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ORIGINAL PAPER

What is Essential in School Social Work Practice

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Abstract
As the need for school social work (SSW) practitioners increases, more research may be useful to understand how roles and practices are shaped and how this differs from their perceptions of essential practice. To understand the roles and functions of SSW, a survey of nine critical components was developed through an evaluation of national association's standards that offer guidance for SSW practice. Survey respondents ($N = 318$) consisted mostly of SSW practitioners (85%), evaluated nine critical components: advocacy, building capacity, home-school liaison, multi-tier system of support, navigating school settings, professional values, service delivery, social work theory, use of data and evidence, and suggested the addition of new essential components. The results focus on which practices are deemed essential and the frequency of performing these tasks. We conclude with implications of practice essentiality and frequency discussed across the nine critical component domains, offering suggestions for future research, education, training, and professional development of SSW practitioners.

Keywords School social work · Roles · Essential practice · Equity · Justice

Introduction

The need for school social work (SSW) practitioners has grown exponentially in recent years. In light of widespread societal challenges and the unique school-based needs of staff and students, more research is needed to better understand the role and functionality of SSW practitioners. Society and schools continue to be shaped by an array of challenges, including, at a minimum, influences of the pandemic (Phillippo et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2022), academic and discipline-related racial inequities (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022; Mitchell, 2021), school climate concerns (Cuellar & Mason, 2019), mental health needs (Kelly et al., 2023), and trauma (Joseph et al., 2020; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). Although SSW practitioners may be highly qualified to help alleviate inequities and promote school-wide support, less is known about the impediments to role and practice obligations (Phillippo et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2019) with even less research on the frequency of equitable practices (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020; Richard et al., 2019).

SSW Practice and Calls for Justice-Oriented Re-alignment

At the same time, the professional praxis of SSW practitioners is confounded by an array of factors that vary by state, district, and school level factors, including practice orientation and role variations (Kelly et al., 2023), varied and inconsistent state certification standards (Mitchell et al., 2021), varied education and training experiences (Thompson et al., 2019), roles affected by nuanced perceptions of administrators and school leaders (Cuellar & Mason, 2019; Stalnecker et al., 2022), role ambiguity and competition with other school mental health professionals (Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020), and fluctuating demands such as crisis intervention and response (Daftary et al., 2021; Phillippo et al., 2022).

In recent years, there has been increasing scholarly attention and calls to re-align SSW with justice and equity (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020). For example, a rising focus on addressing school-based inequities is notable in the alignment toward structural, macro, and ecological awareness (Crutchfield et al., 2020), critical orientation (Meza, 2020), trauma-informed (Joseph et al., 2020), anti-racist (Crutchfield &

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Eugene, 2022), and restorative justice (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). Unfortunately, little is known about the variations of SSW practitioners' roles and practice orientation(s) across states, districts, and schools.

Professional Standards of School Social Work

Multiple professional organizations offer guidance on the scope of SSW practice. Authors (In Press) recently investigated the overlap and distinction across professional models and national guidelines by analyzing (a) The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Standards for School Social Work Services, (b) The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) National Evaluation Framework (SSWAA, 2013), and (c) SSWAA National Practice Model (Frey et al., 2012). *Critical components* were defined as words or phrases that describe (1) What school social workers need to know, and (2) What school social workers specifically do. Their findings reveal that amid all three overlapping documents guiding SSW practice, only 15% of the content was common across all three documents, and an additional 30% was found across two documents. This means over half of the critical components were unique to a single SSW guiding document. These findings point to inconsistent professional guidance, disconnections from orientations of justice and equity, and room for improvement toward professional unity. In addition, and absent from this analysis are the American Council for School Social Work Association (ACSSW) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), both of which pose organizational influence on SSW practice—the former providing resources and guidance for SSW practitioners and the latter providing general social work resources and accreditation standards. That said, there is important work underway to update the most recent national practice models from SSWAA and NASW that may present an opportunity to build professional unity and provide crucial updates to support SSW practice.

Professional Standards of School Mental Health

School mental health professionals (SMHP)—who work in close proximity with SSW practitioners—are also guided by an array of diverging professional practice standards and guidelines. Kelly et al. (2023) provide a recent overview by analyzing SMHPs (e.g., psychology, counseling, nursing, and social work). Their findings reveal substantial overlap in roles and practice orientation, yet little cohesive language to build collaborative networks of support on a systemic or justice-oriented level. These challenges may exacerbate competition between SMHPs, as professionals work to develop viability and sustainability in schools, perhaps at the expense of other disciplines (Kelly et al., 2023). Competition between SHMPs and collaboration challenges are confounded by systemic underfunding and competing professional domains and lobbyists (Lyon & Bruns, 2019). As scholars continue to call for collaborative and interdisciplinary models of SMH (Weist et al., 2012), multi-level barriers impede efforts toward systemic school-wide support. For example, macro barriers include state policies that influence practice (Kelly et al., 2023), varied and inconsistent state certification standards of SMHPs that are more pronounced for SSW (Mitchell et al., 2021), and education and training variations (Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020). Moving inside the school, SSW is guided by roles, responsibilities, and ambiguity that fluctuate and are shaped by many state, district, and school-level factors.

