRT asserts that racism benefits the powerful and serves their interest with respect to racial stratification. Therefore, those in power have very little incentive to eliminate racism. The concept of interest convergence states that any efforts to eliminate racism will occur only if there is a benefit to the dominant or privileged group.

- *Whiteness as property*. CRT states that the dominant group often feels it has the right to dispose of, use, transfer, enjoy, and exclude based on the concept of whiteness. In the educational realm, curriculum is the most readily available example of whiteness as property (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solorzano, Villapando, & Oseguera, 2005).

Overview of Black School Social Workers' Experiences

The participants were interviewed in person across the state of Illinois in their respective communities. The vast differences in their locations were obvious, and the history of their communities and school districts was fascinating. Therefore, I felt it was important to describe the participants, the context of the school districts, and their communities (although pseudonyms are used).

Michael Dellums

Michael was interviewed in his large office decorated with posters on the walls and papers scattered throughout. The interview lasted almost two hours and only ended when visitors from the Illinois State Board of Education came to introduce their new administration. Michael was very insightful and comfortable sharing his experiences and his connection to his community and many of his responses were framed around coping and dealing with adversity.

Michael is a 53 year old man who has been a school worker in the same school for the last 20 years after he spend time in the military. Though he did not grow up in this community, he describes how he grew up in similar ones in other cities throughout the country. He describes himself as a leader in his school and states that his voice is heard by the administration and he is considered a leader among the staff.

Michael lives in the community where he works because he said it allows for more effective practice but he only moved there after his children were out of the house. He chose to

raise his children in a nearby suburb instead of in the city. Casonville was the one of the largest cities in the state in the 1950s, but drastic urban blight has lowered the population to 31,000. It was settled in 1797 and was home to meatpacking and stockyards, but deindustrialization rendered it useless. Currently, the city is struggling. The vast majority (97%) of the population is Black and below the poverty level. The school district is in a similar struggle. Only 12% of the students meet or exceeds standards and 99% of the students are low-income and Black. The middle school where he works is surrounded by open fields and abandoned buildings. He describes the climate of his workplace as students and staff having low expectations. He states that they also have many inexperienced, white teachers and support staff because they are needed to balance out the workforce which is predominantly Black which he says is a never-ending, interesting dynamic.

Michael discussed his graduate school experiences very specifically. He said “The best thing my degree did was give me the power to be at the table.” He also stated it gave him the opportunity to see “other parts of the story” as it related to his classmates experiences and views of the world. He did not have role models within his education spaces and the biggest race issue during his social work training surround transracial adoptions. Michael looks forward to retiring while still volunteering with the kids and in his community.

Kanye Young

Kanye is a 28 year old man who lives in the city of Richland though he grew up in another city a couple of hours away. He has been a school social worker for 5 years and takes his role as a mentor to the students in his elementary school very seriously. This was evident throughout his interview which lasted almost two hours which was conducted during the IASSW

conference in a private conference room. He is very well read and interested in race topics in American society and shared his thoughts throughout the interview.

His school serves approximately 300 students with 41% of the students being Black. The staff demographics include 99% white and 1% Black. Kanye expressed his frustration with the different culture of the school. He discussed the burden of communicating issues to teachers but also stated that he must do it. He discussed how that obligation was engrained in him by his grandmother who was a community activist and foster parent.

Kanye's graduate school experience was at a historically Black college out of state though interestingly, he said that race was not a main topic. His classmates were all African American and he assumes that racial discussions or the lack thereof was taken for granted. He later had to transferred to a predominantly white university to finish his degree for a very different experience. He only had two classmates who were African American. Race topics were still not discussed.

Carlotta Sampson

Carlotta Sampson is 51 years old but she has only been a school social worker for ten years. She began her career in the school system as a teacher's aide and finally went back to school while working three jobs to pay the expenses. She attended a predominantly white university and felt uncomfortable throughout her learning experience—through she acknowledges some of that was due to race and other due to her age at time of attendance. She shared her experiences as we conducted the interviews at the nearby public library. Carlotta was very quiet and reflective and her answers were direct and to the point. The interview took one hour.

She stated that she grew up in a small, urban community much like the one she currently works in and exuded pride that she knew both communities well—the people, the resources, and the spirit. She works in Petersburg. Petersburg is a smaller town that has 33,000 people, 24% of whom are Black. When it was settled in 1827, it became a major industrial center with coal mines and factories. The mines and factories have disappeared since then, and most of the area is abandoned or has been made into parks and lakes. Currently, it is ripe with violence and unemployment.

Carlotta currently works in the high school in that school district with a variety of needs. There are approximately 1,700 students in the school but with only a 72% graduation rate and 27% of the students prepared for college (scoring at least a 21 on the ACT). 68% of the students are low-income and 40% are Black. Carlotta is the only Black professional in the school except for one assistant principal. Any other Black workers are paraprofessionals. Her unique role in the school has forced her into being the spokesperson for many situations—which she enjoys at times and despises at others. Though she felt inferior in graduate school, she currently feels that the staff view her as an expert. Carlotta was very nurturing and empowered by her work with the youth in her building.

Stoney Edwards

Stoney is a 35 year old man who has been a social worker for 10 years and his interview took place in a local restaurant. The interview lasted for about an hour. Stoney is quiet and mild mannered and described his social work practice in a similar way.

He has worked in Death Valley in the same elementary school his entire career where he stated that his focus was to get students “back to their normal”. He enjoys his work and stated

that being a double minority has worked in his favor with the students and staff. He is the only male professional on staff in the building.

Stoney suggested that he works with all students and specifically with the males who need a father figure but that he does not connect with his students outside of the school walls. His school has 8% Black staff but 41% Black students. Though Stoney grew up in the city of Algiers in an all-black neighborhood, he did not talk much about race and instead focused on class and individuals.

Natalia Height

Natalia is a 43 year old woman who has been a social worker for 17 years. She has lived in Death Valley for most of her adult life and has been a part of the community there for two decades. She serves as the only social worker at the middle school where there are 700 students and 61% low income and 30% Black population. 8% of the faculty are Black. Death Valley is a slightly smaller city than Richland, but it is home to a major university. It was a booming railroad city in the 1850s and now is a leader in technology and software. Its Black population is around 15%.

Natalia's interview took place in her office which was decorated with pictures of the students and character posters on the walls. Her face to face interview took place for over two hours but we were interrupted twice by students in need of assistance.

Natalia was raised in a mostly Black community and she thrives living in the same community where she works. She is actively involved in assisting with several afterschool programs that have ties in the community.

Shelly Haynes

Clifford is another small town of 27,000; 24% of the population is Black. In its early days, the town hosted many abolitionist activities. Shelly and I conducted her interview in a private room during the IASSW conference. Shelly was very talkative and her interview lasted an hour and a half. She works in an elementary school and though Shelly has worked there for 12 years, she grew up on military bases around the world. She expressed that those experiences has taught her that there is good and bad in Black and white people and that she does not assume everything in life is related to race. Despite her upbringing, she also shared that she has begun to notice race issues more now that she has gotten older.

Shelly's school has approximately 20% Black students but only 6% of the teachers are Black. She was excited that her school recently began focusing on social justice issues.

Rhoda Childress

Rhoda is currently serving her 6th year as the school social worker at the same elementary school she attended as a child. She is located in a suburb of Algers and the total enrollment is 400 students. Students demographics include 70% Black students and the staff demographics include 99% white.

Rhoda's interview took place in a hotel room during the IASSW conference. She shared how her school's reputation was built on social justice issues so it perplexes her how they cannot hire staff to reflect that initiative. She attended a predominantly white graduate school program with two other participants.

Ali Pittman

Ali and Rhoda have similar work histories and share experiences being old classmates and working in the same school district. Ali was concluding her 6th year as a social worker at the

high school when we conducted her interview in her office. Her high school has 1,500 students with 47% Black and 11% of the faculty and staff Black.

Her interview was a little less than an hour because she has been ill most of the school year. The interview took place in her office.

Victoria Davis

Victoria was the most racially conscious social worker I interviewed. The interview lasted two hours in her home which was decorated in African masks and Black Power movement posters. She presented very passionately throughout the interviews and often answered questions before I answered them.

Victoria has spent 14 years being a school social worker all around the city of Algiers and she is now in an elementary school where there is 24% Black staff and 97% Black students. She attended a city university that she described as diverse. She is often frustrated with her administration.

Diane Hunter

Diane has worked at the charter high school for 7 years. The students and the staff are predominantly Black and she loves the work and the climate within her school. She stated that the atmosphere is a welcome contrast to her graduate school social work training at a predominantly white university. She describes how the traditions, activities, discussions, and even cafeteria food are inclusive of Black culture and she thrives there. It is a small school with only 200 students but she feels like this is home for her. She grew up in Algiers, Illinois not far from where she works. It was a magnet for European immigrants in 1833. By 1900, it had almost 2 million residents living in mostly segregated housing. It has been a political machine, and even

after deindustrialization it has continued to flourish with tourism, transportation, and national retailers.

