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The Professional Development of School Social Workers

Ann B. List

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**THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF
SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS**

BY

ANN B. LIST

B.A., Zoology, Cornell University, 1960
M.S.W., Smith College School for Social Work, 1962

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2010

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents (now deceased), Vida Fitz Randolph Barrs, M. S., and James Thomas Barrs, Ph.D. Their scholarship and refusal to shirk challenges greatly inspired me.

A TRIBUTE TO MY COLLEAGUES

This work has truly been a labor of love! I know to the core how much school social workers take interest in the stories of others--students, families, school personnel, etc., But in this study, I came to realize how much school social workers also enjoy telling stories about their lives and work--especially to a researcher intent upon making collective sense of it all. I am truly indebted to my pilot study and dissertation participants for allowing me into their lives and sharing their learning experiences and practice inclinations with me. Thank you, dear friends!

Acknowledgements

I begin this page with much nostalgia. There are so many faces that flash through my mind—many more than space permits me to name.

The first face is of Dr. Hallie Preskill, my advisor for many years until she left UNM. I took every course Hallie offered after enrolling in OLIT—a total of five. Her enthusiasm was contagious and provided much inspiration. Hallie's interest in Appreciative Inquiry was totally in sync with my social work orientation toward strength-based interventions, so that was one of my favorite courses.

The second face is of Dr. Patricia Boverie, who took over after Hallie left and is now my dissertation committee chair. Patsy has been unwavering in her support of my research, for which I am extremely grateful. She has been totally accessible and has always responded quickly whenever I've raised a question and have needed direction. On another note, Patsy's interest in transformational learning and the course she taught on the topic enabled me to let go of a few lingering demons. It appeared the same thing happened for several classmates. I truly appreciate Patsy's knack for fusing cognitive and emotional processes in a way that propels her students forward.

The third face is that of Dr. Michael Kroth. I first met Michael in Toastmasters and talked with him about enrolling in OLIT. He gave me complete support, so I began the application process. He co-taught with Patsy the first course I took in my program—The Adult Learner. That course prompted me to take early retirement from a job I loved in order to devote full time to my studies; I have never had any regrets.

There are so many other faces. Dr. Mark Salisbury provided total support and patience in a course I took with him on instructional design. I recall several times

averting my eyes whenever he asked a question and looked my way. Thanks, Mark, I was totally new to instructional design theory and was struggling to understand a new paradigm. However, I know I finally “got it” by the end of the semester.

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Another hugely important person in our OLIT community is Loretta Brown, our Program Specialist. She gently pulled me back on track many times—always with amazing and totally off-the-wall wit. The entire OLIT community has been a welcoming, supportive, and stimulating community, infused with much camaraderie.

Outside of the immediate OLIT community, but in another College of Education department, Dr. Betsy Noll was another huge source of support for me. Betsy provided much encouragement regarding my writing when I took her course on case study research methods. That was a turning point for me because I had always struggled with putting words down on paper. I am now at the point where I actually enjoy writing--thank you so much, Betsy! I never in my wildest dreams expected to arrive at this point. I knew my doctoral program would entail a lot of hard work, but to be able to finally conquer “writer’s block” totally amazes me.

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Lastly, of course, is not just a face, but the physical presence and support of my husband, Oscar Lackey. He graciously read this entire document and asked very logical

questions that pushed me to consider why I wrote what I wrote. Early in my program, I overheard him tell a friend on the phone that my studies were “like a full-time job.” Agree. I feel so fortunate to have had this opportunity with Oscar’s support and understanding.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of continuing professional education, professional development, and other growth activities that most heavily influence the practice of school social workers. It was a qualitative study framed by heuristic inquiry using in depth interviews with twenty participants from two western states. A theoretical model emerged based on three components: the context of practice, contextual learning, and practice behaviors. All three components had the same three attributes: prior learning experiences, outside learning experiences, and the personal qualities of practitioners. Two important findings were that when the participants covered only one school and were funded by multiple sources, they were able to conduct more systemically-oriented interventions than would otherwise have been possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	xix
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Background of the Problem.....	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Purpose of the Study	4
Research Questions	4
Significance of the Study	5
Personal Statement	6
Theoretical Framework	7
Self-directed learning.....	7
Situated learning.....	10
Reflective practice.....	11
Transformative learning.....	12
Chapter Summary.....	13
Chapter II: Review of the Literature	15
Chapter Introduction	15
Continuing Professional Education (CPE).....	16
Definition of CPE.....	16
History of CPE across the professions.....	17
CPE models.....	19
Need for a more encompassing CPE theory.....	20
Evaluation of CPE activities.....	22
Summary.....	25
Professional Expertise	25
A model of professional expertise.....	26
Definitions of professional expertise.....	27
Professional career development.....	28
Professional career development and expertise in healthcare, counseling, and education.....	29

