

School social workers responding to inequities and challenged by ambiguity

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ABSTRACT

Structural factors continue to play a role in the manifestation of educational inequities, with school social work practice often oriented in reaction to these conditions. School social work effectiveness is further complicated by overlapping professional, training, and role ambiguities, obscuring both the origins of structural challenges and the appropriate targets for reform. In pursuit of inequity-targeting school social work, we present emergent findings pulled from a broader qualitative study. In the main study, we examined school social worker efforts and capabilities to target inequities in practice and the relationship to structural challenges, training, and role variations. The current paper reflects data gathered from interviews with 17 school social workers practicing in the US, with the findings presented in three themes: (1) Gaps in National Leadership, (2) Gaps in Educational Preparation, and (3) Role Complexity to Ambiguity. Practitioners illuminated the connections and inequities across these levels, with the implications drawn to multi-level ambiguity and the direct impact on role clarity and practice efficacy. The complexity of roles, responsibilities, alongside severity and time-intensive tasks confounded the scope of practice. The discussion and implications explore the intersection of professional ambiguity, training ambiguity, role ambiguity, and contextual influences that affect inequity-focused practice.

1. Introduction

School social workers in the US navigate complex environments and ambiguous working conditions. The field is shaped by professional organizations (Kelly et al., 2023; Lucio, Shayman, et al., 2024), state educational preparation and training inconsistencies (Childs et al., 2025; Mitchell et al., 2021) and disconnects between professional practice models and roles (Phillippo et al., 2017; Murphy et al., 2025). Roles are also affected by distinct administrative guidance, underemployment, high caseloads, and difficult working conditions (Cox, Fitzgerald, et al., 2025; Horton & Herrera, 2025; Lindsey et al., 2024; Stalnecker, Tan, et al., 2022).

This complexity has led to scholarly descriptions of *role ambiguity*, including unclear work demands, competing needs, and fluctuating responsibilities (Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020). Yet, it is unclear whether role ambiguity is a product of divergent national guidance, inconsistent state training, or school-specific challenges (Kelly et al., 2023; Knox et al., 2025a; Lindsey et al., 2024; Lucio, Souhrada, et al., 2024; Mitchell et al., 2021). Within this context, structural and educational inequities shape

school systems, frequently positioning school social work (SSW) in reactive roles that respond to, rather than address, these disparities (Mahoney et al., 2025; Mitchell, 2025; Murphy et al., 2025).

The purpose of this study was to examine US-based school social work practice in alignment with inequity-targeting practice. Building on abolitionist perspectives in social work (Sonsteng-Person et al., 2023) and conceptual research to abolish oppressive frameworks in SSW (Mitchell & Folk-Nagua, 2025), we aim to uncover practitioner efforts to target inequities amid the range of practice roles and responsibilities. This study is based on emergent data drawn from the main study (Mitchell et al., 2026) where we documented practitioner awareness of inequities, their efforts to address inequities, and the scope of SSW practice that, at times, reinforced inequities. Qualitative analysis in the main study shed light on the structural inequities in the field and their influence on SSW practice.

2. Literature review

Prior to examining the extent to which school social workers (SSWs)

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are both equipped with the appropriate skills and able to target inequities in schools, a clear delineation of inequities may be useful. Following this description, we move into a discussion of SSW practice and the dimensions of *professional*, *training* and *role ambiguities*.

Structural inequities that persist across US states and communities, including economic disadvantage, segregation, food and housing insecurity, often manifest in the school as educational inequities through outcomes that disproportionately affect minoritized youth (Ikpur, 2023; Morrison et al., 2023; Weathers & Sosina, 2022). Educational inequities may include low academic outcomes, exclusion (e.g., suspensions), special education disparities, and resource deficiencies (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lipman, 2013; Proffitt, 2022).

Academically, minoritized youth face elevated rates of grade retention, absenteeism, truancy, dropout rates, and ultimately lower high school graduation rates (Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2020; Kearney et al., 2023; Mireles-Rios et al., 2020). Punitively, minoritized youth navigate an increased likelihood of school exclusion (e.g., suspension; expulsion; arrest; referrals to law enforcement), overrepresentation in special education, and experience an elevated presence of law enforcement, police, and surveillance in resource-deficient schools (Camacho et al., 2024; Curran, 2019; Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Wiley et al., 2025). Resource inequities alongside highly punitive environments shape deficit and dehumanizing depictions of youth (Love & Beneke, 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2024; Neal-Jackson, 2018). For example, intersections can be drawn between pathologizing and exclusionary practices that shapes individualized and deficit-based treatment, and, at times, school exclusion that elevates the risk of juvenile justice involvement, incarceration, and the school-to-prison nexus (Annamma, 2017; Macht, 2017; Nocella et al., 2017; Saltman, 2025).

Black, Brown, Indigenous, gender-expansive, LGBTQ+, and students with disabilities face disparate conditions, more severe outcomes (e.g., exclusion; victimization), and are subject to differential treatment as compared to their peers (Allen, 2017; Marsh & Walker, 2022; Snapp et al., 2022). Yet many of the “solutions” to these inequities fail to articulate root causes and lead to reform that (mis)places failure onto youth (Brendtro et al., 2019; Knestrict, 2019). This understanding shapes exclusionary tactics to deter (mis)behavior, even though these strategies are unevicenced in their effectiveness (Okonofua et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2016). Even worse, when youth are feared, militarized approaches may be deployed, including behavioral threat assessments,¹ and one-size-fits-all approaches to discipline such as behavioral matrices (Harding et al., 2022; McLaughlin et al., 2025; Saltman, 2024). Youth with perceived deficiencies are often pathologized, resulting in medicalized treatment and interventions (Annamma, 2017; Macht, 2017; Saltman, 2025). Meanwhile, many of these trends are understood under the umbrella of a “mental health crisis,” masking deeper inequities through a hyper focus on youth pathologization (Ginwright, 2015; Maté & Maté, 2022; McGorry et al., 2025). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to delineate the full scale of these inequities, it is important to situate how SSW practice may be positioned in response to these complex and contextual influences.