School Social Work: Roles, Responsibilities, and Role Ambiguity

School leaders, including educational administrators, may impact SSW practice through hiring decisions of SMHPs, and by shaping roles and responsibilities based on preconditioned perceptions of practice (Cuellar & Mason, 2019; Elswick et al., 2019; Frey et al., 2022; Stalnecker et al., 2022). The context (e.g., geographical; political) of SSW practice influences role orientation and professional ambiguity due to, for example, the demands of crisis intervention (Daftary et al., 2021; Phillippo et al., 2022), lack of leadership orientation (Elswick et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2022), school demographics and orientations to racial equity (Villarreal Sosa & Martin, 2021), and employment numbers and structural orientations (Crutchfield et al., 2020). Our overall understanding of SSW role orientation is also informed by seminal scholarly research.

Over the last two decades, a coalition of scholars has been active in understanding how roles and practice orientation are operationalized, and crucial research has built upon some of the foundational research in the field (Allen-Meares, 1994; 1977; Costin, 1969; 1975). Kelly et al. (2010) surveyed ($n = 1{,}639$) SSW practitioners, findings which underscored the profession's engagement with mental health service delivery and predominance of micro-level practice (i.e., clinical casework). The authors state:

> The findings from this study make clear that school social workers are the main providers of mental health services for some of the most challenging child and family mental health issues in the communities they serve, and they are coping with high caseloads and administrative paperwork demands as well (Kelly et al., 2010, p. 138).

Building on this work, Kelly et al. (2015a) surveyed 3,769 school social workers, which remains the largest sample of SSW practitioners ever researched. In assessing the alignment between the SSWAA National Practice

Model (Frey et al., 2012) and role delineation, they found that SSW practitioners utilized evidenced-based practices to a moderate degree (Kelly et al., 2015a). Concerning practice across tiered prevention models, the authors note that SSW practitioners "spend less time implementing primary prevention strategies than they were 6 years ago" (Kelly et al., 2015b). The results show a disproportionate reliance on secondary and tertiary support (65.4%) versus primary prevention (16.4%). The authors conclude by noting the alignment with previous SSW research, evidenced by the predominance of white women in practice (i.e., characteristics) and the utilization patterns of practice (Kelly et al., 2015a). Several recent studies offer a point of balance to the seminal studies of Kelly and colleagues.

A scoping review by Ding and colleagues (2023) analyzed 18 international outcomes studies over the last two decades, finding that 80% of the studies focused on tier 1 or 2. The discrepancy between other research (Kelly et al., 2010, 2015a) may be due to the researchers grouping work tasks in tiers (i.e., 1 and 2), focusing only on quantitative research, as well as potential publication bias; the authors noted: "while school social workers often provide services at the individual level, they frequently work across systems and intervene at meso- and exo-systems levels to attain positive improvements for individual students and families." A recent study by Ball and Skrzypek (2020) found that SSW practitioners often desire to uphold equitable and justice-oriented frameworks of practice. Yet, their ability to do so may be hampered by competing factors and dislocation from macro and justice-oriented practices (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022).

While we have gleaned a valuable understanding of the role and practice of SSW practitioners, less is known about how their roles relate to their desired scope of practice. For example, the perspectives of SSW practitioners have been under-examined as they relate to professional guidance models and overall role orientation, and even less is known about SSW practitioners' goals, aspirations, values, beliefs, and overall perspectives related to practice and the frequency of service delivery.

Current Study

The current study seeks to explore further (a) Which *critical components* are seen as essential by SSW practitioners, (b) How often SSW practitioners perform these *critical components*, and (c) The gap between what is perceived as essential versus what is performed. Based upon SSW practice components outlined by national organizations, we examine the role(s), task performance frequency, and the perceptions of essential practice—explicated in further detail in the method.

Methods

This study focuses on the roles and functions of SSW as laid out by current prominent national documents of SSW, including the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)'s National Practice Model Brochure, the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Standards for School Social Work Services, and the SSWAA National Evaluation Framework. Researchers utilized a survey to further explore findings from a previous content analysis of the above three documents (Authors, In Press), of which the process is outlined below. A university-approved IRB was granted to disseminate the survey to SSW practitioners, and consent was gathered as part of the survey process.

Survey of Critical Components

The survey tool was developed systematically by using findings from a previous content analysis of the three prominent documents outlined above. Survey questions modulated the findings of the content analysis (Authors, In Press) which identified 87 distinct *critical components* of SSW practice embedded within one or more of the three documents. To develop the *domains* of SSW practice, researchers individually engaged in an open-coding process to identify broad themes of *critical components* and then used a collaborative and iterative process to ensure inter-rater reliability and clear consensus of thematic definitions for each of the *critical components* and *domains*. Ultimately, the research team operationalized nine thematic *domains* of SSW practice per the 87 *critical components* found within the three principal documents. These nine *domains* became the significant sections of the survey, with the *critical components* embedded within their relevant survey section. (See Table 2 for *critical components* and *domains*).

Participants were provided a definition of the broader domain and each *critical component* classified under that domain, described in each section below. This national survey was sent to school social workers across the U.S. Respondents were asked to review the domain definition, then classify each critical component by importance, "How important is [the component] within school social work practice?" by selecting a rating on a 5-point scale from *Not Important at All* to *Essential*. Participants were also asked to rate their own frequency of implementing the *critical component* in practice ("How often do you perform this component?") using a 5-point scale from *Never* to *Frequently*. Finally, at the end of each *domain* section, respondents were asked to identify and submit what they

considered to be missing *critical components* from each domain. Due to the survey length, respondents were randomly assigned three of the nine domains in an attempt to ensure participants would fully complete the survey with intentional consideration.