Summary.....	36
The Formal, Informal, and Incidental Learning Continuum.....	37
Formal learning.....	37
Non-formal learning.....	37
Informal learning.....	38
Incidental learning.....	40
Summary.....	41
A Challenge to Existing Adult Learning Frameworks.....	41
Chapter Summary.....	43
Chapter III: Methodology.....	47
Chapter Introduction.....	47
Methodological Tradition.....	47
Research Questions Revisited.....	51
Methods for Collecting Data.....	53
Sample.....	53
Data collection.....	54
Data Analysis.....	57
Limitations of the Study.....	59
Chapter Summary.....	60
Chapter IV: Analysis of Data and Report of Research Findings.....	62
Chapter Introduction.....	62
Themes Related to Research Questions.....	63
RQ#1: How do school social workers acquire knowledge and skills that inform their practice over time?.....	64
New assignments.....	64
Contextual changes.....	66
New responsibilities.....	70
Expansion of interests.....	72
Shifts in focus over time.....	74
Summary of themes related to RQ#1.....	75

RQ#2: What professional and personal growth experiences do school social workers value most?	76
Highly valued formal professional learning experiences.	77
Supervision.....	77
Consultation.	79
Trainings conducted by senior social workers in a school district.....	80
Intensive two- or three-day workshops.	81
Highly valued formal personal learning experiences.	83
Highly valued informal professional and personal learning experiences.	83
Highly valued incidental professional and personal learning experiences.	86
Highly valued experiences of facilitating the learning of others.	88
Summary of themes related to RQ#2.....	92
RQ#3: How do professional and personal growth experiences impact the practice of school social workers?.....	93
Impact of general contextual learning on practice.	94
Impact of adaptive contextual learning on practice.	96
Impact of formal adaptive learning on practice.	98
Impact of in-services and trainings on practice.....	99
Impact of supervision on practice.	100
Impact of informal adaptive learning on practice.	102
Impact of incidental adaptive learning on practice.	103
Summary.....	105
Impact of developmental contextual learning on practice.	105
Impact of formal developmental learning on practice.	107
Consultation.	107
Clinical supervision.....	110
Trainings by senior social workers in school districts.	111
Two- or three-day trainings.....	112
Impact of informal developmental learning on practice.	113
Impact of incidental developmental learning on practice.	114

Summary.....	115
Impact of strong working relationships on practice.	116
Impact of professional dilemmas on practice.	117
Impact of professional orientation on practice.	120
Summary of factors impacting workplace learning.....	123
Impact of prior learning experiences on practice.	124
Impact of prior professional learning on practice.	124
Impact of prior personal learning on practice.	130
Impact of outside learning experiences on practice.....	134
Impact of outside formal professional learning on practice.	134
Impact of outside informal professional learning on practice.....	139
Impact of outside incidental professional learning on practice.....	140
Impact of outside personal learning on practice.	142
Impact of personal qualities on practice.	148
Summary of themes related to RQ#3.....	154
Summary of Themes	155
Research Findings	155
Chapter Summary.....	156
Chapter V: Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis of Research Findings.....	158
Chapter Introduction	158
PART 1.....	159
The Initial Major Findings	159
The Three Analytical Categories.....	160
Analytical Category #1: Significance of context of work in relation to professional development and practice.	161
Federal regulatory context.....	162
State context.....	164
District context.....	165
Work site context.....	169
Summary.....	173