2.1. School social work

School social workers engage in practice shaped by a variety of

¹ Behavioral threat assessments were developed by the US Secret Service as a mechanism to prevent targeted attacks. The evolution in use expanded into law enforcement and are now used in schools to address school safety concerns. In schools, threat assessments are used to identify the violence risk of students in order to reduce harm. Relatedly, behavioral matrices are now used by administrators as a systematic guide for disciplinary action based on behavioral rule violations. The assumption being that structural guidance may help to reduce inequity stemming from administrative discretion in disciplinary processes.

factors, including political, geographic, school type, practice level, and caseload (Jarolmen & Bautista-Thomas, 2022). Practitioners work school-wide, across multiple schools, manage crises, engage with communities, families, and nonprofits (Elswick et al., 2019; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018; Ochocki et al., 2024). High caseloads, time-intensive tasks, shifting school-based challenges, and inequitable working conditions creates an environment not only difficult to sustain practice, but nearly impossible to address or prevent inequities (Lucio, Souhrada, et al., 2024). Yet, if SSW practice is not oriented to address inequities, then practice may be driven in reaction to inequities rather than proactive and preventative (Mitchell et al., 2024; Mitchell, 2025).

The complexity of SSW practice and competing work demands has often been understood as *role ambiguity* (Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020). To some extent, this is correct, however practitioners may absorb blame and responsibility for these concerns, noted in the depictions of “role confusion” (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Carnes, 2023). Murphy et al. (2025) noted: “the vast number of tasks they [SSWs] were assigned and had to complete led to confusion for their role regarding what they should prioritize.” Moving to a structurally informed model of ambiguity may help to account for the preconditions that influence practice both *inside* and *outside* of schools (Mitchell & Knox, 2026). A comprehensive definition of ambiguity may be useful that includes three components: (1) professional ambiguity, (2) training ambiguity, and (3) role ambiguity (Fig. 1; Mitchell and Knox, 2026).

2.2. School social work and the structural dimensions of ambiguity

Concerns of *professional ambiguity* are evidenced by competing national guidance. In 2025, The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2025) updated their standards for school social work practice, and the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) released their second iteration of the national practice model (Tan & SSWAA, 2025). These distinct documents may complicate the roles and responsibilities of school social workers by supplanting practitioner expertise, privileging researchers as experts, and overshadowing political, geographic, and local variations. Both the national standards and practice model account for role flexibility and variation, however they may implicitly uphold the notion of a standardized *school social worker* — where role definition may be privileged over the recognized influence of state, district, and school complexities (Mitchell & Knox, 2026).

Concerns of *training ambiguity* are evidenced by the divergence of state certification standards (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). Each US state has developed (or not yet developed) independent certification standards for school social work (Mitchell et al., 2021). Individualized state training standards means that SSW roles are, to some extent, subsidiary to state educational preparation which further complicates the profession due to substantive training inconsistency (Childs et al., 2025; Knox et al., 2025b). Variation in certification standards may contribute to a general lack of role preparedness (Cox et al., 2021; Cox, Fitzgerald, et al., 2025; Knox et al., 2020; Knox et al., 2025a). Cox et al. (2021, p. xii) note that in a survey of 175 SSWs: “78% felt their degree had not prepared them for the SSW role.”

Concerns of *role ambiguity* represent a byproduct of professional and training ambiguity, and a manifestation of these inequities in schools. Further, there are a host of variables that confound, change, and redirect SSW practice toward unclear and potentially competing directions (Cox, Clayton, et al., 2025; Jarolmen & Bautista-Thomas, 2022). Practitioners work in a variety of school settings, including public, private, and alternative schools (Badillo-Diaz, 2022; Crutchfield et al., 2020; Lindsey et al., 2024). Practice is affected by geographic location, population density, varied political context, and demographics (e.g., staff; students), creating a variety of divergent needs (Branson, 2019; Richardson et al., 2019). For example, SSWs working in border regions or where a higher percentage of immigrant youth reside may call for targeted practices (Meza, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2020; Villarreal Sosa, 2019; Villarreal Sosa et al., 2021), distinct from practitioners that

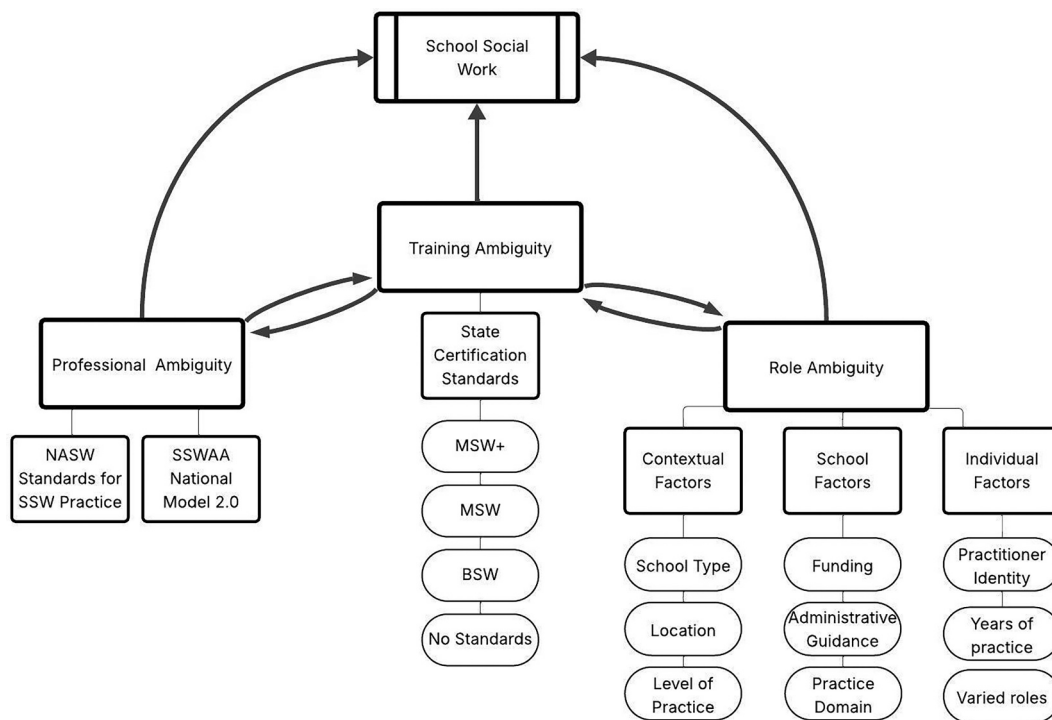


Fig. 1. Profession, Training, and Role Ambiguity.

