

Book Reviews: School Social Work and School Mental Health

Books Reviewed:

Kelly, M. S. (2008). *The domains and demands of school social work practice: A guide to working effectively with students, families, and schools.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Openshaw, L. (2008). *Social work in schools: Principles and practice.* New York: Guilford Press.

Raines, J. C. (2008). *Evidence-based practice in school mental health.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Rachel Kibblesmith, M.S.W.

I reviewed three books on the role and practices of the school social work profession, bringing to my review my experiences as a school social worker in the course of my two Masters of Social Work internships. Although each book provides a unique perspective on school social work, a common theme throughout the three is the ever-changing role that social workers must play in the educational setting.

The first book reviewed, *Social Work in Schools: Principles and Practice*, provides an overview of this theme, and describes many of the issues that school social workers will face in their careers. The second book reviewed, *The Domains and Demands of School Social Work Practice: A Guide to Working Effectively with Students, Families, and Schools*, discusses the social work role while also concisely describing the role of evidence-based practice (EBP) in school social work. The third and final book reviewed, *Evidence-Based Practice in School Mental Health*, takes a more in-depth and accessible approach to an evidence-based process in the school social work field.

Social Work in Schools is a practical overview for social workers who specialize in school social work, and professionals who are interested in the scope of a school social worker's professional objectives. The

core of the book is a detailed description of the role of a school social worker; it reviews the multiple and complex relationships that are often part of the job description, such as building intricate relationships with students, staff, parents, and community resources; acting as an advocate and a voice on the special education team; and being a knowledgeable representative of the developmental and ethical challenges that students will face throughout their life cycles.

The book begins with a helpful section on treatment plans and interventions in which a school social worker may have to be a leader. Some of the notable interventions discussed are functional behavioral assessments, behavioral intervention plans, and social developmental histories. Given the facts that social workers are often an integral component of the special education teams in a school setting, and that schools increasingly are using research-based interventions (as an initiative of the No Child Left Behind Act), a school social worker must be extremely knowledgeable about each of the types of treatment plans that exist in a school environment.

As a reader and an MSW student with a schools specialization, this was an incredibly informative and critical piece

of my reading, not only because this section specifically identifies school-based interventions, but also because it is followed by a set of appendices that include sample templates for collecting intervention data and a list of additional resources. This was extremely beneficial for me as a social work professional just entering work in schools, and could be a vital tool for those already in the school social work field who are looking for additional resources that are congruent with current educational and social-emotional intervention mandates.

Chapters 4 through 8 are dedicated to the special challenges and considerations that school social workers need to be aware of for each grade level, preschool through high school. This was an extremely interesting section of the book. Each chapter provides details as to the general areas of need for targeted developmental groups, and also delves into some typical (but quite chronic) issues that certain age groups face.

The topics in these chapters range from preschool to third-grade students who are facing separation anxiety issues to the developmental delays typically diagnosed during this time, such as autism spectrum disorder. The chapters on grades four through six discuss physical and hormonal changes and bullying. In the middle school chapters, topics discussed include anger and aggression and eating disorders. Finally, the chapters on high school students discuss sensitive subjects such as sexual identification, dating relationships, gang violence, and graduation. To exemplify the special topics discussed in each chapter, a case study is provided to allow further clinical exploration.

The next section of this book illustrates a series of vulnerable populations that would almost certainly need special consideration by a school social worker. The discussions of some of these special populations cover children who were victims of violence and trauma, parental absence, substance abuse, death and loss, and working with non-citizen populations. As an up-and-coming

MSW in the school social work field, I was able to use these chapters as a supportive resource for additional information on issues faced by the students I worked with.

The book addresses some topics that should be part of a school social worker's therapeutic repertoire, so that she or he can help children who have been exposed to violence and trauma; parental absence in the form of military deployment, divorce, incarceration, or death; and death and loss of a significant individual in the student's life. Throughout my experience, I have had a number of students in my various caseloads who have lived with these issues, and these chapters allowed me to better understand the social and emotional dynamics at play in such students' lives.