Diane's interview took place in her home. It took over 2 hours and was a leisurely discussion that often went off on tangents. She described how she bought her home recently and planned to live in the neighborhood for a very long time.

Pearl Herman

Gongers is a suburb of Algiers has a population of 74,000; 4% are Black. It is the world headquarters for a major company and has one of the largest malls in the world. This is where Pearl has been a school social worker for 3 years. Most of her interview, which took place in her home was filled with her continued feeling of disconnect at work. She works in an affluent, predominantly white middle school with high test scores, little mobility, and little diversity. There are 9% Black students in her school and she is the only Black staff member besides the secretaries and cafeteria staff.

Pearl shares how she is already losing her passion for the work because there is no sense of community and it is a burden to come to work though she loves the kids. She has tried to foster some connections by creating a mentor group for Black females but she has recently found it seems to be a dumping ground for teachers to get students they do not want to deal with out of their classrooms.

She often compared her internship experiences to her current workplace during our 90 minute interview. Her internship reminded her of the high school and the neighborhood where she grew up as a child and a sense of community made her feel like she understood her purpose in life and her work. She lived close to the school and had relationships with them outside of the

school setting. She also stated she had more credibility in her internship than she currently does in her workplace.

Pearl was a very emotional participant during the interview while describing work and her graduate schools experiences at a predominantly white institution at in the city. She often went home exhausted from class because of race issues but expressed how she sometimes held it in so she wouldn't be labeled as the "angry Black woman." Pearl is concerned that she may be fired before she gains tenure because she often feels obligated to speak her mind about race.

Sonya Edwards

Sonya is a 30 year old woman whose energy and determination for her career was evident throughout the interview which took place for over two hours in her home. She has lived in the community where she currently works her entire life and is connected to both tremendously. She has worked in the high school for 5 years and she is also a professor at the local community college, the president of her civic organization, and active in her church.

Her community, Richland claims to be the fourth-largest city in Illinois outside of Chicago with a population of 120,000 people, 24% of whom are Black. The earliest settlers arrived in 1680, and it became a hub for distilleries and bootlegging, as well as home to a major factory. Now, it is a thriving tourist company in central Illinois. The school district has 47% low income students and an 83% graduation rate with about 1,000 students in attendance. Sonya thrives in her school setting which she states is filled with different activities and experiences every day. Throughout her interview, she shared how she relates well to the students which, in turn, causes many white staff to have concerns. She stated that "they don't understand the work I do; the way I talk to students—my language—the way I relate to them; like I am a foreign creature."

Sonya accepts the challenges she encounters in her workplace well though according to her. She has a good support system, she feels empowered and knowledgeable in her role, and it is also a part of her personality. Sonya said she experienced similar encounters during her social work training at a predominantly white institution and she felt comfortable sharing her ideas and experiences and advocating for herself throughout the program. During the two hour interview, Sonya was a full of stories and was able to share experiences throughout. She also valued her role as the “mother” of many students in the school and the community connector for the schools as well.

Summary of the Participants

Although each of the participants shared their personal stories and schooling that mostly existed in predominantly white institutions as well as their varied workplace experiences, all had similar responses to the primary research questions that explored their role as school social workers. CRT acknowledges that its most basic premise is that race and racism are interwoven into American society. Therefore, it is logical that most would describe their roles as “objective” or “neutral” and as providing “equal opportunity” service to all. This is in contrast to Black social workers of the past, who might have used terms such as “discrimination” and “equal rights” to describe their profession and work.

When asked about their roles, participants responded,

I provide a variety of functions every day. I see myself as the parent within the school—*loco parentis* as they would say.

I provide social and emotional services for students to help them be successful academically in school. That can range from special education testing to conflict

resolution to home visits. I break up fights, provide winter coats, and facilitate groups on grief and hygiene. You name it and I probably do it.

I am the homeless liaison and I have access to a wide variety of students. I test for special education services, provide individual and group counseling and I am on the crisis team.

The general overview that participants provided allowed me to surmise that these participants were proud of their work that aimed to assist students be successful in school and that their job allowed them to help students in a variety of ways. Therefore, the remaining research questions were framed specifically around racial issues and explored participants' experiences ranging from graduate school to their current work situation. Six salient themes emerged from the data to provide a comprehensive picture of what Black school social workers experienced. The themes were early experiences of race, gender, and class; graduate school training; membership in the school community; obligation to Black youth; negative experiences in the workplace; and career satisfaction.

Early Experiences of Race, Gender, and Class

Race and racism had influenced the participants since childhood, as evidenced by their answers to the early childhood questions. Most offered stories that often intersected with other identities they had, such as their gender, class, or the neighborhood they grew up in. For instance, one participant discussed how she was taught that color and race were not an issue to be concerned with.

I grew up on a military base and there was always only two to three brown people in my classes. I mostly had white friends. My parents were from the south, but they didn't talk about race. They said there are good people and bad people in all races, but you do have to be twice as good to be equal.

Another participant had vastly different views and grew up listening to her family members debate the current issues of the times. Most of the issues centered on the civil rights and Black Power movements. Two of her older cousins were professors of African American studies at some of the first programs started in the country. She stated that her experiential knowledge of her family members and her surroundings continued to influence her as a professional:

I didn't learn about race from school. It came naturally—listening to stories, listening to my family. It was my destiny to do this work, I think.

Yet another participant stated how she missed out on such family discussion.

Mom calls me Ms. Black Power, but I am mad at my mom for not teaching me about this stuff. I am still learning as an adult and that is sad.

Another learned the master narrative of what a social worker is like from a movie instead of by hearing the stories of true pioneers in his field. He stated,

I actually wanted to be a bus driver and then later a social worker even though the only thing I knew about being a social worker was from the movie *Claudine*.

The families of the social workers in this study had varying exposure to and experiences of racial discussions in schools and other spaces. CRT holds that racism is not a new concept. It is one that has been woven throughout society and is ever-changing. It is constantly being called different names, being addressed in different ways, and being influenced in different manners. It will always cause some to question what they are experiencing.

I remember walking into stores with my white friends as teens. I always felt that there was an assumption that I couldn't afford the items in the store. They always approached

my white friends first as if they had money and I didn't—but I didn't want to think it was a race issue.

Another respondent stated she is always on “high alert” when it comes to racial issues because her older brother would constantly point out instances of racism to her when she was a child. He identified instances in commercials, in textbooks, and even in items in grocery stores. His favorite pastime seemed to be pointing out differences in movies and magazines. She stated,

I learned about race from the cradle. It was always in my face.

Although participants' family stories varied, the common thread was that they all impacted the participants' views on race in society. Despite the respondents' stories related to their families and neighborhoods, there was not much discussion about their early schooling experiences.

Graduate School Training

Most of the respondents had strong opinions about their social work graduate school training and its impact on them as social workers. The participants expressed in numerous ways how they did not receive the curriculum and pedagogy they needed to tackle the complexities of issues taking place in the K–12 school settings they worked at. Although most schools, like social work professionals, take a social justice stance similar to CRT's, participants stated that though the theory was there, the knowledge of how to implement that systemically into practice was lacking. They stated that the agenda to eliminate all forms of oppression including racial, gender, language, generation status, and class subordination (Matsuda, Lawrence III, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993) seemed to be all talk.

I felt like anytime they talked about poverty of some sort, it was just a quick and hurried, awkward discussion. I remember having to do a presentation on, like, the lunch program or something like that for one of my classes, and they got on the subject of food stamps

and things of that nature. And I'm like, "Actually more white people are on food stamps than Black people." I remember saying that comment because I was mad about their portrayal of society, but they had just read it in a book and all of a sudden were experts. Most of the participants did not remember any meaningful instances of race and oppression being taught and explored.

I really don't remember, especially when it comes to race, how we were trained to deal with that. And I think maybe why it doesn't stand out to me is because I am minority, so maybe it was said and then I just tuned it out.

There were a lot of gaps and we didn't talk about inequities. But I didn't want to be the angry Black woman all the time so I sometimes let things slide even though there were teachable moments there. I thought that was the professor's job anyway. It hurt though because I felt like if we can't talk about it now, we can't practice it later.

Several respondents stated that understanding race and racism is not something that can be taught in graduate school or can be gleaned from a textbook. Their belief is aligned with CRT's tenet that having experiential knowledge is the key to understanding.

I think there's always more that can be done when you're talking about race, because—and it's not necessarily everything that you can learn in a textbook—so a lot of stuff you're gonna have to learn by experience; you have to learn by interacting with kids, interacting in their environment too. I mean it's good to read the books so you get an idea, like stuff like Jonathan Kozol and stuff like that, but you also have to kind of be in that setting so you can understand some things too.