work in cities with a higher enrollment of Black youth (Crutchfield and Eugene, 2022; Kyere & Huguley, 2020; Teasley, 2004). In addition, practitioners work across a variety of levels (e.g., elementary; middle; high), often within and across multiple schools and regions (Kelly et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2019). These factors are confounded by variations in funding, administrative guidance, and supervision (Bluestone-Miller et al., 2016; Bronstein & Mason, 2016, p 223; Daftary et al., 2025; Kelly, 2025; Phillippo et al., 2023; Stalneck, Alvarez, et al., 2022; Stalneck et al., 2025; Watson et al., 2022).

Understanding SSW cannot be dislocated from the structural dimensions, including national guidance (e.g., professional ambiguity), state certification standards (e.g., training ambiguity), and role orientations (e.g., role ambiguity; Mitchell & Knox, 2026). An expanded understanding of ambiguity must encompass a structural recognition of SSW to build consistent professional guidance, training unity, and practice clarity toward inequity-targeting roles (Kelly et al., 2023; Lucio, Shayman, et al., 2024; Mitchell & Folk-Nagua, 2025; Mitchell & Knox, 2026).

2.3. Purpose & theory

To build upon practitioner wisdom and expertise, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of SSWs related to educational inequities, training, and roles, guided by two research questions: (1) How can school social workers be equipped with skills to recognize and address educational inequities?; (2) What are barriers to addressing inequities and abolishing oppressive frameworks relative to school social work?

This study is theoretically grounded in abolitionist teaching (Love, 2019), abolitionist social work (Sonsteng-Person et al., 2023), abolitionist school social work (Ab-SSW; Mitchell & Folk-Nagua, 2025), and the main study under review (Mitchell et al., 2026). In the conceptual research on Ab-SSW, connections were drawn between social work's historical deficiencies, current practices in schools, deeply intertwined inequities and discursive oppression that encapsulate youth identities amid fear-based, deficits, where interventions seek to fix and reform youth rather than the structural inequities causing and shaping these

disparities (Bornstein, 2015; Brendtro et al., 2019; Guz, 2022; Knestrict, 2019; Sugrue, 2017). The conceptual framework aimed at the abolition of oppressive frameworks and aligning SSW practice with inequity-targeting practice, including a deeper emphasis on justice, youth-centered, macro, and prevention-based frameworks, led to the development of the main study (described below) and the emergent analysis depicted in this paper (Mitchell & Folk-Nagua, 2025).

3. Methodology

The qualitative inquiry was conjoined by a person-centered approach to data collection (Levy & Hollan, 1998) and thematic analytical techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A total of ($N = 17$) school social workers participated in interviews ranging from 1 to 2 hours in length. The inclusion criteria required SSW practitioners to be actively employed, and all were US-based. Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board, we utilized convenience and snowball sampling, corresponded with professional networks and provided a recruitment flyer that state and national associations sent to members. Participants were provided informed consent and were asked to complete a demographic survey. Participants spanned multiple US states, and the semi-structured interviews coupled with person-centered techniques guided the qualitative conversations (Huffman, 2025).

3.1. Main study

In the main study (Mitchell et al., 2026), we explored educational inequities and how SSW roles, at times, potentially reinforced inequities. Given the breadth of quality data from practitioner interviews, the data also pointed to emergent themes of professional, training, and role ambiguity. Although questions of ambiguity were not the sole purpose of the initial study, semi-structured interview questions did contain questions related to the profession, training, and role specificity. Thus, the data presented is an emergent depiction of the data analysis, much of which builds upon the main study (Mitchell et al., 2026).

3.2. Participants

Participation from 17 SSWs was majority women (94%), and all had master's degrees (Table 1). Participants worked in varied school settings, including urban (9; 50%), rural (5; 29%), and suburban (4; 23%). Study participants were White (11; 64%), Black (4; 24%), and Latina/o (2; 12%). Roles included micro–macro (10; 58%), mezzo (23%), micro (2; 11%), and macro (1; 0.05%). The majority of participants had more than 20 years of practice (6; 35%). Participants identified politically as Democrat (6; 35%), prefer not to say (4; 23%), Liberal (3; 17%), Moderate (2; 11%), Independent (1; 0.05%), and Other (1; 0.05%; Table 1).

3.3. Interviews and data analysis

Semi-structured interviews with SSWs were driven by person-centered techniques (Levy & Hollan, 1998). This orientation positioned practitioners as experts by valuing their responses, with interviews oriented toward the directions, at times, guided by participant responses (Huffman, 2025). For example, utilizing probing, follow-up questions, we often deviated from the interview guide in ways that responded to the key insights from practitioners, emphasizing SSWs as both informants and respondents (Huffman, 2025).

Thematic analytical techniques were supported by several stages of collaborative, team-based inquiry. Upon the completion of all interviews, data was transcribed from video to audio using Descript

2.14.0, then uploaded to Google Sheets for coding and analysis. Data was de-identified, with pseudonyms randomly assigned to participants for privacy protection. Three phases of data analysis were completed, with a pre-analysis data cleaning used to assign all interview transcripts (three per-person).

During *phase one* of the analytical process, all team members proceeded through initial coding, where preliminary codes and notes were used to get an introductory sense of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Peer debriefing was utilized to review codes, discuss overlap and divergence within collaborative conversation (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). Multiple team members assigned to each transcript helped debriefing strategies by building coding consensus and allowed for nuanced analysis when divergence occurred (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). *Phase two* of the analytical process moved from preliminary codes to a more elaborate construction of codes, sub-codes, backed by collaboration, discussion, and analytical comparison (Spall, 1998). Code consolidation, overlap, and consensus was built on categories to begin grouping analysis together (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). *Phase three* of the analytical process moved to thematic development—categorical sections were reassigned to team members—for a final stage of analysis where larger categories, codes, and sub-codes were developed into themes useful for conveying research clarity (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Scharp & Sanders, 2019). Phase three included a final stage of peer debriefing, including individual conversations between researchers to reduce ambiguity and boost thematic cohesion (Scharp & Sanders, 2019; Spall, 1998).