Analytic Category #2: Level of value attached to learning experiences.	174
Trust issues associated with highly valued learning experiences.	175
Highly valued contextual learning experiences.	177
Supervision.	178
Multi-disciplinary team meetings.	178
Learning from clients.	180
Highly valued prior learning experiences.	182
Highly valued outside professional learning experiences.	183
Highly valued outside personal learning experiences.	185
Highly valued experiences of facilitating the learning of others.	186
Summary.	189
Analytic category #3: Impact of learning experiences on professional practice.	189
Impact of general contextual learning on professional practice.	190
Impact of adaptive contextual learning on professional practice.	192
Supervision.	192
Mentors.	195
Colleagues.	196
Routine activities.	198
Learning from mistakes.	200
Impact of developmental contextual learning on practice.	206
Impact of problem-solving activities on practice.	207
Impact of trial and error strategies on practice.	209
Impact of professional dilemmas on practice.	212
Impact of reflection on practice.	216
Impact of the emotional component of learning on practice.	219
Impact of critical events and significant turning points on practice.	223
Impact of transformative learning on practice.	225
Summary.	227

Summary of adaptive and developmental learning.....	228
Impact of prior learning experiences on practice.....	228
Personal qualities associated with the impact of learning on practice.	233
Summary.....	238
Summary of analytical categories.....	239
Two Additional Findings	239
PART 2.....	245
A Theoretical Model for the Professional Development of School Social Workers	245
Components of the model.....	246
Attributes of the model.....	248
The iterative nature of the model.....	248
Interrelationships between the components and attributes of the model....	249
Application of the model.....	254
Three-dimensional models.....	256
Summary of theoretical model.....	260
Chapter Summary.....	261
Chapter VI: Conclusions, Recommendations, and Commentary on Research Topic	263
Chapter Introduction	263
Conclusions	264
Rationale for conducting this study.....	264
The micro-macro continuum of practice.....	266
Recommendations	268
Recommendations for school social work practitioners.....	268
Recommendations for educational administrators.....	268
Recommendations for school social work educators.....	269
Recommendations for further research.....	269
Commentary on Research Topic.....	270

List of Appendices	278
Appendix A SAMPLE COVER LETTER	279
Appendix B CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH	281
Appendix C PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONNAIRE	283
Appendix D INTERVIEW GUIDE (original and revised):	284
Appendix E SAMPLES OF INTERVIEW THEMES AND SUPPORTING STATEMENTS	286
Appendix F THEMES AND SUB-THEMES FROM DATA ANALYSIS	297
Appendix G PARTICIPANT PROFILES	298
REFERENCES	304

List of Figures

Figure 1. Professional Development of School Social Workers.....	247
Figure 2: Learning Trajectories of Research Participants.....	258

Chapter I: Introduction

Background of the Problem

Every year social workers in most states are required to participate in continuing professional education (CPE) in order to maintain licensure to practice. The content of CPE activities approved by state licensing boards covers the broad spectrum of knowledge required for social work practice. The structure of these activities also extends across a spectrum, ranging from formal didactic presentations to highly interactive, experiential workshops. In addition, the format of these activities varies considerably, with some lasting a mere one or two hours to others extending over long periods of time.

The intent of CPE is to improve professional practice in order to provide quality services for clients. The cost of CPE activities is borne either by the individual practitioner or by agencies wishing to support and retain employees. In either case, the cost of purchasing and/or providing CPE is an important issue for the social work community.

In contrast to CPE, there are many activities that offer no continuing education units (CEUs), but which greatly enhance the professional development (PD) of social workers. These include trainings provided by employers and informational or skill-development programs offered in the community. They also include job-embedded activities such as regularly scheduled team meetings, supervision, sessions with consultants, interactions with clients, and informal conversations with colleagues, to name only a few.

Thus, for the purpose of this discussion I will refer to continuing professional education (CPE) as a formal activity that requires registration, payment, and provides

CEUs. On the other hand, I will use the term professional development (PD) when referring to activities of a more informal nature that are for the most part job-embedded.

Statement of the Problem

Interest in assessing the value and effectiveness of CPE and PD activities in the field of education has increased substantially in the past decade (e.g., Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Guskey, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Guskey & Sparks, 2004; Kent, 2004; Zepeda, 2008). By contrast, very little attention has been given to the topic in the social work profession. And, as far as I can determine, research in this area in *school* social work is non-existent, other than a case study and pilot study I conducted in 2005 and 2007 respectively.