I think some of the cultural stuff that I know I gathered from my own experience, not necessarily what I was taught in a graduate program. I think there are a lot of things—a lot of nuances that are overlooked like between staff and kids, staff to staff, and then also sort of you as a social worker, sort of where you fit when you are looking for a job.

Others responded that only people of color could understand racism:

I had to write a bio for my class at the beginning of the first semester of school. The teacher told me that my bio couldn't be real. I almost cursed him out.

I used to get so mad in class when people didn't believe what I was saying, like I chose to describe a horrible fairytale. I would think, "How can your opinion override my experience? Get the hell outta here!"

So you don't know those things until—unless you're a minority and you are constantly aware of those things.

Each participant could name the one to three other Black students in their cohort and usually the one Black professor they had, if any. The absence of students and faculty of color continues to be an issue. Often, the respondents described the behaviors, actions, and comments of their white classmates as more stressful than the graduate program itself. Hearing the dominant ideology spouted and seeing the roots of racism and how racism manifests itself through one's peers, as CRT suggests, was a problem to many respondents. One participant felt it was her duty to educate others.

All the time I felt like someone needed to educate them on what was really going on, because I felt like they had this idea of this, and this, and that, and this is the reasoning

why. No, it's not the reasoning why. And like I say all the time, I can't speak for all Black people, but I can speak for the majority of them.

One respondent stated that graduate school was an adequate, though not mind-blowing, experience of issues of oppression in American society. Despite her positive outlook, she realized just how ignorant her classmates were: "I was afraid for future clients. I used to check people and talk to the teacher often." Another respondent felt it was not his duty to inform and educate their classmates:

I refused to do the project because I already knew about being Black. I don't specifically remember the project, but I definitely remember me taking a stance on it, and I am sure all the white folks did too.

There were mixed responses about even being in the room with white people:

I felt out of place in school with a room full of white people. I always felt like "all eyes on me." Especially when we discussed cultural competency. It was so stereotypical and oversimplified.

Cultural competency work appeared to be a guideline that was vaguely implemented into the social workers' training but was not a concept that has evolved with the changing landscape of society. Most participants could not identify any articles or textbooks but most remembered a project they had to present. Overall, most viewed it as a nonfactor in their graduate programs. But several respondents felt like the stereotypes they endured were the worst part of graduate school.

So I feel like it wasn't a big shock to me. Like a lot of my friends who went to all-Black schools—it was like a shock to them to be the only Black person in their class. And for me, I'm like this is the norm. I took honors classes in high school, and there was just me.

So I don't know. I feel like I never really had a problem interacting with diverse people. And I felt like in college the only time I ever had issues was when it would come to group projects or something, and they would be like, "Oh, she's in our group." Like, you don't even know me. The only time they would seek me out for a group is if we did do a project on race or the inner city or something.

This notion of interest convergence suggests that her classmates would not have welcomed her into the group unless it was a self-serving opportunity for them. Through the interviews, most of the participants identified specific gaps that they recognized in their training. Self-reflection was a key component that was underutilized. Participants mentioned the need for more classroom management and assistance with academic barriers, as well as more assessment and mental health work, all while addressing disenfranchised populations and their differing needs surrounding the issues listed. Participants also suggested more work related to resiliency, not just for youths but for social workers as well.

Graduate school produced strong feelings among most respondents. Most feelings centered on anger, frustration, and sadness when it came to race and racial issues and eventually becoming an effective school social worker. CRT states that it is legitimate and critical to understand racial insubordination. These stories should be viewed as a resource in graduate schools.

Membership in the School Community

One research question asked if participants' school setting or the location of their school community contributed to participants' role as a school social worker and how they delivered their services. Although some were familiar with the particular history of their communities and

how that might influence their workplace, it did not register as a major influence on any of the respondents.

My school is in a higher-income area, but it has also become very diverse. There were integration issues back in the 1970s, and those neighborhood boundaries are still a concern and on people's minds because it kind of serves as a disadvantage for the students and for some of the schools. Because they're on the bus longer or because they don't live near the school, they can't necessarily attend some of the after-school activities. So the purpose of it back in the '70s was for integration, but now it's not necessary.

Casonville is configured in a way that the impact of racism is powerful and visible. Driving down the streets and seeing the abandoned neighborhoods—like a ghost town. Shoot, even what used to be the Catholic school in town is now a federal prison! I mean, what message does that send?

The CRT concept of whiteness as property speaks volumes to the school location as well. This tenet of CRT explains how whites have been in power of the construction and naming of schools as well as the traditions built within them.

The building that I'm in, it was built in like 1957 or '58. And at that time it was definitely was all white. The Black kids who moved here had money so people could tolerate that. But then those boundary lines changed, and then you have more Black kids, but they're the Black kids that didn't have anything—these poor, little Black kids. So I've had teachers say to me about Black students, "Well, they don't belong here." And I, "What does that mean, they don't belong here? They live across the street."

Our building was built in the late 1800s. There are swastika signs in the tile pattern in the hallways. We always wonder what other secrets we have yet to find.

CRT suggests that racism is historical and interdisciplinary and that we must consider the laws, policies, and actions that have positioned our communities and school systems into what they are today. One participant even noted,

You just need to research some of the street names or even school buildings . . . named after white folks who practiced and stated racist ideology. In order to analyze and change those structural manifestations of racism, though, we need to name them and identify them first.

This is not information that everyone is aware of or knowledgeable about like this participant, but the understanding of the insidious ways racism has been rooted into communities is powerful once uncovered. Although many in Illinois tout that issues north of I-80 the interstate highway south of Chicago, are vastly different than downstate, the participants' responses did not reflect this idea. Because most of the workers "meet kids where they are"—a common phrase used by social workers in direct practice—they did not feel like their students experienced anything different than students living elsewhere. Although different communities may have been birthed or may have evolved differently because of racial implications, the school social workers were not focused on broad issues of racism; rather they tackled individual (micro issues) as they arose.

Being a member of the school community was a theme that emerged early on in the research. Participants expressed two very polarizing ideas about the benefits and drawbacks of

being a part of the school community. Several saw their role as community members as essential to being effective as a school social worker.

I know what the kids are feeling Monday morning walking into the school because I experienced it too. The kids will come to school because somebody they knew just got shot the other day. We've had to call the police because of drug activity outside of the school, which is across the street from my house. It's like a park right across the street, so all type of things going on at that park. So it's definitely a dangerous area, but I grew up here. Like my students. I mean it has definitely gotten better, but it's still not the best community to be in.

I get to see kids in their natural element. Like if I see them at the store—seeing them out and about. And then they get to see who I am outside of that school building, and I get to see who they are and who their family members are and how they're interacting with people outside the school building. So it has its advantages.

I won't say it's necessary to live there, but to understand the community or where the people in the community come from is. So, sort of so that you know what they have available, their culture. Just, sort of, the people. I do a lot. It's where I grew up. It's where I feel comfortable.

I see the kids in their natural settings. I went to school with their parents. I know what happened on the kids' block before the police and definitely before the school knows because I am living it.

I see a real big connection with you with understanding what's going on in the home that might not be seen—that whole iceberg effect, where you only see the tip that's at the school. Because you talk a lot about—but you don't know what's going on over there. I say to kids outside of school all the time, “I know. I see you.” Because I do. I know them.

I try to maintain some boundaries, though, but it's hard. In graduate school, they talked about dual relationships, but how can I not have them?

CRT counters the ideology of colorblindness and of being objective and neutral. Not understanding the dynamics of the numerous relationships between social workers and students is detrimental to the profession. Graduate school teachings should recognize experiential knowledge and relationships as an advantage. CRT posits that experiential knowledge from living in the community is a resource. The intersectionality of lives, classes, generations, and neighborhoods seemed vital to most of the respondents' work. Most of the participants appeared energetic when describing their lived experiences. Nevertheless, one participant discussed the negative aspects of living in the community where he worked.

If you think about—old-school teachers used to live in the neighborhood, things like that. So if you wanted to kind of return to that, traditional values, you should know people's parents or see people at the grocery store. It helps people know that you're a real person, because sometimes people they're like, “Oh, you grocery shop?”

One perceived living in the community as a hindrance: “I do live in the neighborhood where I work but I do not like it. I feel like I always have to be ‘on’ and in professional mode.” While this respondent disagreed with the positive aspects of living in the same community as his workplace, his explanation was in agreement with others': “You are constantly working at home,

at school, and in your community.” And another stated, “I like to distance myself from work so I moved out of my school community.”

Although two social workers disliked being part of their school community, all expressed concern when others did not understand or try to understand the communities that students come from or were simply scared of the students they taught. Because, as CRT would suggest, educators see the dominant ideology and beliefs about the world as accurate or normal, they perceive the youth who live differently from them as abnormal.

These white teachers come from the suburbs, and they don't see these kids the same way.