3.4. Researcher positionalities

This project was led by a team of students, researchers, and SSW practitioners all enrolled (i.e., students) or employed at a Historically Black University in the South. As a team, we operationalized our collective identities, sharing concern of structural oppression and the enduring nature educational inequities. Our critical team perspectives drove our desires to better understand school social work efforts aimed at disrupting inequities and establishing practice to uproot injustice. Through our scholarship, direct practice, and researcher/student experiences, we built on our knowledge of school social work inequities to highlight structural limitations as illuminated by practitioners and incorporated through in-depth team engagement.

4. Findings

This section represents the qualitative findings from ($N = 17$) interviews with school social workers, summarized by three overarching themes, (1) Gaps in National Leadership, (2) Gaps in Educational Preparation, and (3) Role Complexity to Ambiguity. Table 1 provides demographic characteristics and Appendix A provides all interview questions. All participants were educated at the Master's level, and specific role characteristics were specified in Table 2.

4.1. Theme one: gaps in national leadership

We begin on the SSW professional level with a look at the thematic *gaps in national leadership*. Practitioners in this study highlighted how divergent national guidance posed challenges for cohesive guidance, state leadership from associations, and role delineation in schools. Although positioned thematically as the gaps in national leadership, it is imperative to consider the relationship between these inequities and the aforementioned professional ambiguity. Within the gaps of national leadership, we explore two sub-themes: (a) ambivalence toward state needs, and (b) model indifference and role clarity.

4.2. Ambivalence toward state needs

Discussing national leadership and state connections, Smith suggested: “They [SSWAA] could provide more professional development

Table 1
School Social Work Demographic, School, and Political Characteristics.

(N = 17)	
Education	
Master's	17 (100%)
Gender	
Woman	16 (94%)
Man	1 (6%)
Race	
White	11 (64%)
Black	4 (24%)
Latino	2 (12%)
School Type*	
Rural	5 (29%)
Urban	9 (50%)
Suburban	4 (23%)
Other	1 (6%)
Role	
Micro	2 (12%)
Mezzo	4 (24%)
Macro	1 (6%)
Micro-Macro	10 (58%)
Years of Practice	
3–5 years	2 (12%)
6–10 years	4 (24%)
11–15 years	3 (17%)
16–20	2 (12%)
20+	6 (35%)
Political Leaning	
Liberal	3 (17%)
Democrat	6 (35%)
Moderate	2 (12%)
Independent	1 (6%)
Prefer not to Say	4 (24%)
Other	1 (6%)

Note. *School Type goes over 100% due to practitioner employment in multiple districts.

Table 2
Participant Demographics, School Factors, and Role Orientations.

Participant	Demographic Factors						School Factors			Role Orientations	
	Age	Gender	Race	Years	Politics	Level	Type	Role	Practice	Tasks	Tasks
Ace	33–45	W	W	16–20	D	High	Urban	SSW	M–M	Admin	MH
Beem	46–58	W	W	20+	M	K-12	Suburban	SSW	Mezzo	Training	Attendance
Ceel	33–45	W	W	6–10	D	Alt	Urban	SSW	M–M	SPED	Crisis
Dedee	46–58	W	B	6–10	PNTS	High	Urban	SSW	M–M	Caseworker	Attendance
Degan	33–45	W	B	6–10	D	Elementary	Suburban; Urban	SSW	M–M	Caseworker	Advocacy
Kam	33–45	W	W	11–15	PNTS	K-12; Alt	Rural	Lead SSW	M–M	Clinical	Grants
Kwaya	46–58	M	B	20+	I	All	Rural	Director	Macro	Supervision	Policy
Mayah	46–58	W	W	20+	L	High	Urban	SSW	Mezzo	MH	MV
Maci	33–45	W	H	6–10	PNTS	High	Urban	Bilingual SSW	M–M	ELL	MH
Micci	46–58	W	W	20+	D	K-12	Rural	Lead SSW	Micro	CE	FE
Mahu	46–58	W	W	6–10	D	Multiple	Multiple	SSW	Mezzo	Wellness	FE
Simah	46–58	W	B	20+	D	Multiple	Urban	Coordinator	M–M	Attendance	MV
Kweb	33–45	W	W	3–5	Leftist	High	Suburban	SSW	M–M	Caseworker	Threat Assessment
Jaime	46–58	W	W	20+	M	All	Rural	SSW	M–M	State-level	Advocacy
Smith	33–45	W	W	16–20	D	High	Rural; Urban	SSW	Micro	ELL	SPED
Kace	33–45	W	W	11–15	L	Middle	Suburban	SSW	Mezzo	SPED	Intervention
Emery	33–45	W	H	11–15	PNTS	K-12	Urban	SSW Coordinator	M–M	Admin	Training

Note. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity, and all acronyms are provided below. **Gender**, Man (M), Woman (W); **Race**, Black (B), Hispanic (H), White (W).

Political, Democrat (D), Independent (I), Liberal (L), Moderate (M), Prefer Not To Say (PNTS); **Level**, Alternative (Alt); **Practice**, Micro-Mezzo-Macro (M–M); **Tasks**, English Language Learner (ELL), Community Engagement (CE), Family Engagement (FE), McKinney-Vento (MV), Mental Health (MH), Special Education (SPED).

opportunities for states and to get people kind of more fired up about the work that they're doing at the state level." Smith spoke to the ambivalence toward state needs and the disconnected priorities of national leadership. To some extent, supporting practitioners toward inequity targeting practice may be contingent upon enthusiastic national leadership and coordinated guidance. Simah elaborated on their work within the state association adding that: "It's been hard to find people to take on leadership roles." Extending the gaps on the national level and affecting the leadership trajectories of SSWs may be reflected in disparate professional guidance. For example, the National Model 2.0 mentions leadership, however, pathways for leadership in schools or on the state level are not articulated (see Tan & SSWAA, 2025). The result is that national leadership may function in service of professional sustainability that, at times, may overshadow state-needs and school social work efficacy. The parameters of inequity targeting practice may depend on multi-level leadership engagement, where coalitions, collaboration, and alliances pave the way toward a unified approach that most benefits youth in schools (Warren, 2021). Potentially, the inability to draw folks into leadership roles may be a result of national leadership gaps, poor state integration, lack of clarity towards leadership roles, and limited connections with university preparation programs.