Results

Participants

The link to the survey was disseminated electronically to members of the School Social Work Association of America, The National Association of Social Workers School Social Work Specialty Practice Section, and the American Council on School Social Work. The survey link remained open from October 2021 to January 2022 to collect responses. Of the 318 respondents to the survey, 89.9% reported they were school social workers, leaving a total of 286 responses in this study's analysis. The SSW respondents were likely to work in rural areas (25.2%), large suburbs (25.2%), small or medium cities (20.1%), or large cities (20.6%). When asked about their experience in the SSW field, respondents reported they had 6–10 years of experience (24.5%), followed by others who had more than 20 years of experience (21.7%). Finally, when reporting about student demographics, almost half (44.8%) reported that over 76% of the students they served received free and reduced lunch. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Table 1 Participant demographics

	N	%
Role		
School Social Worker	286	85.5
School Mental Health Provider*	15	4.7
Other*	17	9.7
Urbanicity (SSW; N = 286)		
Large city	59	20.6
Small or medium city	60	20.1
Larger suburb (> 10,000 residents)	72	25.2
Small suburb (< 10,000 residents)	22	7.7
Rural area	72	25.2
Years of experience (SSW; N = 286)		
Less than 3	44	15.4
3–5	46	16.1
6–10	70	24.5
11–15	34	11.9
16—20	30	10.4
More than 20	62	21.7
% Free and reduced lunch (SSW; N = 286)		
Less than 10%	16	5.6
10–20%	24	8.4
21–40%	37	12.9
41–50%	33	11.5
51–75%	42	14.7
76–100%	128	44.8
No Answer	6	2.1

*Not included in the analysis

Critical Components

Advocacy Critical Components

The *domain* 'advocacy' was defined for participants as 'addressing and promoting policy, procedures, and services'. Of the 11 *components* in this section, five were identified by more than 60% of respondents as essential. These included: promoting social justice (84.5%), promoting school safety (75.18%), promoting a psycho-social environment (68.61%), engaging in systems-level change (61.31%), and challenging structural barriers (60.58%). Only one *component*, advocating for students and families (64.93%), was reported as being performed frequently by SSW practitioners. Table 2 provides a full view of the SSW practitioners' perceived view of all the 'advocacy' *components*.

Building Capacity Critical Components

The *domain* 'building capacity' was defined for participants as 'empowerment practices with families, schools, and communities we serve—as well as to the SSW profession and SSW practitioners themselves'. Of the nine *components* in this section, three were identified by more than 60% of respondents as essential. These were establishing professional relationships with school personnel (86.99%), educating school personnel on the impact of trauma (73.29%), and engaging in professional education and supervision (69.18%). Only one *component*, establishing professional relationships with school personnel (77.93%), was reported as being performed frequently by participants. Table 2 provides a full view of the SSW practitioner's perceived view of all the 'building capacity' *components*.

Home-School Liaison Critical Components

The *domain* 'home-school liaison' was defined for participants as 'direct interactions that foster connection'. Of the five *components* in this section, two were identified by more than 60% of respondents as essential: working collaboratively with school administration, school personnel, students, family members, and community professionals (78.63%) and knowing the scope of resources within the school and community (71.97%). Regarding the frequency of performing these tasks, only working collaboratively

Table 2 Importance and frequency of critical components by domain

Domains and components	Essential (%)	Frequency Performed (%)
Domain 1: Advocacy 'critical components'		
Promote social justice	85.40	20.59
Promote school safety	75.18	45.19
Promote school quality	68.61	25.55
Promote a psycho-social environment within the school	66.91	37.78
Engage in systems-level change	61.31	19.40
Challenge structural barriers	60.58	20.59
Challenge norms and practices that interfere with school success	56.93	25.93
Challenge barriers to learning	55.15	34.56
Advocate for students and their families	53.28	64.93
Advocate for programs/policies that respect diversity/dignity of all	51.09	19.85
Address school processes and/or policies that affect student outcomes	50.74	16.91
Domain 2: Building capacity 'critical components'		
Establish professional relationships with school personnel	86.99	77.93
Educate school personnel on the impact of trauma	73.29	23.45
Engage in professional education, supervision, continuing ed programs, peer consultation, etc	69.18	41.38
Mobilize resources to maximize academic and behavioral success	55.86	31.25
Establish partnerships with community agencies/providers	54.11	29.66
Provide training to enhance other's practices, skills & abilities (e.g., school personnel, families, community professionals)	40.82	20.00
Contribute to the development of the school social work profession	39.73	17.24
Assume leadership roles	27.40	22.22
Identify families to be school leaders	21.92	6.94
Domain 3: Home-school liaison 'critical components'		
Work collaboratively with school administration, school personnel, students, family members, community professionals	78.63	65.91
Know the scope of resources within the school and community	71.97	46.97
Develop home-school-community partnerships	58.33	36.36
Facilitate engagement between student-family-school-community	57.58	35.61
Provide systems coordination	42.42	23.48
Domain 4: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) 'Critical Components'		
Apply interventions within the multi-tier framework	56.62	34.75
Perform roles and responsibilities across a multi-tier framework	52.24	38.03
Monitor MTSS interventions	50.40	18.31
Conduct multi-tiered school needs assessment	47.69	20.42
Domain 5: Navigate school settings 'critical components'		
Support students to improve their social, emotional, and behavioral competencies	83.09	75.37
Increase students' feelings of safety within the school setting	79.41	59.40
Understand unique aspects of social work within a school setting	72.59	59.09
Facilitate social-emotional learning in a school environment	70.59	53.73
Ensure students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classrooms	69.85	52.24
Support academic outcomes	45.59	38.81
Understand and carry out educational policy (district, local, state, federal)	36.30	24.63
Use appropriate technology for services	36.30	36.84
Align data collection/assessments with LEA goals	32.59	20.45
Understand historical and current perspectives on public school education, including educational reform and legislation	25.74	12.69
Domain 6: Professional values 'critical components'		
Demonstrate effective communication skills	100.00	68.84