Overall, *Social Work in Schools* is an informative and useful book for social workers who are considering entering the school social work field, as it will help them acquire a more thorough understanding of the roles and dynamics that are components of the school social work profession. I also found it to be a thorough resource for social workers who are already professionals in the school system, but may need additional information on common therapeutic issues that students face throughout the developmental life cycle or new ideas on how to improve current social work practice.

The second book reviewed, *The Domains and Demands of School Social Work Practice*, contains an abbreviated yet insightful analysis of the historical role of the school social worker, and analyzes the future of the school social work profession in light of the new policies of response to intervention. In a very short and easy-to-read format, this book works through some exceptionally difficult concepts involved in the contemporary, hard-hitting issues that school social workers currently face.

The first chapter begins with a review of the development of the school social work profession. The book then quickly dives

into its major purpose: Chapter 2 describes what an evidence-based process is and how a school social worker can implement it. Chapter 2 also has a list of “Do’s and Don’ts” for evidence-based practice, which I found to be an extremely useful quick guide for those just dipping their toes into the EBP concept. Some of the “Do’s” are: make time for literature reviews, find colleagues who can assist with information collection, and get the tools necessary to carry out informed practice. The “Don’ts” include: do not rely on Google or Wikipedia for clear and convincing evidence, do not give up after a limited time, and understand that the evidence uncovered is not the be-all and end-all. Rather, this evidence should supplement and enhance the client outcomes and therapeutic relationship; two of the key factors in client success.

The third chapter of *The Domains and Demands of School Social Work Practice* takes a broad-survey approach to description of the history and demographics of school social workers, and factors that have been found through research to be integral to a school social worker’s professional success. I found this chapter extremely interesting, both because it gives additional insight into the social work profession, and because it provides clear data on measured outcomes that should be implemented in the school social work field. Overall, this chapter is devoted to describing the scope of the school social worker’s role and the services that school social workers offer. It notes that school social workers historically have targeted individual treatment, group counseling, interventions related to individualized education plans, and crisis intervention.

Chapter 4 challenges school social workers to view school social work through the macro lens of developing prevention services, in the spirit of the response-to-intervention model. This chapter discusses an article published by Frey and Dupper in 2005 in which the researchers developed a “Clinical Quadrant Framework.” Kelly discusses this literature and the framework

as a model for school social workers to view the paradigm shift of service provision that is occurring in educational systems.

Although Kelly notes that the majority of school social workers view their professional role as lying primarily in Quadrant C, “Individual, Small Group, and Family Therapy Interventions Designed to Target Specific Client Psychological and Behavioral Changes,” this book offers additional insight and ideas for how school social workers can expand this role and move into the other three quadrants, which focus on larger areas of social work practice such as whole-school change and policy-making practices. I felt that this was an exceptional chapter and a critical area of study for school social workers who are experiencing a cultural shift in their profession due to the constantly changing nature of educational policies.

Chapter 5 returns to the evidence-based process, and walks the reader through the process of carrying out EBP with two common issues that school social workers often face: ADHD and anxiety. What I found extremely helpful in this chapter is Kelly’s working-through of the evidence-based process using his survey of literature and appraisal techniques. This gives the reader a constructive example to follow along with, and also may ease the anxiety and trepidation of school social workers who are novices to EBP.

Chapters 6 and 7 continue to look at the school social work profession through the macro lens. These chapters discuss in depth how a cohesive response-to-intervention policy can change and expand the role of the school social worker, specifically with regard to case management, increasing parent involvement, and student behavior plans. In chapter 7, Kelly also discusses how to provide evidence to work toward whole-school change regarding two issues commonly faced by a large population of students: poverty and divorce.