Adding complexity to the gaps in national leadership, Ace discussed the intersection of professional and political concerns, stating that: "I think professionally, there's so much uncertainty as a school social worker out here." What began as a conversation about job security, expanded to include political trends, concerns of funding, and limited supervisory understanding of SSW, all of which contribute to role ambiguity and highlight the need for national advocacy on behalf of SSWs. This would remove the locus of responsibility from individual SSW advocacy and toward national representation for the consistency and advocacy needed to sustain and build the profession. As SSWs are forced to advocate for roles and responsibilities, amid ambiguous supervisory knowledge, their abilities to build holistic, preventive, and inequity-targeting practices may be limited. With this in mind, practice may be oriented in response to the challenges that exist, and the parameters of advocacy in context based on geographic, political, and fear that encapsulates varied types of practice.

4.3. Model indifference and role clarity

Adding to the gaps in national leadership and challenges of role

clarity, some participants connected these concerns to the differing understandings of the National Model 2.0. For example, Jamie spoke at length about their concerns:

The school counselors have been there a lot longer and they're threatened by what the school social workers can do. School social workers have something to blame for this because we don't define ourselves well. When I'm supervising school social workers, I'll say, have you looked at the national school social work model? You should be bringing that framework to discussions. School social workers are reluctant to do that. That's part of the problem, the younger ones coming into it aren't comfortable. We just kind of do what we do well, that, that's part of the problem.

Jamie highlights an important concern regarding the reluctance of practitioners to engage with the practice model. However, this perspective reifies the blame and individualization that practitioners often absorb—that are largely a product of structural inequities and gaps in national leadership (Mitchell & Knox, 2026). In other words, SSWs may face blame for the professional ambiguity that manifests as unclear role delineation. Although indifference to the model could be a product of its recency, it is not clear why some are enthused, and others are not. Further, the perceived competition between school mental health professionals (e.g., counselors) means that practitioners must navigate the ambiguity between school mental health (counseling) and SSW, adding barriers which stand in the way of inequity targeting practice. Although a clear distinction between social work and counseling—while important in its own right—may distract from the cross-system collaboration that is needed toward the development of equitable school mental health practice (Frey et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2023).

Kweb reflected on the National Model, highlighting the importance of national leadership at the conference and the need for ongoing education to improve comprehension of the model, role clarity, and minimize administrative misunderstandings. Further, they discussed the model and wheel used to emphasize varied practice (see Tan & SSWAA, 2025):

I got so jazzed about the wheel and my boss hates that thing. He was like, I don't know how this is gonna help. I was so excited, and I was like, this makes so much sense. We can explain what we do. He was like, no, I just don't think this is gonna help anyone. I don't think people need another confusing graphic

In addition to practitioner indifference to the model, Kwaya highlighted how distinct school administration, coupled with the limited national guidance created ambiguity surrounding the model in relation to practice engagement. The inability to see the benefits of such a model can be linked to the potential gaps in national leadership and advocacy. Perhaps, there are concerns from administrators that these supersede their perspectives on what the role looks like in schools. Furthermore, inequity-targeting practice may be contingent upon supervisory buy-in and administrative support. The gaps in national leadership that affect practice are also confounded by educational preparation and training.

4.4. Theme two: gaps in educational preparation

Qualitative representation in this section emphasizes the inequities in educational preparation and training. Although the thematic focus is on the gaps in educational preparation, it would be analytically incomplete to ignore the training ambiguity that plays a role in the overall adequacy of preparation, and also the ability of SSWs to effectively target and address inequities (Mitchell & Folk-Nagua, 2025). Put another way, training ambiguity, including inconsistent, generalized, and at times, non-existent training standards, manifests within individuals as a training shortcoming or inequity, but in reality is a product of systemic SSW training ambiguity. Developed in this section are the subthemes of (a) insufficient educational preparation, (b) professional development inadequacies, and (c) experiential training.

4.5. Insufficient educational preparation

Participants spoke at length about educational preparation and training. Emery stated: *"If you were to ask me straight outta grad school, if I was prepared to address inequities, probably not."* Simah added: *"I don't know that I was adequately prepared, as far as how to address inequities. I feel like my training was more focused on how to support students in the various capacities that occur at school."* Degan noted: *"My initial education probably touched the bare basics."* Mahu confirmed: *"My initial education didn't do anything to help me."* Kweb discussed limitations of their MSW program: *"My specialty was the vaguest one, children, youth, and families so I kind of got to just dabble in whatever I wanted to."* Kam identified hiring challenges as a supervisor: *"I feel like a lot of the social workers that I've employed or worked with don't really have that training on how to collaborate with non-social work teams."* Kwaya continued:

We need more training to support inequities. Not only being aware of the law but being aware of advocacy tactics too. How do you navigate between keeping your job right on one hand and then on the other hand making sure that you're not using some really regressive practices?

Collectively, practitioners highlighted the insufficiencies across their educational preparation, including the limitations of a generalist educational program, posing difficulties on collaborative school-mental health practice, and disconnection from training that supports inequity-targeting practice. These gaps have practice implications given that SSWs may be less equipped to identify and address inequities impacting their students. Insufficient educational preparation also intersects with training ambiguity, resulting in some practitioners speaking highly of their preparation, and others distraught by training deficiencies. Concerns of preservice training also extended into professional development.