Table 2 (continued)

Domains and components	Essential (%)	Frequency Performed (%)
Provide services in a way that demonstrates respect for diverse populations	100.00	60.1
Maintain confidentiality	99.20	74.6
Comply with local, state, and federal mandates	99.15	68.1
Adhere to professional ethics (from NASW, SSWAA, etc.)	98.29	82.6
Exhibit self-awareness	97.37	67.1
Manage workload effectively	97.22	39.8
Actively balance mandate as a school employee and as a social worker	94.74	58.7
Maintain timely, accurate records	94.29	51.4
Adhere to standards and practice requirements set by the state education agency	93.20	61.3
Utilize ethical decision-making model(s) and theories	92.38	58.7
Know and use current state statutes on school social work practice	89.36	36.9
Clarify SSW role within school, district, LEA	89.13	30.3
Develop specialized knowledge of client groups served	88.64	37.5
Domain 7: Service delivery 'critical components'		
Report suspected child abuse and/or neglect	97.56	40.6
Work with families	95.28	50.3
Work with students	94.53	78.9
Conduct suicide risk assessments	93.16	35.3
Contribute to and implement practices to create a safe and healthy school environment	93.02	41.6
Use a variety of approaches and techniques for service delivery	92.38	56.0
Provide crisis intervention services	92.31	57.1
Provide interdisciplinary professional consultation and collaboration	90.22	42.1
Implement services and programs that promote social-emotional competencies	89.25	36.3
Promote prevention efforts	88.89	24.2
Provide mental health services	87.16	54.8
Promote school climate and culture	84.88	28.5
Identify resources that meet school needs	79.76	29.3
Honor and celebrate cultures within a school	78.21	12.2
Create services that address gaps	73.81	23.0
Provide behavioral management services	72.15	39.1
Use functional assessments	54.32	18.9
Domain 8: Social work theory 'critical components'		
Promote a continuum of services	66.21	44.3
Address ecologies (e.g., home, school, community) relevant to the topic	58.3	41.5
Utilize social work theories for service delivery	56.9	44.3
Recognize historical, political, social, economic, and cultural factors that influence educational outcomes	52.0	26.5
Domain 9: Use of data and evidence 'critical components'		
Assess/identify individual needs	84.2	68.2
Use evidence-informed approaches	65.4	46.1
Monitor the progress of services and/or interventions	60.1	36.3
Know and use eligibility requirements for services	59.5	43.7
Interpret data	51.8	36.6
Collect data	50.3	42.7
Assess/identify school-wide needs	48.4	20.6
Utilize research literature to inform practice	44.2	22.3
Assess/identify classroom needs	43.6	19.8
Evaluate effectiveness of services and/or programs	42.3	17.9

Table 2 (continued)

Domains and components	Essential (%)	Frequency Performed (%)
Engage in systematic assessment	40.6	16.0
Assess/identify extent of family engagement	39.2	21.7
Assist school staff with implementation fidelity	37.4	14.6

with school administration, school personnel, students, family members, and community professionals (65.91%) was reported as being performed frequently by SSWs. Table 2 provides a full view of the SSW practitioner's perceived view of all the 'home-school liaison' *components*.

MTSS Critical Components

The *domain* 'MTSS' was defined for participants as 'knowledge, skills, and practices associated with the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS)'. Of the four *components* in this section, none were identified by more than 60% of respondents as being essential. The highest-rated essential items include: applying interventions with an MTSS framework (56.62%), performing roles and responsibilities across an MTSS framework (52.24%), and monitoring MTSS interventions (50.40%). None of the *components* in this *domain* were reported to be performed at greater than 40% frequency by SSW practitioners. Table 2 provides a full view of the SSW practitioner's perceived view of all the MTSS *components*.

Navigate School Settings Critical Components

The *domain* 'navigating school settings' was defined for participants as 'knowledge of educational practices within a school-based environment'. Of the ten *components* in this section, five were identified by more than 60% of respondents as essential. These include: supporting students to improve their social, emotional, and behavioral competencies (83.09%), increasing students' feelings of safety within the school setting (79.41%), understanding unique aspects of social work within a school setting (72.59%), facilitating social-emotional learning in a school environment (70.59%), and ensuring students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classrooms (69.85%). Only one *component*—supporting students to improve their social, emotional, and behavioral competencies (65.91%)—was reported as being performed frequently by SSWs (75.37%). Table 2 provides a full view of the SSW practitioners' perceived view of all the navigating school settings *components*.

Professional Values Critical Components

The *domain* 'professional values' was defined for participants as 'adhering to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics and applicable mandates at the district, state, or federal level'. Of the 14 *components* in this section, all were identified by more than 85% of respondents as being essential, with 11 above 90%. These were: demonstrating effective communication skills (100%), providing services in a way that demonstrates respect for diverse populations (100%), maintaining confidentiality (99.20%), complying with local, state, and federal mandates (99.15%), adhering to professional ethics (98.29%), exhibiting self-awareness (97.37%), managing workload effectively (97.22%), actively balancing mandates as a school employee and as a social worker (94.74%), maintaining accurate records (94.29%), adhering to standards and practice requirements set by the state education agency (93.20%), and utilizing ethical decision-making model(s) and theories (92.38%). Frequency of performing these tasks was reported as follows: adhering to professional ethics (82.61%), maintaining confidentiality (74.64%), demonstrating effective communication skills (68.84%), complying with local, state, and federal mandates (68.12%), exhibiting self-awareness (67.15%), adhering to standards and practice requirements (61.31%), and providing services in a way that demonstrates respect for diverse populations (60.14%). Table 2 provides a full view of the SSW practitioner's perceived view of the navigating school setting *components*.