I feel I am often thwarted by others in the building when I try to link the school culture with the community culture. They won't let me merge the gap.

My coworkers will say, “It's the wintertime. It's about to be dark at 5:00. I need to be gone by 4:30.” And the other people that are from the area is like, “You're fine. They're not going to mess with you.”

Some of my counterparts are frustrating because they don't pay attention. Regardless of them being Black or white . . . they don't live in this city to understand what's going on. So I take pride in the fact that I live in the community. I take pride that during the summer, kids stop by my house. “Miss S, you got something to drink? When does school start?” There's times that I just park in the back 'cause I'm like I don't want to be bothered. But I take pride in that. I'm gonna go to the grocery store, I'm gonna see kids I know. It makes me do my job better.

We had a guy that got stabbed by his girlfriend in our community about a month back. He was an adult so administrators were like, “Well, that doesn’t have anything to do with us.” Yes, it does, because, one, he went to this school; two, he has cousins that are here in this building, so it comes back here. And not only that, but now it’s gonna bring light to domestic violence—so things that they just aren’t aware of. I went to school with it, you know, so just things that they just aren’t aware of because they don’t live in this community . . .

Like I have a parent the other day when I was taking her home, and she was telling me that she had got robbed, and she was telling me where it was at. And we happened to drive past my grandmother’s house, who has deceased. And the robber had ran from my grandmother’s yard apparently, which a lot of people run through that yard. So I said, “Oh.” I said, “Oh, that’s where it was?” She’s like, “Yeah.” I said, “Oh, my grandmother used to live there.” She’s like, “You related to Stephanie?” And I was like, “Yup.” Those connections are vital to my work.

Black school social workers have definite relationships with the students, families, and communities but the changing landscape is a non-factor since they “meet kids where they are.” Additionally, experiential knowledge allowed workers to feel a greater sense of ownership and understanding to their Black youth so even though dual relationships are frowned upon in the graduate school training, the majority of my participants saw that as an advantage. They see it as important to recognizing the value of the whole child and how they can impact their lives positively in the school setting but outside of it as well. In summary, most participants felt it was a benefit to live and work in their communities in order to be an effective school social worker.

Obligation to Black Youth

One of the research questions asked specifically about participants' relationships with Black youth in their building. CRT explains the centrality of racism and how it permeates school systems but sometimes is very difficult to see. However, the respondents were able to recognize it.

Some of the Black kids are treated differently. You can look at the data and know that for a fact, but colleagues don't even notice.

So, yeah, there's race issues. Our kids are singled out more. Actually, when they did the end-of-the-school-year report, our Black principal pointed out that our discipline referrals, the percentage of discipline referrals for kids, for Black students, was very high. And that percentage was higher than the actual percentage of Black students in the building. White folks had all kinds of reasons why and they usually blame it on the home life.

What some educators fail to realize is that they are not as objective or neutral when it comes to disciplining students as they might think. They assert their ingrained teachings, knowledge, and expressions of correct behavior when they discipline students. CRT's concept of whiteness as property explains that white people own the behavior that is acceptable in schools. For example one respondent said,

I argue the yoga pants on Black girls are different on white girls. So here's the thing: so a Black girl wears leggings and she has a butt. So, guess what? It's gonna stick out more. The white girl wears 'em and the administrator calls it yoga pants, so the teachers don't write her up. You only get a write up for wearing leggings.

Most of the respondents recognize that they simply relate to the students better and understand their situations. They found that crucial to their jobs.

I just feel like I've always been myself, like I understand that I'm the adult and the teacher and all this and this, but I'm still me. And I let them know that. I'm like, I will love you today and kick your butt tomorrow.

I think when you become one of the few certified minority people in your building, you take on more roles and responsibilities. When I was assigned to this particular school, I was like, "I gotta switch up the mindset because I know that some of these kids out here are used to only the people that are in the cafeteria or the janitor—White and Black kids." So I had to change my mindset of what my purpose was. I have to be an example for these kids out here. So you take—there's a lot of roles that we take on besides just, "Oh, let me help you figure out how to adapt and cope."

During my internship at a predominantly Black school, I just absolutely loved it. And being with African American students, that was my biggest thing. Not that I have anything against other races, but I just feel like I want to give back to our kids. The school is located maybe four blocks from where my elementary school was, so I feel like this is my community and I wanted to give back.

We had a lot of—we have, I think, teachers feel they're being disrespected or students are being insubordinate when it may be a situation where a kid—I mean if they don't treat their parents a certain way, why are you expecting they're gonna treat you any

differently? Or, just because they don't respond when you call them the first time doesn't mean that they're necessarily being insubordinate. Maybe they really didn't hear you, you know? I'm not saying to excuse things, but maybe that's really what happened.

One respondent said she often had a dual role of educating students about teachers and teachers about students. This is the essence of the social justice work that CRT supports. She said,

So my goal is help them understand that everyone has a different opinion, and you don't know what the background is, and that they should talk to that teacher afterwards. And if they're not comfortable doing that, then, yeah, come to me so then I can talk to the teacher with you or talk to the teacher on my own.

I educate them when they come to me about something, and I try to get—I will, nine times out of ten, I will try to help them understand the teacher's perspective. But there are some times when it's really hard to try to give the teacher the benefit of the doubt. But I do try with them so they can understand where the teacher is coming from. But at the same time, I will also let them know what's inappropriate and they should not have said it, but they're entitled to feel that way. So I try to get them to understand that and then for them, the next time that would happen, to talk to the teacher respectfully and say, "Can I talk with you after class?" So that's been my goal with them, because I'm not always gonna be around or I'm gonna be busy, and you can't always blow up at a teacher because they said something to you that you thought was racist.

I just feel like, because my internship supervisor was Caucasian . . . a lot of times I felt like—a kid would come in, for example. One kid was like, “My mama beat me.” And the student had like a lot of marks on them. But it was in places that you couldn’t see. You could clearly tell it was from a belt or something, and the student did act like a fool the day before and they parent had to pick them up early. So in my mind, I’m saying, “You did the crime.” But she was like, “Oh, my God.” I was like, “I understand we are mandated reporters, but he seriously did this, this, and this.” If we don’t discipline our kids, they have something to say. If we do, they have something to say.

Working with Black youth means working with Black parents. Most respondents felt that having shared lived experiences was even more important in these relationships as many parents have negative perception of schools and social workers.

You get to love ‘em, your parents. You know, you can kinda—you can talk crazy if you need to, because those are your people.

It’s interesting because they always complained about the Black families making too much noise at graduation. But now our school is becoming more diverse and its first-generation families to America, populations who are quiet and value education in their eyes and cause no trouble. Now, no one is saying anything.

I am often called to work with a family because I am Black. This happens often and I am OK with that. And the kids will seek me out because their parents told them too. And my perceptions are often accepted by Black families without question.

The parents don't want to deal with the white folks. The staff don't understand the Black culture. They blame everything on the home life.

Without exception, the respondents' viewed their role and satisfaction as centered on helping students. All had specific duties, roles, and obligations to different populations of Black youth in their building even though no one initially identified their work in that way. My participants also felt an obligation to work with the parents—extensions of the youth. Being a cultural bridge has been important to their work and assist in advocating for parents as well as families.

Negative Experiences in the Workplace

One research question focused on worker satisfaction. This section identifies some of the negatives or stressors that participants felt. The most prominent examples of microaggressions appeared through the school social workers' responses regarding the negative issues they experienced in the workplace. Because CRT explains that racism is endemic to American society and interwoven with what Americans are taught is normal, whiteness as property is often very evident in the workplace. Although there are isolated incidents of whiteness as property, most are subtle and difficult to pinpoint. Because it is standard fare to honor Martin Luther King Jr. or to host a cultural competency workshop, the daily assaults are often confused or diminished. In light of the frequently inaccurate portrayal of historical facts surrounding Blacks, many of the Black social workers I interviewed did not have the voice or ability to argue a point concerning covert racial comments. Although most respondents did not have a term to describe what they were feeling, all had examples of microaggressions that were interwoven throughout their day.

Like when November comes, I dread it at this point, November through February, because step team stuff picks up, the basketball season. Oh, should we do Black history

stuff? And it's a mess, yes. The comments. The barriers. The threats against kids—Black kids. It's ridiculous. And small stuff but big at the same time.

The white folks thought my girls group was going to “fix” the Black girls. They make jokes when the girls get into trouble.

I think this past year I was thrown into the “Oh, well this parent doesn't get along with this person, so can you do it? It'll be easier for them too, because you know, you're Black, she's Black, and you all might be able to connect.” I've had that experience.

I was sponsoring the African American club talent show, and the line to get in started two hours before the doors opened. The principal commented, “Why can they get here early for this but not for school?” I said, “Because this has meaning to them. They have ownership of it. They see people who look like them performing and running the show. They are engaged and having fun. Should I go on?”