4.6. Professional development inadequacies

Practitioners highlighted training inequities related to professional development and continuing education. Jamie discussed the limited options for continuing education, *"If I was waiting for someone to formally give that to me, I would've never received it."* Dedee added: *"In professional development we talk a lot about theory, but we never put it in practice."*

Jamie spoke to the limitations of school-based professional development, *"If they really don't wanna hear it, they'll say, we don't have time for that training."* Regarding specific types of professional development, Ace added: *"We never had professional development on cultural competencies."* Repeatedly, participants noted limited access to quality training, instead noting that existing options were insufficient or lacked practice utility.

Participants also discussed how training may reinforce harmful perspectives. For instance, Maci discussed the recurrent focus on trauma-informed training, noting, *"It would be more helpful to know how to support students."* Kwaya noted that working in a rural district, some of the folks that came to provide training were problematic: *"It sounds interesting on the surface, but it's rooted in a lot of deficit."* Practitioners pointed directly at the professional development training limitations, and the lack of contextual relevance given the role variation of practitioners such as within rural schools. These training inadequacies shaped the demands of experiential growth and self-taught training.

4.7. Experiential training

The combination of preservice training limitations and the inadequacies of professional development may spur the need for self-directed, experiential training. Ace noted the benefits of experience: *"I think the most helpful thing is working within the schools."* Similarly, Maci discussed her identity as a Hispanic minority, adding that their personal experiences, length of practice in the school system was more useful than training. In addition to the emphasized need for self-directed learning, Maci highlighted the complexities of navigating SSW practice as a minority. In attempts to move beyond the deficit-based focus on training inequities, Kam discussed the value of forward-thinking mentalities,

There's always more to learn. I feel like you're always finding something new coming in your door and you're always finding a new challenge that you have to overcome, whether at a student level, a parent level, a building-administration level, or community level.

Kam's insight underscored the importance of self-directed learning, a point many practitioners highlighted, but an imperative that may have been shaped by the abundance of preservice training inequities and professional development inadequacies. Collectively, these concerns all collide into the parameters of SSW practice and the scope of roles and responsibilities.

4.8. Theme three: role complexity to ambiguity

The roles of school social workers are inseparable from the gaps in national guidance and educational preparation, however there are also localized concerns that affect practice. Theme three delineated two subthemes: (a) demands on practice, and (c) role complexity.

4.9. Demands on practice

Although practitioners engaged in a variety of roles, environmental practice demands had an intricate influence on practice. Practitioners highlighted the geographic complexity of location, cultural diversity, demographics, and funding. Kam stated, *"We have totally different geographical locations. Not only weather wise, but also culturally."* Micci discussed the presence of SSWs, noting they employed *"10 social workers in the district across 27 schools, and it's just really geographically spread out around 22,000 square miles."* Beem highlighted geographic diversity stating that: *"Every school in the district is different. Every board and community are different."* They also noted the the benefits of funding and intern-based support, *"We have the opportunity to have lots of interns and it's such a joy to learn from them and give to them."* This variance affected SSW practice by demanding SSW presence across multiple schools, at times spread across huge geographic distances, and working in a range of culturally diverse practice settings with needs of students and

communities.

The demands on practice were also intricately shaped by school-based leadership and administrative guidance. Jamie noted that: *“My supervisor doesn’t give us any guidance on what type of data should be driving the types of students we see...What data do you want us to collect? We’ve asked that every year. They will not give us an answer.”* This example highlights both the limitations of direct SSW supervision and how the lack of training undermined quality practice. Although it may be appropriate for practitioners to mold practice to administrative guidance, it is also important to recognize that SSWs should be trained adequately to engage in practices without constant supervisory approval. Understandably, this is a tricky balance to uphold as practitioners work to advocate while maintaining job security. Ace shared a similar sentiment, *“You don’t have supervisors who know what your role is, and then they don’t advocate for funding.”* Furthermore, should this be the job of individual SSWs, or an imperative of national leadership to establish roles and provide guidance for administrators and supervisors?

Ceel, working in a contracted role outside the school, took things a step further, asking: *“Who’s my supervisor? Who’s supervising me? How does this work? What does communication look like? How do you communicate with the schools and what do your policies look like and what do the school’s policies look like,”* adding that *“There wasn’t any face to face. No one ever came out to visit the school that I was aware of.”* Ceel illuminated how the complexities of inadequate supervision are complicated by contractual obligations and the feelings of having multiple responsibilities of satisfying work demands and school-based approval for disparate supervisors. On the other side of the equation, Kam highlighted the benefits of high-level leadership, *“We had an amazing superintendent who advocated for school social workers. That’s why we’re here in the first place. He has totally given us reign and power to do best practices in schools.”* Geographic location, community needs, funding parameters, and disparate nature of administrative guidance and supervision imposed an intricate set of demands on practice, beyond simply the standardized roles and responsibilities.

4.10. Role complexity

The complexity of SSW roles, time-intensive nature of certain responsibilities, alongside the gaps in national leadership and training create a multi-dimensional influence of practice complexity and barriers to practice clarity. Role complexity may affect practice ambiguity through unclear work demands, competing needs, and predominant role orientations. Kam discussed practice complexity, stating, *“We don’t have set guidelines of what we should be doing, so in that way, like what I don’t know, I don’t know.”* A likely byproduct of inadequate gaps in national leadership and training, reinforced by supervisory deficits, the result was unclear practice expectations and role ambiguity. Kweb stated, *“I would say my work is probably about 50% micro.”* Micci added: *“I really think in a micro way. I’m trying to train my brain otherwise.”* These concerns, among many others, led to concerning perspectives, with Kweb noting: *“I don’t think that anything that I’m doing is helping. I don’t feel like I’m making a big difference.”* This perspective may reflect the perceived inadequacies of one’s work engaged in micro practice although deep structural inequities persisted. Emery clarified these challenges:

It’s kind of difficult because nobody really knows what we do, and how we’re supposed to do it. It’s just mostly, you know, fix this broken student and help this family find some housing and some resources. Other than that, it’s pretty much we monitor and track attendance.