Service Delivery Components

The 'service delivery' *domain* was defined for participants as 'approaches and tasks in which SSWs work directly with students, families, school personnel, and communities within the school context'. Of the 17 components in this section, 16 were identified by more than 60% of respondents as essential and of those. Eight of these were above 90%. These were: reporting suspected child abuse and neglect (97.56%), working with families (95.28%), working with students (94.53%), conducting suicide risk assessments (93.16%), contributing to and implementing practices to create a safe and healthy school environment (93.02%), using a variety of approaches and techniques for service delivery (92.38%), providing

crisis interventions services (92.31%) and providing interdisciplinary professional consultation and collaboration (90.22%). Only one *component*—working with students (78.95%)—was reported as being done frequently by more than 60% of participants. Table 2 provides a full view of the SSW practitioner's perceived view of all the service delivery *components*.

Social Work Theory Components

The 'social work theory' *domain* was defined for participants as 'contextual factors that influence barriers and/or resiliency of students, the school, or the community'. Of the four *components* in this section, promoting a continuum of services (66.21%) was identified by more than 60% of respondents as essential. None of this domain's *components were* reported as being done frequently. Table 2 provides a full view of the SSW practitioner's perceived view of all the social work theory *components*.

Use of Data and Evidence Components

The 'use of data and evidence' *domain* was defined for participants as 'using scientific research throughout practices, assessing and monitoring needs, and service effectiveness'. Of the 13 components in this section, three were identified by more than 60% of respondents as essential. These included: assessing and identifying individual needs (84.21%), using evidence-informed approaches (65.41%), and monitoring the progress of services and interventions (60.15%). Only assessing and identifying individual needs (68.22%) was reported as being performed frequently by SSWs. Table 2 provides a full view of the SSW practitioner's perceived view of all the use of data and evidence *components*.

New Essential Components

In addition to the 'critical components' derived from the three principle guiding documents, participants were prompted to identify areas of SSW practice that they believed to be missing from the list of *critical components* provided for the *domain*. Overall, participants identified 12 *areas of practice (skills and/or knowledge)* they believed should be included in existing *domains:* building capacity (3), service delivery (3), home-school liaison (1), MTSS (1), navigating school settings (1), professional values (1), social work theory (1) and use of data and evidence (1). The majority of these 12 newly identified components highlighted mental health services and trauma-informed practices.

Additionally, the open-ended prompts led to participants identifying three broad areas of SSW practice (i.e., *domains)* they considered to be missing from the provided lists. These domains included 19 specific *components* that were not included within the 87 original *critical components*, as the concepts did not exist within the content of the 3 documents reviewed via a content analysis (Authors, In Press). The three new domains included: professional advocacy (including 8 new *components*), justice-oriented practices (including 5 new *components*), and special education (including 6 new *components*). For professional advocacy, participants recommended components from clarifying roles to advocating for the profession. Within justice-oriented practices, components included, for example, the use of anti-racist approaches and even understanding one's own biases. Finally, special education had several new items about special education and IEP teams. See Table 3 for a complete list of the new *components* identified by participants across existing and new *domains*.

Discussion

In this study, we surveyed SSW practitioners to understand their roles and practices in the context of national organizational guidance, including the frequency of practices and perceptions of essential practice. We delineated our findings amid *domains* of *critical components*—as articulated by professional organizational guidance. In other words, all practice items surveyed were essential components of practice as dictated by national organizations' existing models and frameworks for practice. By juxtaposing both the frequency of practice and the values of essential practice, we can gain a better understanding of how roles are operationalized, what practice challenges exist, and how to strategize on mechanisms of reform. In this discussion, we examine the major findings in the context of SSW literature, including (a) Roles frequently and infrequently performed, (b) Roles deemed essential and inessential, (c) Roles deemed essential and frequently performed, and (d) Roles deemed inessential and infrequently performed.

Roles Frequently Performed

The domain of professional values (ethics) represented 58% of the most frequently performed tasks. The most frequently performed tasks (e.g., frequently performed *critical components*) from *domains* other than 'professional values' included: working with students (78.95%), establishing professional relationships with school personnel (77.93%), supporting students to improve their social, emotional, and behavioral competencies (75.37%), assess/identify individual needs (68.22%), and work collaboratively with school administration, school personnel, students, family members, community professionals (65.91%).

Table 3 Missing Components

Domain	Essential component
Existing domains & new components	
Build capacity	Educate parents and families about resources
	Build/develop support teams
	Educate school personnel on risk/protective factors, inclusivity, and mental health
Liaison	Work with professionals from relevant systems (ie parole officer, hospital discharge, foster care, etc.)
MTSS	Develop (expand, build) MTSS systems
School settings	Understand mental health specifically related to educational outcomes
Professional values	Seek out training and professional development opportunities to adhere to SSW best practice recommendations
Service delivery	Application/use of trauma-informed approaches
	Develop relationships—with students, colleagues, families, etc
	Develop and implement social emotional learning curriculum
SSW theory	Knowledge of trauma-informed approach(es)
Use data	Use data to find and recognize potential risk factors (i.e. attendance)
New domains & new components	
Professional advocacy	Advocate for and set boundaries related to professional roles/responsibilities
	Self-advocacy about own role, boundaries
	Advocacy about the importance of SSW profession
	Advocate for / provide education about the unique roles and positions that exist for school-based social workers
	Communicate about capabilities of SSW profession
	Advocate for policies/legislation about the SSW profession
	Support SSWs being supervised by other (licensed/certified) SSWs
	Join SSW professional organizations for SSW unity and cohesion
Justice oriented practices	Work towards closing achievement gaps
	Understand and reflect about personal identity (biases, etc.)
	Use of cultural humility
	Use of anti-racist approaches and promoting racial equity
	Use of inclusive practices
Special education	Participate as member of IEP team
	Provide direct services via IEP
	Support and participate in IEP evaluation/case study/assessment and eligibility
	Educate parents/guardians about SpEd procedural rights and safeguards
	Recognize and diminish disproportionality (re: identification)
	Know how to write and use equitable and inclusive FBAs and BIPs