When they did the Black history program, no one made comments out loud, but you can see them thinking, “When are we going to stop doing this?”

Although CRT supports lived experiences and sharing voices, some respondents struggled with being made to be the spokesperson. Though there are similarities, CRT empowers and supports participants and gives them the choice and platform to speak-it is not a position forced on them that being a spokesperson does.

I feel like I am the go-to person when it comes to Black issues, which I don't like.

I get mad that others don't help carry the load. Whites expect me to teach them. They don't try to learn for themselves.

I typically speak up without going into race issues. It is tiring and draining to always be on alert.

I am the only one in my building who is an African American. But I have noticed that the older I get, the more I speak up, and I have started to recognize some of my coworkers say comments for me.

I don't want to always be the voice but people want me to be the voice.

I get handed a lot of cases because I am Black. They moved me to the predominantly Black school because a white teacher didn't feel safe. I said, "Why me?" but I knew why.

Sometimes I don't mind being the voice, but I also don't plan to be the NAACP in my building.

The burden on Black social workers is real and stressful. Many discussed how stereotypes impacted their jobs. Addressing stereotypes was a theme that surfaced as the participants discussed their coworkers.

So we have one regional manager who was an African American woman, very dominant. She was a Delta as well. And she just did not play. And I felt like she lived up to the

Black sista “Girl, don’t you dare cross me” type of person. But that’s not always the best thing.

I’m not trying to be all “hood girl” and all that crazy stuff, but they try to say I could be.

But I’m going to stick up for our own. And then, I feel like because I stick up for my own, I’m very, very passionate, and so when I become passionate, I think I get loud.

Several discussed their white colleagues specifically and how they impacted the workplace. One said, “I find it hard pill to swallow that white people are rigid with our rules and standards but passive with their own.” Another said,

I started speaking up after the social justice training. I feel like they empowered me. All the feelings and thoughts I had I now had a name for them, and the other people in the room did, too. So I wasn’t the only one who had an awakening—well maybe—but I wasn’t the only one who got the information!

I’ve had to talk to white teachers when there’s been race issues. And sometimes when I break things down for them, they’re like, “Oh. I get it now.” But is that my job?

Despite these negative experiences, most had a Black ally, role model, or mentor to act as a buffer from the daily assaults in the workplace.

I have one Black colleague I trust in my building. And, like, even if I don’t . . . agree with something that he’s said, I will not . . . One, I won’t acknowledge that in front of staff because I don’t want them to see that him and I don’t agree on something. And, two, I definitely wouldn’t do it with the kids. So we tend to team up to support the kids more so than anything.

Most of the colleagues in my building are paraprofessionals. Not that that's a problem per se, but then there are other issues you contend with when venting, like college or salary.

Most had at least one support person in their building to help them with coping. I found that almost all were satisfied with their work as a whole but were frustrated in many areas. They loved their profession and had a variety of ways of coping. There were similarities in their methods of coping with race issues such as talking to people outside of the school setting and finding like-minded individuals with whom to vent. Some talked about dealing and coping by "not doing as much."

I talk to my friends, who are minorities in their professions as well.

I have to find the balance and protect myself so I sometimes don't go into the teacher's lounge. Because I will hold it against you if you say something out of pocket. I have to protect myself—and you—from that!

Sometimes I'll get really frustrated and I'll cry. That's just with life, period. I'm a crier. But it's also a release.

I vent to the secretary who's a Black female and then also to the administrator who's a Black male.

I talk and vent to my husband. I think the one thing that I do at work is I try to keep it level, like I'm not crazy. I'm always nonchalant. That's every day, but when I go home

I'm like a spaz. When I'm complaining—my husband calls them “So why?” stories 'cause I'll walk through the door like, “So why did so and so do this today?!”

My drive home is a stress reliever for me, and I am good about leaving work at work. I also love humor throughout the day. I get it through the kids, on the radio, and in random places.

I have a devotional book in my work drawer.

I pray and fast and listen to music.

The participants stated they needed those coping mechanisms because most struggled with how others judged their relationships with students, which is often the focus of the work social workers do.

Sometimes I talk to the students like they are my neighbors on the street or my own kids because they often are. Some colleagues don't get that or wish they could. People have tried to tell the administrators about my “way” before.

The challenges that I have . . . I think some teachers—well, not “I think,” I know—they don't understand what I do and that—how I have to cater to the needs of the students, whether that's with the way I talk or how I address them with other things going on. And so I had a teacher say to me my first year when we were playing the Black history program . . . There were students; I would call them down. We met like once a week, end of the day, for 30 minutes, right? And there would be a different day of the week, so it

wouldn't impose too much on the teacher's lesson plans. And [I] had a teacher e-mail me about these two girls and say, "I don't think they should be coming down to see you, 'cause it's a privilege for them to just come down and see you and hang out." OK. One, I don't even know who these two students are. You just assume they were coming to see me 'cause they were Black females. Two, do you send the same e-mail to the band or drama director? No, you don't!

Oh, goodness. I had a student . . . I was standing in the hallway talking to him. He has bad tardies. And the teacher's like, "Oh, you must be talking to him about his tardies." I was talking to him about his job, you know?

And even like when it came down to stuff for like the step team, the gospel choir—we've had issues with that, with people saying stuff like the choir director didn't understand why students came to me about forming a gospel choir instead of her. They don't like you. And, to their knowledge, you don't have any experience with gospel. Now, maybe you do, but what they've seen of you—they did not gather that information. And that's not to say that I necessarily had knowledge on gospel music. They figured, "Hey, she looks like us, so she must . . ." you know? And they definitely know if I don't know, I . . . will get someone who does.

Career Satisfaction

All of the participants acknowledged that though their job was stressful, it was purposeful and necessary, and they found satisfaction in their career. All were satisfied with their career despite the frustrations they shared throughout the interviews. Some had early experiences that

assisted them in being successful in their careers. One shared, “I have a brother who has special needs, so it’s just like a natural thing to want to be around that. To work with others like my brother, is the best for me.” Others shared their passion to ultimately promote social justice even if it means taking a pay cut: “I say, ‘It doesn’t matter.’ I say, ‘I need to be around kids.’ I’m very passionate about whatever it is that I’m doing.” Others stated,

I love my job because it is different every day!

I love doing grassroots work. I would never do anything differently.

I saw a need. The parents tended to be Black parents who didn’t know. They welcome my voice and that makes me feel satisfied.

These school social workers truly saw themselves as educators, which fulfilled them and helped them see that role as their responsibility.

I see it as my responsibility to enlighten others in order to help other communities.

I see myself as a race activist, and I know there will be a cost. But I hope I am building bridges. I have to take the risk. I cry, but I am satisfied.

I think it’s our job to become leaders. I think it’s our job to be alert of race issues, but we have so many other things that we have to tackle with individual students. I think if we have noticed something, then, yes, we need to bring attention to it. I think that is our responsibility.

At the same time, many didn't feel their role or responsibility was to address race issues.

Do I think we should actively go out seeking race issues? No. But if we notice something and notice that something is unfair, that's our job as a social worker anyways. And I think, as a Black school social worker, when you pick up on those things, it is your responsibility to address it or to bring notice to it to maybe an administrator. But I don't think we need to actively seek out those things. That's a lot of work.

Overall, the participants were satisfied with their careers despite the stressors, including racial stressors related to graduate school and their coworkers. School social workers have been trained and often practice direct (micro level) work with students and families which brings a high level of satisfaction. They find ownership and satisfaction being the cultural bridge between the school and the students and families and they receive satisfaction by using their natural skill sets to fill in the gaps for youth with direct practice work.

The participants on a whole did not identify a need to make on a bigger level or macro level. They hold steadfast that they can affect change with the work they currently do. Despite the immense stress they face as social workers generally, and Black school social workers, in particular, feel respected and valued. I would maintain that this is a critical component to how Black school social workers maintain resiliency in a profession (much like teaching) that is undervalued.

Data Analysis

The data analysis showed that though there were differences among the participants and their experiences in graduate school, in their workplace, and in their early experiences, there

were still commonalities that existed on these topics. My participants ranged in age, experiences, and school environments though most of their experiences surrounding race were revealed through their early family experiences and schooling. The strongest themes identified by the school social worker interviews centered on the purposefulness of their work with youth, their inadequate graduate school training on race issues, and the impact of being a part of the community on their work. These social workers stressed the satisfaction they felt from being connected to their students and families as well as the enhanced level of understanding they felt working with their students despite the perceived lack of education they received in their graduate social work programs surrounding race, oppression, power, and privilege. Other themes that surfaced were their coping strategies, their use of allies, and how early life experiences impacted their work. These school social workers identified various coping strategies that supported them through their work that most found draining but satisfying. All identified not only activities to deal with their stressors but also adults to help them with their daily stressors.