Role complexity and ambiguity were confounded by the scope of practice responsibilities. Practitioners highlighted their roles as supervisors, coordinators, onboarding experts, grant liaisons, organizers of professional development opportunities, and partaking in a variety of complex roles (Table 2). These roles and responsibilities may not comprise the full range of practice demands that SSWs engage in but

may offer a glimpse into practice complexity and resultant ambiguity. Specific roles and their relation to demographic and school factors were categorized in Table 2 for added clarity.

5. Discussion

Findings point to role complexity and ambiguous practice conditions with an intricate relationship between national guidance, training, and demands on practice that are often outside of the control of school social workers. Although we distinctly presented the themes of gaps in national leadership, gaps in educational preparation, and role complexity to ambiguity—SSWs illuminated the connections and inequities across these levels.

On the national level, the resulting gaps in national leadership, divergent models, practice and accreditation has an intricate relationship to educational preparation, with the challenges persisting through professional ambiguity. Practitioners highlighted these concerns in schools in the context of practice model indifference, lack of administrative buy-in to the model, while leadership sought control over roles in ways that supplanted national guidance.

On the state level, the gaps in educational preparation were underscored by practitioners. Interviews spoke to the insufficiency of preservice training, the generalized nature of educational preparation leading to vague and non-SSW specific options. These factors were amplified by inequities in professional development opportunities, lack of contextual relevance, limited quality in training opportunities, ultimately forcing SSWs into self-reliance for experiential learning and self-directed training. SSWs highlighted the limitations of continuing education, including disconnection between theory and practice, training deficits in areas that practitioners sought, and the limitations within the training they did receive (e.g., deficit-based; trauma-informed). These factors, to some extent, may be shaped by the overall ambiguity in state-level training (Mitchell et al., 2021; Mitchell & Knox, 2026).

In schools, the gaps in national leadership and educational preparation manifested in widespread role delineation, role complexity, time-intensive tasks, substantial role demands, response to crises, and location specific ramifications such as lack of direct supervisor support and varied administrative guidance. The complexity of SSW practice was presented by practitioner descriptions of varied roles and contextual influences. For example, school type (e.g., public; charter), practice level (e.g., macro; micro), school level (e.g., elementary; high), geographic location, work setting (e.g., remote; in-person), political influences, school board personnel variations, school resources, support (e.g., admin; interns), community-based components, demographic factors, practitioner identities, and working conditions (e.g., workload; case-load). Jarolmen & Bautista-Thomas (2023, p. 21) write about these variations exquisitely in their SSW practice guide. Practitioners are a product of their environment; thus, their roles are both a manifestation of professional guidance, educational preparation, training, and specific practice orientations (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022; Mumm & Bye, 2011; Sugrue, 2017; Tan & Frey, 2025). All of these domains are essential for us to learn more about. For example, if SSWs are active in environments with supportive administrators and supervisors, more research would be extremely useful to help understand what ideal support looks like, how practitioners are supported, and whether we can re-apply the lessons learned to other regions (Bluestone-Miller et al., 2016; Bye et al., 2009; Elswick et al., 2019; Stalneck, Tan, et al., 2022).

In addition to the complexity of roles, specific tasks were described as difficult and time-intensive. The scope of responsibilities intersected with the complexity of tasks, where role severity (e.g., crisis) further confounded practitioner abilities to engage in effective practice. It may be that the concerns of role severity are exacerbated by working conditions and within environments with limited support (Capp et al., 2021; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2025).

5.1. Implications

The practitioner-inspired findings underscore implications for professional guidance, training consistency, role clarity, and future research. On the professional level, the findings illuminated a distinction between national guidance that essentially frames one type of school social worker (i.e., generalized domains), and the host of variations that practitioners navigate (Mitchell & Knox, 2026). Given the complexity of these factors, it is unclear whether the depiction of a one-size-fits-all model of SSW is helpful given the nuance of state, district, school, and contextual variations. To be clear, the National Model 2.0 (Tan & SSWAA, 2025) does account for this complexity by: “allowing for the variation in the roles of school social workers across different regions and school districts” (Tan & Frey, 2025). Questions remain about how preconceived practice domains may potentially discourage role variation and overshadow contextual factors affecting SSW practice on a daily basis, including geographic, political, community, and school environments (Jarolmen & Bautista-Thomas, 2023).

Roles are further challenged by the practitioner identities and their overall ability to advocate and steer their roles in a direction of their choosing. Kwaya highlighted these concerns, asking how practitioners can effectively advocate against inequities while also keeping one’s job. This concern is especially pronounced for folks with identities that diverge from the dominant school ideology and normative expectations. For example, identifying as a progressive while working in a rural-republican school, or having a minoritized identity (e.g., Black; LGBTQ) while working in White, heteronormative school district. Further, what does it mean to demand one type of school social worker that is potentially divergent from administrative guidance and supervisory suggestions? Professional ambiguity is further evidenced by the handful of states that emphasize special education as a prominent role of SSWs, yet special education is not listed in the practice model (Tan & SSWAA, 2025), although it is briefly mentioned in the national standards (NASW, 2025).

Practitioners spoke about the dimensions of role ambiguity, however it is unclear the extent to which these concerns were shaped by factors that exist *outside* of schools such as professional and training ambiguity. The scope of roles, responsibilities, and task-severity may represent a displacement of the structural inequities across the *profession* and within *training* that manifest as role ambiguity (Mitchell & Knox, 2026). What this means for SSW is that role ambiguity may be both a product of both *professional ambiguity* and *training ambiguity* but may also be distinct on its own accord as reflected in *role ambiguity*. Putting this into the context of practice aimed at targeting inequities means that substantial role variation and practice vulnerability may occur as the structural inequities persist (Mitchell & Knox, 2026). Additionally, practice aimed at targeting inequities may benefit from regional specificity, as well as a cohesiveness across state training standards that builds and sustains training in this capacity.

5.2. Recommendations

To build on SSW efforts to target inequities, intersecting attention is needed toward professional guidance, state training, and role delineation. Until these parameters are aligned, it may be difficult for SSWs to work in environments that are not only reactive to inequities, but, at times, actively harmful. As we call for abolitionist SSW practice, there is an interconnected pursuit needed with structural attention to profession, training, and role ambiguity (Mitchell & Folk-Nagua, 2025; Mitchell & Knox, 2026).