Regarding roles and responsibilities frequently performed by SSW practitioners, we are pleased to see the high delineation of professional values and ethics. However, it is interesting that the high frequency within these categories represents a disproportionate amount of *values* and *ethics* rather than components of *actual* practice. In some ways, our findings are congruent with previous literature. For example, the high frequency of support for students to improve their social, emotional, and behavioral competencies (75.37%) and direct work with students (77.93%) appears to reiterate previous findings (Kelly et al., 2015a). Consistent with calls from scholars for enhanced relationships and collaboration (Brake & Kelly, 2019), the high frequency of establishing professional relationships with school personnel (82.61%) and working collaboratively with school administration, school personnel, students, family members, community professionals (61.31%) are positive findings. More research could explore collaboration and relationship promotion strategies to help inform pre-service SSW practitioners and practitioners early in their careers (Cox et al., 2022).

Our findings also converge with previous research. For example, Kelly et al. (2010) demonstrated that SSWs spend most of their time providing mental health services, whereas our findings documented that 87.16% deem these practices essential; however, only 54.89% performed these roles frequently. It is unclear whether the low performance frequency

is indicative of a problem. Given the wide range of responsibilities and varied working conditions, more research is needed to understand (a) If there is an unmet student need, (b) What roles and practices dislocate SSW practitioners from their ability to provide mental health services, and (c) Research to understand the quality of these services delivered from multiple perspectives such as educators, families, students, and SMHPs.

Roles Infrequently Performed

The infrequency of certain roles being performed may present cause for concern. Notably, low-performance frequency *components* include engaging in systems-level change (19.40%), advocating for programs/policies that respect the diversity/dignity of all (19.85%), and addressing school processes and policies that affect student outcomes (16.91%). Although the underperformance of certain tasks may pose cause for concern, it is also an important finding that can be leveraged to inform research and bridge research-to-practice divides. Previous research (Kelly et al., 2015b) documented SSW practitioners' lack of primary prevention efforts. In this study, the frequency reported by participants regarding *components across the MTSS domain was less* than 38% (see Table 2). Not only were all components of MTSS scored low on performance frequency, but they also scored low on essentiality. Given the presence of MTSS utilization in schools, more research is needed to understand roles, responsibilities, and SSW practitioner perceptions of MTSS, as well as whether performance frequency within MTSS garners room for improvement. Additional concerns about role infrequency include low levels of systems-level change (19.40%). Research is needed to understand whether low levels of systems-level engagement are driven by a lack of education or training orientation to systems-level change or potential barriers related to role or school factors.

Roles Essentiality

The novelty of this study includes the assessment of the role frequency of SSW practitioners, as well as the perceptions of role essentiality. As scholarly calls for justice-oriented practice increase (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020; Mitchell, 2021) and the SSWAA National Model 2.0 recognizes as a key framing element (Tan & SSWAA, 2024), it is comforting to see the congruence between these calls and SSW practitioners' desires for social justice-oriented practice (85.40%). Unfortunately, the relationship between roles deemed highly essential and the frequency of these practices was not always positively correlated. For example, understanding historical and current perspectives of public school education, including educational reform and legislation, was rated low on essentiality (25.74%) and performance frequency (12.69%). The extent to which ratings of low essentiality affected performance frequency is unclear. Additionally, it may be that certain tasks are scored low on essentiality and performance frequency due to limitations of preservice education, training, or continuing education components—we explore this idea further in the implications section. Meanwhile, several tasks were rated highly essential yet infrequently performed.

Roles Deemed Highly Essential and Infrequently Performed

Fifty practice items were rated as highly essential (above 60%) including practice items in every *domain* except MTSS. This finding may necessitate additional research to understand *why* practitioners deemed MTSS *components* to be less essential compared to others. Similar to the results about the frequency of performed tasks, the majority of practices within the *domains* of professional values and service delivery scored high on essentiality. Outside of these two domains, the tasks rated highly essential include: establishing professional relationships with school personnel (86.99%), promoting social justice (85.40%), assessing/identifying individual needs (84.21%), and supporting students to improve their social, emotional, and behavioral competencies (83.09%)—with the remaining tasks still deemed highly essential, though falling below 80%.