These findings were combined with the conceptual and theoretical frameworks I laid out in previous sections. Though school social workers identified and acknowledged direct practice work through individual counseling and interventions; conflict resolution work between students and/or students and staff; testing for special education services, and assisting families with resources and referrals. This micro level work was readily accepted and supported by their school community and they are often leaders in that area. On the other hand, none of the school social workers identified macro level work that they routinely participated in such as sitting on discipline or curriculum committees, discussing implementation of problematic policy and procedures, or discipline and/or academic data analysis. Despite the level of macro work, the

participants' insightful comments revealed a dawning awareness of the roles and experiences that had not been part of the social work or education literature before.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This study shed light on several critical issues and provided interesting findings on the roles and experiences of Black school social workers. The essential questions of this study were the uniqueness of school social workers and what facilitated and hindered their success in their professions and their personal satisfaction in their work. The research also examined their work and their responsibility to Black youths in their schools. Ultimately, the study identified three key findings: (a) Overall, Black school social workers appear to be in a unique position of understanding and connecting with Black youth which lead to positive work satisfaction; (b) Graduate school social work programs appear to lack to provide the training for social workers to address race issues as well as other oppressions; (c) The study also found that the connections Black social workers have with Black youth does not appear to have a direct positive impact on the educational inequities that persist in K-12 school settings. Although Black school social workers impact the lives of Black youth in a variety of ways and purposefully influence the school and work settings, providing needed services to youths and their families through direct practice (micro-level work) does not directly correlate to the policy needs (macro work) necessary to make lasting, systemic change.

Finding #1: The participants in this study continually reported incidents that affirmed their positive connections with Black youth in their daily interactions in their workplace. Though they listed numerous ways that they connect, the understanding of the youth's communities and communication styles were identified the most. There also appeared to be a connection of "us versus them" where the participants shared the racism and ignorance that white teachers spouted

to them and Black students. Ecological systems theory posits that this Black school social workers conduct good, meaningful work with the microlevel systems as well as the mesosystems of connecting the community. Critical race theorists suggest that lived experiences and experiential knowledge is important in understanding how racism impacts our daily work. Overall, Black school social workers appear to be in a unique position of understanding and connecting with Black youth which lead to positive work satisfaction.

Finding #2: The participants in this study stressed that their connections with Black youth was not taught in their social work graduate school programs. Graduate schools appear to lack to provide the training for social workers to address race issues as well as other oppressions fully using the ecological model. Graduate programs often teach theories, concepts, and lofty ideas without encouraging students to explore or challenge the relevance of the work to their school community or even to their personal life.

Overall, it appears that the topic of racism may have been addressed from the micro to the macro level, it was not approached in an in-depth learning environment. Critical race theorists would suggest that the teachings of racism be embedded throughout the curriculum much like the racism is embedded within everyday American society.

Finding #3: The participants in this study did not identify that the connections Black social workers have with Black youth does not appear to have a direct positive impact on the educational inequities that persist in K-12 school settings at the macro level. Though microsystems are imperative to good social work, it takes dedicated work to address the changes as well. CRT suggests that embedded racism will only be addressed when discussed through policies, curriculum, etc.

Implications for Practice

The experiences of Black school social workers in this study shed light on the continued and expanded roles that Black school social workers may play within their K-12 workplaces, their graduate school programs and research to address the persistent education inequities that exist with Black youth.

K-12 Workplaces

The relationships with Black youth and their families reported by Black school social workers suggests that they are in the position to be leaders in guiding Black youth into cultivating a critical race consciousness. This shift in thinking is important to close the educational inequities that exist because the educational struggles of African Americans has been well documented but most speaks from the deficit model or the *underachievement* of Black youth. A vast amount of research has contributed to the underachievement of Black youth (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1991; Mickelson, 1990; Rothstein, 2004; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003) and race continues to remain at the center of the failures. Black school social workers using CRT allows a counter narrative of success and resiliency and how the utility of schooling can be used as a viable option for positive life outcomes instead of highlighting the negatives (Carter D, 2008) states,

An increased understanding of Black students' attitudes about race, awareness of racism in society, and understanding of the utility of schooling for social and economic mobility can help educators identify and embody pedagogies and practices that foster not only academic achievement but also healthy, positive identity construction in Black youth. (p. 12)

Because of the relationships many Black social workers have with Black youth, they may be in a prime position to assist these youth in gaining a critical race consciousness to better understand how race can be a potential barrier, how historically social inequality has impacted education even today, and they will be in a better position to achieve their life goals by being aware of the structural constraints that racism may have placed before them (Carter D, 2008).

Critical race theorists would posit that these “leaks” happen prior to higher education and begin making their mark at the beginning and throughout the educational pipeline. Black school social workers must take a leadership role and work to understand the sociocultural contexts in which Black students learn so that schools can better meet their academic needs. An increased understanding of Black students’ attitudes about race, awareness of racism in society, and understanding of the utility of schooling for social and economic mobility can also help educators identify and embody pedagogies and practices that foster not only academic achievement but also healthy, positive identities within Black youth from the individual student (micro level) to the policies and procedures that dictate their success or failure (macro level work).

Black school social workers are also in a position to initiate, support, and encourage the discussion of racism in a nurturing way and how it impacts Black youth within the school setting. This work needs to occur in the classroom, in the curriculum, and at the programmatic level. This is important because society continues to struggle with having open discussions about race and its impact has on educational settings from kindergarten to graduate programs. Even though all of the challenges participants faced were not race related, many were intertwined with issues of equity, diversity, and cultural appreciation and understanding and therefore, CRT has tools to initiate dialogue around those issues. Building a positive support network and identifying

positive coping strategies and resiliency will allow Black school social workers to tackle the daunting tasks they face in the ever-changing educational context that they work in and support their colleagues in the same environment.

Additionally, Black school social workers need to understand that racism is deep seeded and this eradication of oppression and support of social justice is emotional and tiring work. Professionals are encouraged to join cultural organizations and to find mentors to help support their work. In addition, making connections with older, more experienced professionals, such as those who have already served as leaders in such settings and have experienced or lived in similar settings, would offer valuable insights to school social workers. Since there are only 347 Black school social workers in the state of Illinois (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013), school social workers themselves must take ownership in creating and developing formal and informal networks with other Black educators (such as the National Association of Black Social Workers). This can also be accomplished by professionals being involved in their school communities and investing resources in their workplaces which is important to connect the micro and macro level work for meaningful change.

Black school social workers should consider these findings and seek professional development and continuing education requirements to support this work. There have been studies that examine the racial consciousness of teachers where they use CRT tenets and other frameworks to explore how they have been socialized by racist institutions and norms (Schniedewind, 2005). Researchers indicated that if teachers do not acknowledge their own racial identity, they will not recognize the need for young people to affirm their own. This study revealed that all of the Black school social workers were aware of their racial identity, therefore they may be in a position to assist not just students, but teachers in that area as well.

Nevertheless, the specific question of professional development and training after they were placed in their job was not explored—therefore, it may be a further research topic.

Overall, CRT sheds light on how both the micro level and macro level environments of schooling are permeated with racism, cultural beliefs and traditions that manifest in both individual and institutional forms (Reynolds, 2010) (Villenas & Dehyle, 1999). Black school social workers who want to analyze their practice within the school setting through a CRT in education and EST lens may utilize some of these strategies:

- Challenging questionable policies and procedures, both written and verbal
- Being the “voice” in meetings to question the equity of programs and activities
- Teaching students and families how to effectively navigate the school system
- Advocating for marginalized populations in committee meetings
- Challenging the abuse of power and privilege in the school setting
- Assuming leadership roles on decision-making committees
- Providing workshops and trainings for staff on climate, race, and equity issues
- Voicing concerns over inequitable extracurricular and sports activities
- Having the courage to dialogue across difference to understand layers of an issue
- Practicing self-reflection and self-improvement
- Critiquing formal knowledge and learning to identify gaps in learning
- Believing in families as collaborative partners
- Challenging staff on biased comments and hidden curricula
- Encouraging a strength perspective when discussing students and home life
- Knowing resources and understanding where the gaps lie

- Providing counter explanations to curriculum that is antiquated and challenging teachers to do the same
- Staying knowledgeable on laws, policies, and procedures impacting marginalized students in the building

In summary, there is a plethora of work to be done in the school setting that can improve the academic and discipline outcomes of students in school. The work is varied and involves direct practice, as well as addressing and creating new policy initiatives around this work.