Inequity targeting practice may also look different in different regions. Therefore, more information is needed to understand advocacy in varied practice contexts, including different types of practices (attendance; discipline), levels of practice, location of practice, school type, and environments with varied levels of administrative, supervision, and school mental health support. As practitioners work to maintain job

security, this also means they are learning to advocate in context based on the geographic, political, and local variations (Mitchell, 2025). This means, we must flip the paradigm on what effective practice and national guidance looks like, to value practitioner-led initiatives, and orient toward the locality of practice differences. In this study we focused on US-based SSWs, however it may be useful to consider similar structural approaches in international regions to examine the connections of national leadership, training variations, and school-based practice. With this in mind, other regions may have developed more unified approaches from which the US could learn. It may also be useful to develop localized models of SSW effectiveness, to document roles, realign toward inequity-targeting practice.

In addition, more research is needed to deduce how roles align and diverge with national guidance and state certification standards. For example, just because a given practice domain is not emphasized in the model does not negate the existence of the role in schools. Practitioners in this study highlighted their special education roles (Table 2), yet this is not an area of practice currently emphasized in the national model. Efforts are needed to align professional guidance, state training, and SSW roles; however, it is also important to note that the rigid enforcement of these parameters that supplants or dismisses the current practices in schools may be harmful. Equally important to emphasizing a research-based model of SSW is unearthing the wisdom of practitioners, so that inequity-targeting practice can be built through research-to-practice partnerships and advocacy in context (Mitchell & Folk-Nagua, 2025). This also means national guidance, and state training, must work in unison with local districts, schools, and administrative oversight in order to build a cohesive and all-encompassing approach to SSW, and eventually useful for targeting inequities (Mitchell & Knox, 2026).

5.3. Limitations

A limitation of this study is the distinction between the primary research questions, semi-structured interview questions, and the framing of this paper. First, this study was built upon emergent data taken from the main qualitative study exploring inequity-targeting practice in school social work. The main study (Mitchell et al., 2026) aimed to understand the degree to which SSWs are positioned in ways capable of targeting and disrupting inequities. We did not ask about the dimensions of ambiguity—which future research should examine—but the framing of inequity and ambiguity evolved from emergent data presented by practitioners. Given this, there may be limitations in our analysis. One gap in the data may relate to national leadership and guidance given that no questions directly asked about this, although it came up in naturally. An additional gap is that we did not ask about training ambiguity, however we did ask about training in the context of practitioner’s ability to address inequities, with future research needed to directly assess training ambiguity. A third gap may relate to role ambiguity, although this was not directly asked, approximately half of the interview focused on questions about roles and responsibilities. Still, it is important to denote the lack of explicit questions surrounding ambiguity and that these themes emerged thematically. As practitioners highlighted the abundance of inequities, it became clear that neither professional guidance (i.e., professional ambiguity), educational preparation (i.e., training ambiguity), nor role clarity were cohesively aligned in a way that supports SSWs toward addressing inequities. This is not to say that practitioners did not try—some were even successful—but our framing aims to relocate attention to these multi-dimensional ramifications that shape the SSW role, many which happen *prior* to school-based employment (Mitchell & Knox, 2026). Lastly, the US context, lack of regional specificity used to protect participants, and small sample size underscores interpretative caution regarding the limited, but robust sample.

6. Conclusion

School social workers in this study spoke to their ability (or lack thereof) to address inequities amid complex practice and contextual factors. Role challenges were connected to the structural gaps in national leadership that may relate to *professional ambiguity*. Roles were also connected to the gaps in educational preparation shaped practice due to inadequate preparation, professional development inadequacies, and self-driven, experiential training. Practitioners highlighted the demands on practice, role complexity, and deep intertwined aspects of ambiguity that complicated efforts toward inequity-driven practice. Practitioners discussed the lack of role clarity, competing work demands, extreme work conditions, time-intensive roles, conflicting supervisory advice, among many other factors. Practice variations were distinctly shaped by school type, practice level, geographic location, political factors, practitioner identities, resources, and funding. Beyond these challenges that intersect and evolve, practitioners were courageous stewards of advocacy striving to learn more, improve practice, and effectively support the communities, families, schools, and youth that they serve. Yet, practitioner abilities to promote inequity-targeting practice was constantly disrupted by the culmination of national, training, and role complexity. In the future, more can be learned to build support, improvements, and consistency needed to improve outcomes and re-align SSW to inequity targeting practice.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured interview questions

Awareness, role and training

1. To what extent are you aware of educational inequities in your school or district?

If so, please share any experiences or recognition of inequities in your school.

2. What is your awareness about how your role is funding?
3. What state/federal policies do you most work with and what challenges do you face in supporting youth equitably?
4. To what extent do you feel your training has supported you in your ability to attend to and address inequities in the school?
5. What school-based challenges and orientations potentially reinforce inequities or rely on oppressive systems (e.g., deficit-based; criminalizing; pathologizing; exclusionary; culturally oppressive).
6. What community-based challenges infiltrate into the school?

7. What neoliberal challenges (corporate; political; capitalism) do you notice interacting with oppressive frameworks in schools?

Action

8. In what ways do you engage in macro practice (e.g., policy; advocacy)?
9. In what ways do you practice on the mezzo level (e.g., school boards)?
10. In what ways is your practice oriented around addressing educational inequities?
 - A. Exclusionary Discipline (e.g., suspensions, expulsions, arrests, referrals)
 - B. Mental health (e.g., diagnoses, pathology, medicalized, psychotropic)
 - C. Special Education (e.g., assessment; referrals)
 - D. School climate (e.g., relationships; prevention; collaboration)
11. In what ways are you engaged in holistic, healing, or youth centered advocacy?
12. In what ways do you center families in your work?
13. How do you engage in prevention?
14. In what ways do you use data?

Moving forward

15. What is needed moving forward to make changes toward address inequities (e.g., training; role shifts; school board; administrative support; families; communities)?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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