Many practices deemed highly essential were performed infrequently, including several macro-oriented *components*. Many of these infrequently performed macro-level job functions are also underscored by scholars as important areas of SSW practice, including promoting school climate and culture (84.88; 28.57%; Iachini, 2017; Joseph et al., 2012; Villarreal Sosa, 2021), promoting social justice (85.40; 20.59%; Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022), promoting school quality (68.61; 25.55%; Frey et al., 2013), challenging structural barriers (60.58; 20.59%; Crutchfield et al., 2020), promoting school safety (75.18; 45.19%; Cuellar & Theriot, 2017), and engaging in systems-level change (61.31; 19.40%; Berzin & O'Connor, 2010). Although scholars have been urging SSW colleagues to increase the utilization of macro-level practices, responses have evidenced contextual barriers that limit the ability to implement these practices (Phillippo et al., 2017). For example, the dearth of systems-level work is congruent with the findings of Berzin & O'Connor's (2010) review of SSW syllabi, noting the disproportionate clinical focus and lack of systemic/environmental content. Given the age of this research, new studies aimed at understanding educational preparation may contribute to moving the field forward.

As previous studies have confirmed the predominance of micro-level practice (Kelly et al., 2015a), it may be that, in addition to contextual barriers, SSW clinical orientation poses barriers to macro-level practice, meaning that

perhaps SSW practitioners are unclear on how to best promote macro-level work. For example, Ball and Skrzypek (2020) confirmed similar findings of SSW practitioners' desires to uphold justice-oriented practices, but that confounding practices impose barriers to macro practice. More research is needed to understand the relationship between macro-level practice and clinical orientation. Finally, there were several practice *components* deemed both inessential and infrequently performed.

Roles Deemed Inessential and Infrequently Performed

Several tasks scored low on essentiality and were infrequently performed. Meanwhile, it is important to restate that the content analysis about current SSW skills and knowledge (Authors, In Press) utilized existing professional organizational guidance documents; therefore, all the tasks assessed were deemed *essential* per these governing entities. Roles deemed inessential and also infrequently performed were notable in practice such as, for example: understand and carry out educational policy (36.30; 24.63%; Curtis et al., 2022), understand historical and current perspectives of public-school education, including educational reform and legislation (25.74; 12.69%; Frey et al., 2021), provide systems coordination 42.42; 23.48%; Kelly et al., 2015a), assume leadership roles (27.40; 22.22%; Elswick et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2022), and identify families to be school leaders (21.92; 6.94%; Quezada, 2016). Furthermore, it is unclear whether *components* rated low in essentiality undermine the performance of them, or if pre-existing practices, education, training, and school-level factors were influential to both practices deemed essential and the frequency of practice.

Roles Deemed Highly Essential and Infrequently Performed

Results showed divergence related to some *components* that were rated as highly essential, though less frequently performed. For example, 78% deemed honoring and celebrating cultures within a school as an essential practice, yet the frequency of this task was only 12.21%—a disparity of 66%. Promoting social justice was deemed as essential by 85.40%, yet frequently performed by 20.59% of participants—a difference of 64.81%. Promoting prevention efforts was deemed essential by 88.89% of participants but performed by 24.22%, evidencing a discrepancy of 64.67%. Clarify SSW role within school, district, and LEA was deemed essential by 89.13% of participants, though performed frequently by 30.37%, a difference of 58.75%. It should be noted that the disparity between essentiality and frequency performed may not always represent cause for concern. For example, reporting suspected child abuse and/or neglect was deemed essential by 97.56% of participants, though reported as a frequent task by only 40.60%—a difference potentially explained by mandated reporting requirements (essential) and overall estimated prevalence of child abuse and neglect (frequency) (Kim et al., 2017). However, other tasks performed infrequently may be cause for concern. Promoting school climate and culture was deemed essential by 84.88% of participants, yet only 28.57% of participants rated this *component* as frequently performed. It will be important to strategize as to how to address these gaps between essentially deemed practices and the frequency of practice—especially as informed by the literature.

Missing Components

Finally, participant responses to the open-ended prompts about what was missing from the provided list of *critical components* of SSW practice led to the addition of 12 new *components* across the existing nine *domains* of SSW practice, and 19 new *critical components* within three newly emergent *domains* of practice. This means that, when examining the complete list of both existing and new *critical components* of SSW practice derived from this study, participants identified 26.3% of essential knowledge and/or skills currently missing from existing SSW frameworks of practice. These newly emergent *components are generally* related to trauma-informed practices (within 'service delivery' and 'theory' *domains*), collaboration with community, continued development and training, using data to identify risk and protective factors, and engaging in MTSS systems. We recognize these findings come specifically from the SSW practitioners who completed the survey during the four months it was open for responses, and we are also pleased to recognize that recent and current work to update SSW practice model(s) incorporates some of the *domains* and *components* noted as missing within this study. It is comforting to see that the recently published SSWAA National Model 2.0 (Tan & SSWAA) is aligned with results from this study, both of which demonstrate the significance of the inclusion of equity and social justice as an essential component to practice. This means that SSW now has professional guidance, grounded in data, that emphasizes the core component of the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021) and past and current iterations of learning competencies put forth by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE,) calling for and guiding justice-oriented practices.

Limitations

There are several limitations and cautions to consider when reviewing the study results. First, due to the survey length, participants were randomly assigned three of the nine

domains. While this undoubtedly helped with the completion rate of the survey, it limited the ability to complete further analysis across all domains, such as how demographics such as age, experience, and school urbanicity might play a role in responses. Additionally, we relied on other organizations to send the survey to members, which limited the ability to track response rates or fully control follow-up requests. Future studies might address this by having participants answer all domains or focusing on specific domains.

There are several explanations as to why some components might be considered essential and not done frequently or done frequently and not considered essential. For instance, there is the possibility that the tasks associated with that component rarely happen in a SSW practitioner's role, such as suicide assessment, or the component is considered essential, and still, the SSW practitioners are not afforded that role in their position or schools.