Graduate School

The literature is clear that there are many leaks along the educational pipeline for students of color and although most of my participants had positive K–12 experiences, they could also reflect on the resources they did not have and remember their classmates who did not succeed. Solorzano et al. (2005) contended that one needs to understand the cumulative effects of inadequate educational preparation and school conditions throughout K–12 education and how those affect students of color and their entry points into college and later into graduate school. The participants in this study discussed this by sharing their experiences of not having adequate academic or emotional support in certain areas of schooling, a lack of knowledge from family members about college, or the financial strain and the task of having to work while in school. The structural and institutional hand of racism was evident throughout most of my participant's schooling—even if it was not named (Pewewardy, 2007). It is well documented that for Blacks, factors such as lack of finances, lower familial support, fewer mentors, more cultural stereotypes, inhospitable campus climates, and a sense of being a cultural misfit can influence navigation through graduate school (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). In the 2009–2010 school year, of all US residents, Blacks earned 12.5% of all master's programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Due to the absence of Black students in graduate programs, graduate programs often lack the necessary discussions and research projects dealing with issues of race, power, and privilege in K-12 educational settings. As evidenced by this study, most participants were only able to name the few Black fellow students in their classes, as well as their lone Black professor, if there was one. Therefore, the limited presence of Black school social workers or even teachers will continue to be an issue in this country. Graduate programs across the country will remain deficient unless the voices of Black students and other diverse perspectives are heard and celebrated. Therefore, social work graduate programs must make a concerted effort to develop a better understanding of how to attract, support, and retain students from diverse backgrounds.

Besides the lack of diversity in the student body, the most significant issue identified through the literature and confirmed by this study was the lack of information taught on racism and its impact on clients, communities, and society in graduate school. Though cultural competence is the model most could identify as their learning portal into race, scholars have more recently noted that there are several challenges associated with the cultural competence model including the eclipsing of race as a central mechanism of oppression, student resistance, and the unintentional reinforcement of a color-blind lens (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Razack & Jeffery, 2002; Schiele, 2007). As it currently stands, the cultural competence framework leaves student ill-equipped to deal with institutional racism and oppression on all levels where it permeates—individually, structurally and globally (Pollock, 2008; Razack & Jeffery, 2002). Therefore, not only should graduate schools revamp their curriculum, but school districts across the state should continue to provide training and supports to educators and school communities regarding cultural diversity, cultural competence, social justice, and critical race work and graduate programs and school districts should do this work collaboratively. Several works

suggest that CRT could be the transformational model used to teach diversity in schools (Abrams & Moio, 2009; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) to educate school workers how to respond and create change around institutional racism. The pedagogy offered within many graduate school programs often do not address the complex issues related to race, power, privilege, and diversity.

Typically, these programs provide a narrow view of school social work that does not dig deep enough into race and diversity issues—sans the special programs designated at a few of the school social work graduate programs in the state and across the country. But the ever-changing landscape of K–12 educational settings makes it a necessity for those discussions and curricular changes.

Additionally, social work internships should include service-learning projects located in a variety of school communities. These internships should provide knowledge and understanding of privilege, structural racism, critical reflection, and social workers' roles and others' perceptions of their roles as they enter and engage in differing communities. This approach to education involves a commitment to developing graduate school programs that acknowledge CRT in education in order to explore the notion of social and racial justice (Ortiz & Jayshree, 2010; Stovall, 2006) This approach to seeking social justice and eliminating oppression and discrimination while tackling educational inequities in schools, is a task the social work profession should take the lead in.

Implications for Research

CRT offers a methodological framework to expand on this work which will continue to explore racism within our schools. This can continue to affirm and support education issues that are impacted by race. One of the purposes of research is to generate additional questions. This study emerged out of a desire to make a contribution to the sparse literature documenting the

unique experiences of Black school social workers, as well as the desire to put more critical race work into the field of school social work. CRT can be used as a tool to identify and delve into the main influences and barriers.

Additional research should focus on graduate programs and examine issues such as how to create meaningful and culturally responsive programs that address historic and contemporary race issues in school social work programs. Cultural competency work is a topic that has been studied within the social work profession. Teasley (2005) examined this work, and others supported either the lack of cultural competency or the lack of a model. Abrams and Moio (2009) stated that cultural competency is largely ineffective and equalizes oppression. Several questions remain: Should CRT in education be taught in place of cultural competency in school social work graduate programs? Should a graduate program that is practitioner-focused include research components as well? Should there be distinctions between graduate school and professional development courses in future research or should the work be aligned?

Berzin and O'Connor (2010) compared the syllabi of 58 out of 191 accredited MSW programs across the country related to policy, diversity, discrimination, history, and roles, among other things. Although it was a comprehensive examination of curriculum, there appeared to be no topics specifically addressing race even though the profession's premiere organization, the National Association of Social Workers (2007), issued a document titled *Institutional Racism & The Social Work Profession: A Call to Action* calling on the entire social work profession in the United States to take responsibility for addressing racism as it is manifested within the profession and in the broader society. Therefore, should graduate school programs' syllabi and curriculum address the implications on race and learning more robustly? If more students and faculty of color were in graduate programs, would there be more robust literature in this area?

Additional questions raised by this study that address practice issues include the following: What strategies should be put in place to increase the success of students of color along the educational pipeline? Should school social workers play a more direct role in working to close the achievement gap and discipline disparities seen in many schools? Should this be a priority for the profession taking into account the other factors besides current academic teachings that play into that gap? What role should Black educators play in influencing Black and white students alike in understanding the racial dynamics of society since schools are understood to be microcosms of society? Others should focus on emerging research on geographic spaces such as on exploring how the perceptions of policymakers impact funding and resources for a community.

Discussion

The purpose of this final chapter is to expand and summarize the study in order to consider the broader implications of the experiences of Black school social workers. Black school social workers' training and their unique life experiences naturally identify them as being potential leaders in the work of addressing racial barriers to youth in academics and discipline. The United States is rapidly changing, which is most evident among students in the classroom. Educators, Black and white, are being hired in school districts in communities where they might not have been placed a decade ago.

In light of these changes throughout the U.S. education system, it is important to acknowledge the impact of race and gender on the educational environment. Ecological systems theorists would claim that these changes can occur through direct practice, curriculum improvements, and enhancement of cultural self-awareness, as well as the broader implications of faculty development and policy changes. Black school social workers should be recognized as

role models. On a systems level, they may also be huge contributors to attracting, recruiting, hiring, and retaining a more diverse faculty and staff.

Despite the areas for growth, the roles, unique challenges, and benefits of Black school social workers remain understudied and virtually unacknowledged among educators in the school setting. This work suggests that improving graduate school training, creating a support system and work allies, participating in continuing education and professional development, and operating with a social justice agenda are all essential to the social work profession and educational reform. The 12 Black school social workers who participated in this study indicated the challenges and successes they experienced as they navigated their professional roles. These findings generated several implications for practice and research at both the local and policy levels of educational and social work leadership.

Future recommendations would include the expansion of the work of Black school social workers and their natural cultural competency tendencies in exploring how leadership and empowerment can be infused into their work. It will also be important to explore graduate school social work syllabi and curriculum used to address oppressions and racism. The examination of their effectiveness and to measure whether the work carries over (or not) into internships and workplaces will be important and well as examining how policy work can be incorporated into learning portals so that more professionals are aware of the systemic issues and remedies to solve issues around funding, resources, and curriculum. Examining the stakeholders' views of school social work roles (PTSA, administration, school board, community) and their perceptions of being "visible, viable, and valuable" and leaders with in schools will be important as well as doing more work on expanding the critical race consciousness surrounding Black students and their positive academic achievements.

This study highlighted the gaps in graduate school education related to race and a racial understanding of the country, the state, and the self. Different teaching philosophies of schools make a difference in terms of what is being taught and who is teaching it. History must be taught, and the social climate and social service needs of the time should be examined. Black school workers have been primed to be cultural brokers and the change agents for issues related to race, its impact on the achievement gap and disciplinary disparities, and the social and racial climate of schools.

This qualitative study explored the roles and experiences of Black school social workers in K–12 school settings. The theoretical frameworks of CRT in education and EST helped to guide the work on many levels. The literature implied that there were huge gaps in what we know about Black school social workers and their impact working with Black youth. Although the themes expanded on their vast experiences as Black school social workers, especially with respect to the racial implications, they did not address ways in which they may have taken a leadership role in addressing inequities in schools with a special focus on Black youth. Although their roles as cultural brokers was documented through the study, more research needs to be done on how they can impact the educational inequities that manifest through academics and discipline.

This study began the discussion for Black school social workers and affirmed their voice in the educational literature. Lynn (2006) stated, “CRT in education begins to create a discourse that articulates the ways in which teachers of color can initiate the process of ending racial subordination” (p. 115). CRT provides a way of interpreting, analyzing, and calling attention to the existence of race and racism in society. It hopefully gives graduate schools and school districts an awareness of voices they may not always hear and provides Black school social

workers a voice connected to CRT work. This study relates stories of the experiences of Black school social workers in educational settings and helps set the stage for their growing ability to work with Black youths in urban settings across the state of Illinois.