Chapter 8 closes the book with a

discussion about the future of the school social work profession and how this role can not only be expanded, but also become a more efficient and effective model. Key factors in this role development include utilizing evidence, and changing the attitude and education of school social workers to include skills such as advocating for research in this field and partnering with policy makers to enhance the success and support of interventions.

As a social worker new to the school social work field, I felt that *The Domains and Demands of the School Social Work Practice* provided an easily understandable approach to issues that at times seem overwhelming. Dr. Kelly, an experienced school social work professional and established author and researcher in the field, provides a supportive and concise look into a process that once sounded daunting, but now stands to reason as a seamless model under the “best social work practice” umbrella. This is a “must-read” for any school social work professionals who are facing greater demands or challenges to their current roles, or who are interested in discovering how to adapt and modify their professional obligations according to the EBP model.

The final book reviewed, *Evidence-Based Practice in School Mental Health*, is critical for any school social work practitioner. This book’s core focus is assisting school social work practitioners to abide by the legal educational mandates that have become commonplace in the school settings, such as No Child Left Behind and the practice of response to intervention (RTI). Contemporary educational legislation requires professionals in the school system to have the ability to prove, through data-driven and data-based measures, that their educational interventions are both efficient and effective. Ultimately, the goals of these policies are not only to hold educational institutions accountable for their work with students, but also—and more importantly—to close the achievement gap for students who are discrepant from their peers and who require an additional level of support

from an educational team.

These educational policies also apply to the social–emotional learning standards that are in place, particularly when students receive special education services from the school in the form of an individualized education plan. This book discusses the need for school social workers to supply social work interventions grounded in research both to students receiving special education services and to clients from the general education setting. The theory behind EBP is that using research-based interventions is not only best social work practice, but also aligns with the legal mandates in an educational institution.

Evidence-Based Practice in School Mental Health is a comprehensive “how-to” guide for the use of EBP in school social work. The first few chapters of the book provide an in-depth analysis of an explanation of what EBP is, and how it can and should be used in social work interventions. Raines offers clear and concise arguments that an EBP approach to school social work is not only required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, but also fulfills social workers’ ethical obligations for continuing education and the development of best social work practice for their clients.

The bulk of the book, takes a detailed look at how school social work practitioners can develop an EBP lens. The book describes EBP as a five-step process (covered in chapters 3 through 8): “Creating Answerable Questions, Investigating the Evidence, Appraising the Evidence, Adapting and Applying the Evidence, and Evaluating the Outcomes.” Each chapter begins with a preview of the chapter contents and coverage, and ends with a chapter summary to ensure that the reader gains a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the material and literature discussed therein.

The last set of chapters focuses on the ethical reasoning behind evidence-based practice, and the systemic issues that school social work practitioners may face when

trying to implement an EBP approach in an educational setting. Perhaps the most convenient part of this book is the appendix, which provides a multitude of Internet resources for social workers. Topics include advocacy groups, appraisal tools, assessment tools, empirically supported interventions, ethical and legal guidelines, and systemic implementation, in addition to many other resources.

Evidence-Based Practice in School Mental Health is a critical resource for any school social work practitioner. The author, James Raines, is an established school social worker, researcher, and author; and in this work provides an intensive yet easy-to-understand overview of the EBP process. Taking a contemporary approach to school social work practice, this book helps readers develop an integral research and evaluation process. It reinforces the fact that school social workers must become aware of and adapt to the paradigm shift that has occurred in the educational field in both philosophy and legislation.

I found Raines's book to be one of the most current and informative of any of the books that I have read on school social work. For many years, school social workers often seemed bereft of resources on topics such as these, while the rest of the stakeholders in a school setting (such as teachers and school psychologists) were provided with research-based programs and interventions to provide to their student population. Ultimately, I found that it was a particularly critical resource when I was a school social work intern in an educational setting that was heavily involved in an RTI process, and an educational support team that relied on research-based interventions, properly tracked progress, and data-driven outcomes.

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