There might also be limitations related to survey question interpretation. For instance, terms such as "school safety" or "promote social justice" may be subject to varied interpretations. Being able to follow up with participants or gathering context for their responses would add additional insight into the perceived roles and tasks of SSW practitioners. More research could lead to a stronger understanding of how individuals came to this conclusion, including what experiences led to their perspectives (e.g., training, school climate, personal qualities). An additional limitation relates to the wide array of factors that influence SSW practice, which may pose competing demands and contribute to the underperformance of certain tasks—more research is needed to better understand roles and practices in the context of state certification, educational preparation, as well as school and individual level factors.

Future Research

Even where consistency in critical components was perceived as essential to SSW practice but under-emphasized in frequency, an array of additional questions arise. For example, the majority of participants suggested that social justice (84.5%), school safety (75.2%), promoting a psychosocial environment (68.6%), engaging in systems-level change (61%), and challenging structural barriers (60.5%) all were essential components of SSW practice, however, what remains unclear and demands further investigation is how these components are interpreted, including what inclusive advocacy might look like, and any barriers that may exist (e.g., training; school factors) which prevent these practices. Now that we have gained a general understanding of what domains of practice are desired, more research is needed to explicate these categories further. Building capacity critical components also raises questions about moving from what is perceived as an essential component to performing the task at a more frequent level. For example, 86.9% of participants perceived that professional relationships with school personnel were an essential component of practice, and 77.9% performed this task frequently; however, questions remain about how these relationships were emphasized and what factors supported or impeded these practices. More research can help to understand how relationships are promoted to inform collaborative models and scale up relationship-rich frameworks. Similar questions arise when examining the home-school liaison critical components, where working collaboratively was denoted as essential by 78.6% of participants and performed frequently by 65.9%. Additional research could explain the definition of working collaboratively to understand how this is achieved, what barriers exist, and what factors and training may support these efforts.

More research is also needed to understand the strengths and limitations of these components to understand whether under-utilization is a product of educational, training, school, or individual-level factors. If the national models deem the components as part of the models from SSW and practitioners do not agree or do not perform these tasks, this is a crucial area to examine further. Furthermore, even amid components perceived to be essential and emphasized frequently, questions remain about whether these components are essential to the school and the promotion of youth outcomes. In other words, just because a domain is essential or frequently performed does not guarantee the utility of the component. Additional research can build on these findings and help to build efficacy and inclusivity in SSW practice.

A final area for future research relates to the frequency of roles performed and the usefulness of interpretation. As noted in the results and discussion, certain tasks performed at lower frequency may not be indicative of a problem (e.g., suicide risk assessments; reporting child abuse). Meanwhile, the high frequency of certain tasks (e.g., ethical values) provides little depth to understanding the direct contribution to practice. Future research may be useful to understand the quantitative interpretative nuance, including the use of mixed methods and qualitative data to minimize interpretation variance of survey items and provide a deeper understanding of the roles performed and overall perceptions of essential practice.

Implications

While other research has looked at the role of SSW practitioners, to our knowledge, this is the first study to look at role and activity together. We seek an updated picture that accurately portrays what SSW practitioners can and should be doing in their roles. In doing so, we recognize that there is a plethora of ways in which SSW practitioners

support students, families, and school communities around the nation—and such vast role discrepancies are not only inevitable but also necessary when considering the array of people, geographies, and overall cultures with whom SSW practitioners work. Yet some SSW models lack a justice-oriented perspective that adequately fulfills our ethical mandate as social workers (NASW, 2021).

Of the nine domains examined during our analysis, there was a clear consensus from participants that information relating to the 'professional values' domain was considered essential to SSW practice. Kelly et al. (2010) study, over seven years ago, showed that SSWs expressed frustrations regarding their typically micro-focused work with individuals and/or small groups, as they wanted to perform tasks at a broader macro level to be more equitable and influential. Results from this study show that even today, these professional tendencies have not significantly changed. An updated SSW model should encompass the fact that SSW practitioners have the strongest agreement that professional values are of utmost importance within SSW practices; the profession could leverage such unanimity to encourage even stronger equitable practices that promote justice-focused initiatives in a multitude of ways.

For instance, our findings generally showed how SSW practitioners inconsistently depicted the extent to which content in our current SSW practice models is essential to their work. In other words, we saw how individual SSW practitioners perceive the details of current SSW models as differently important. Such inconsistency brings to light the notion that individual practitioners' values and priorities inevitably seep into professional realms. As a profession, therefore, SSW practitioners, researchers, and policymakers must come together to recognize, discuss, and reflect upon how personal identity contributes to the SSW role. Such recognition in and of itself is essential to cultural humility, which is just one of the ways our findings illuminated the lack of focus on justice-oriented practices. There is a need for tangible mechanisms to which SSW practitioners can turn in order to more intentionally interpret how personal identities and/or opinions influence professional practice approaches and decisions. A new model of SSW practice should highlight the necessity for SSW practitioners to be culturally responsive.

The varied reactions and opinions regarding the content of the existing models illustrate that they do not work for the SSW profession as a whole; responses and opinions regarding the current model's content were not cohesive. Developing and implementing a cohesive model of practice will significantly benefit the profession. A cohesive model of practice will indeed affect what a school social worker does within their role, but moreover, a practice model that is produced intentionally, with the use of existing evidence and data, has the potential to affect legislation, educational practices, and pave the way for new research to come (Chapin Hall, 2022). For this reason, future models must include a clear and dominant focus on justice-oriented practices that illuminate the foundational values of social work. Indeed, it seems only essential that we have an accurate, cohesive, and timely core model for the school social work profession as we move towards stronger professional advocacy and growth.

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