In order to make change in the educational landscape with the growing disparities among students who are languishing the most—the ones that “visiting teachers” were first placed in schools to help in the early 20th century—it is essential to critically acknowledge and address racism and racist practices that persist and purposely set out to exact systemic change. The individual, personal, micro-level work that many school social workers become inundated with—though positive—will not create systemic change that Black youths need. As CRT states, racism has a permanent place in society and it is important to understand the structural and societal barriers in order to help Black youth overcome them.

The purpose of this final chapter is to expand on the research in order to consider the broader implications of the experiences of Black school social workers. Although they are few in number, they have the potential to create significant change and raise awareness. This research sets the stage for further study of Black school social workers in the future. The findings contribute to broadening the discourse and to informing the field of educational leadership of the perspectives and challenges facing Black school social workers and the work they do. It contributes to the field of leadership by broadening the discourse of K–12 educators to include social workers in general and Black school social workers and their unique perspectives in particular.

Conclusion

In many ways, my work has led me to examine the significance of critical race pedagogy. Critical race and culturally relevant pedagogy examines the ways in which Black teachers draw on culture as a basis for fostering the academic achievement of African American students (Lynn, 2006). I found that discussing these issues heightened the awareness of participants during the course of this study. For instance, I received several phone calls from participants after they had an encounter at work that they described as “another microaggression assault.” Others inquired about the progress of my work because they deemed it important and informative and they felt connected to it. Most did not believe it was their ultimate role to be the race leader in their schools; however, over time, as more issues or racist acts and microaggressions occurred, they seemed to feel more obligation to speak out and stand up for racial injustice. My hope is that through my work, they will begin to be torchbearers for their race and profession like so many of the pioneering Black social workers of the past by acknowledging and accepting their leadership in the school setting and carrying a host of responsibilities and opportunities to incite change. Through subsequent discussions, most understood the risk involved and the resiliency needed to navigate those risks and withstand such challenges while remaining committed to their social work ethics and values.

Bonilla-Silva (2003) stated that racial ideas and practices that reflect the interests of the dominant group permeate all social institutions, small-group formations, and individual actions in society. Many Black social workers of the past who entered the social work profession saw their careers as a way to create social change, though historically they entered a profession that has always struggled between professionalization and social action (Bell, 2014). If a small study can spark interest and discussion, a curriculum and broad focus might accomplish much more. Although this study focused on the deficits of Black students by focusing on the disproportionate

discipline of Black students and the achievement gap that remains between Black and white students and continues to plague many schools, my future work will focus on telling the success stories of Black youth in educational spaces.

The educational struggles endured and advancements made by African Americans as a group, since slavery, are a testament to a prevailing collective commitment to developing and maintaining positive racial and achievement-oriented identities in a society where an individual's racial group membership often renders one as less-than, subordinate, and/or invisible. (Carter, 2008, p. 16)

The use of African American culture should be used as a resource from which to draw constructs for rethinking pedagogy and practice for educating Black students. The phrase “Se wo were fi an wosankofa a yenkyi,” is a phrase from the Akan language I Ghana which translates as, “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten,” captures the essence of the work I am beginning here.

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APPENDIX A: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY (EST)	CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN EDUCATION (CRT)	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK MERGING CRT & SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK
<p>Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested this systems form of human development. The social work profession has expanded this perspective to explain that an individual is “constantly creating, restructuring, and adapting” to the environment as the environment affects him or her (Ungar, 2002). This system intervenes based on the strengths and weaknesses between systems with a bio-psycho-social perspective.</p>	<p>CRT originated in legal scholarship with Bell and Ladson-Billings in 1970s. As the theory has grown into a subset, education grew. CRT in education critically examines and understands the contexts, thoughts, beliefs, interpretations, implications, and resistance toward school improvement and the school improvement planning process (Gillborn, 2008).</p>	<p>Therefore, a merging of the two theories would (once fully developed) provide a framework for school social workers to work with students and families with an approach to “best practices” in the schools while dealing with the student and the racial climate on all systems.</p>
<p>Category Breakdowns</p>	<p>Category Breakdowns</p>	<p>Merging of Categories</p>
<p>Microsystem This system involves the day-to-day, immediate environment of a student that involves the family, classroom, individual, religious, and peer influences.</p>	<p>Racial microaggressions take place at this level and the master narrative is often spoken as truth.</p>	<p>Social workers can empower students by providing individual counseling that allows the students’ voices to be heard and to challenge the master narrative through counter storytelling. Supporting students with crisis intervention services and encouraging resiliency and self-determination are important here.</p>
<p>Mesosystem This system is where the microsystems interact. School climate would be addressed in this system.</p>	<p>Interest convergence establishes roots in this system where marginalized students are often granted rights only when it benefits the majority. The dominator over property rights is obvious while the systems interact and the inability to control the transfer, use, or exclusion over programs, sports, and facilities makes Blacks feel inferior.</p>	<p>Social workers must be aware of these climate issues and challenge incongruences as they appear (and are hidden). Being aware how interests benefit marginalized students, why and how racism plays out, and who has access to resources is a constant learning and awareness issue. Social workers should assist students in navigating those systems. Knowledge of past practices and an awareness of critical consciousness are necessary.</p>
<p>Macrosystem This system is the blueprint that shapes a student’s beliefs and patterns of behavior, which may include racism, sexism, and violence. Cultural traditions, historical value, political forces, and economic conditions all have influence in this system.</p>	<p>In this system, it is apparent that history continues to play out in contemporary society as it relates to racism. Often, when traditions are encouraged and not examined, social injustices take place.</p>	<p>Social workers must understanding the history of race and culture in the educational setting where they work (formally and informally) and recognize how it impacts marginalized students. Social workers must examine the meaning behind policies and actions and use critical knowledge when analyzing those issues.</p>
<p>Exosystem This is a general level that impacts systems indirectly and on a larger scale but plays no active (relatively) role in the student’s life. For instance media, the community, school system, and medical institutions may here.</p>	<p>This system recognizes the permanence of racism including the hierarchal structures that govern all political, economic, and social domains.</p>	<p>Social workers must be cognizant of how data is analyzed.</p>

APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTION MATRIX

Research Questions	Data Collection Sources	How I Accessed the Data?
1. What are the unique roles and experiences of Black school social workers in K–12 school settings?	Interviews Online focus group prompts	Interviews with Black school social workers; weekly review of Facebook posts and comments
a. How might race and racism influence delivery of social work services and social workers' career satisfaction?	Interviews Online focus group prompts	Interviews with Black school social workers; weekly review of Facebook posts and comments
b. How might different K–12 school settings influence delivery of social work services and social workers' career satisfaction?	Interviews Online focus group prompts	Interviews with Black school social workers; weekly review of Facebook posts and comments
c. How do social workers articulate a commitment to working with Black youth?	Interviews Online focus group prompts	Interviews with Black school social workers; weekly review of Facebook posts and comments

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1.

Participant's name:	_____
Has consent form been signed?	Yes No
Has permission been given to audiotape?	Yes No
Gender:	Male Female
Educational background/highest degree earned:	MSW PhD LCSW LSW Other _____
Population of students served:	Regular ed./special ed./both/other
Geographical location served:	Rural/inner city/suburban/small city
Size of school district served:	_____
Size of school(s) served:	_____
SES/demographics of school(s) served:	SES: _____ White: _____ Black _____ Hispanic: _____ Asian: _____ American Indian: _____ Hawaiian/P Islander: _____ Multi: _____
Years employed as a school social worker:	_____
Date:	Time: _____ Location: _____

Questions

2. Are there certain roles you feel you are called on to perform rather than your white counterparts?

3. Do you perform duties whether volunteer or paid that are specifically geared toward Black students?

4. How are you viewed by community members and how would you describe your role (or not) as a community member?

5. How well were you trained to address challenges you have faced in your school settings?
Where did you gather your knowledge—graduate school, home, reading, etc.?

6. Do Black social workers have commonalities that white social workers don't?

7. What role models do you have for your social work practice? Besides personal ones, are you aware of the contributions of Black social work pioneers?
8. What are school social workers' current professional roles and responsibilities?
9. What is the role of school social workers in terms of what they do in the schools and what they can do, especially when serving in school leadership roles?
10. How are school social workers trained in graduate programs to serve diverse student populations, particularly in reference to race, racism, and school racial climate?
11. What personal challenges do Black school social workers experience in their employment?
12. What coping strategies are used by Black school social workers to cope and deal with resistance in their school settings?
13. In what ways do Black school social workers address their school systems concerning race issues/racial policies?
14. Is it the responsibility of Black school social workers to become leaders/critical activists in their schools?

Closing Questions

15. Anything else you would like to add?
16. What questions do you have about the Facebook online focus group?

Consent signed for Facebook Group?	Yes	No
Information Sheet Given for Facebook Group:	Yes	No
Participant Activated as a Facebook Participant:	Yes	No