In spite of relatively limited research regarding the value and effectiveness of CPE and PD activities across the professions, the provision of these activities has burgeoned into a multi-billion dollar industry (Cervero, 2000; Mott, 2000; Sleezer, Conti, & Nolan, 2004). In social work, it is customary for attendees at two- or three-day professional conferences to complete and submit an evaluation form at the end of each session, whether it is for a keynote speaker, a plenary session, or an individual workshop. These are generally one-page forms asking attendees to rate the content and value of the session, the expertise and delivery style of the presenter, and the adequacy of the handouts distributed in the session. Sometimes they also ask if the attendees might use something from the session in their practice and if they would be interested in learning more about the topic in the future. In addition, there is usually an over-all conference evaluation form that requests feedback regarding the food and facilities, as well as suggestions for topics in future conferences. In exchange for completing these

evaluations, conference attendees receive a document indicating the number of CEUs they have earned. The conference planners generally use these evaluation forms to rate the speakers and workshop presenters in order to determine if they will invite them back or encourage them to submit proposals for future conferences.

For shorter CPE or PD events, such as one or two hour presentations, a signature on a sign-in sheet is usually all that is required. Pre-printed CEU documents are then made available to the attendees as they leave. Copies of these CEU documents are subsequently attached to professional license renewal applications that are submitted to the practitioners' state licensing boards every year or two, depending upon the particular state's licensing cycle.

Unfortunately, these procedures are totally inadequate for assessing the impact of CPE and PD events on professional practice in the workplace. In reality, these procedures do little more than record the attendees' presence at these events, along with their attitudes about the presenters' knowledge and presentation styles, the adequacy of hand-outs, the quality of meals and refreshment breaks, and the comfort of the facilities, etc. If the attendees are asked how they intend to use the new knowledge or skills they have acquired, this type of question, of course, measures nothing more than intent.

Across the professions, there are rarely any follow-up studies that assess the extent to which information or skills acquired at workshops, conferences, and training sessions are incorporated into the attendees' practice in the workplace. Knox (2002) points out that such follow-up studies are complex, time-consuming, and costly. Others (Daley & Carlsson, 2004; Ottoson, 1997; Ottoson & Patterson, 2000) assert there are multiple factors in the workplace that influence the transferability of new knowledge and skills

from the learning site to the workplace. These factors include encouragement from others, general support for change, opportunity to apply new knowledge and skills, adequate resources, and the authority to act, to name but a few. The reality of these factors adds to the complexity of designing studies that measure the actual transfer of learning from the training site to the workplace. Fortunately, researchers in recent years have begun to look at the interplay of these factors in relation to the transfer of knowledge and skills from the training site to the workplace (e.g., Guskey, 2000, 2002a, 2002b; Heller, Daehler, & Shinohara, 2003; Killion, 2002; Mizell, 2003; Zepeda, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of continuing professional education, professional development, and other growth activities that most heavily influence the practice of school social workers. The study was designed to explore school social workers' experiences with both formal and informal learning activities. Particular attention was paid to how content, structure, and format influenced the level of value the research participants attached to these activities and how these activities impacted their practice.

Research Questions

I need to state that I regard learning experiences as the equivalent of growth experiences. I am certain one could argue that learning results in growth, but throughout this document I will use these terms interchangeably. My research questions are as follows:

RQ#1: How do school social workers acquire knowledge and skills that inform their practice over time?

RQ#3: What professional and personal growth experiences do school social workers value most?

RQ#2: How do professional and personal growth experiences impact the practice of school social workers?

I recognize there is a fine line between learning experiences that *inform* practice (RQ#1) and learning experiences that *impact* practice (RQ#3). For the purpose of this study, I regard learning that informs practice as learning that contributes to or shapes practice in a very general sense. On the contrary, I regard learning that impacts practice as learning that generates changes in practice behaviors that promote practice effectiveness.

Significance of the Study

Flyers, brochures, and email messages about upcoming CPE and PD activities are increasingly inundating the mailboxes of school social workers, both at work and at home. These notices usually describe the content of the training activities quite well. They also inform the recipient of the number of CEUs that will be granted, if at all. These notices might also highlight the qualifications of the presenter(s). The structure of the activity is reflected in the date(s) and location of the event. The format of the activity, however, is often difficult to discern. A phrase or two might be included in the text, such as “experiential” or “interactive,” that hints at what attendees can expect. Increasingly, these notices provide schedules of the events, such as the starting and ending times of sessions, particularly when the events last more than a day.

School social workers, like teachers, earn relatively modest salaries, so the cost of attending the events these flyers and brochures advertise is always an issue. Some school

districts are able to pay registration fees so school social workers can attend specific well-established annual conferences, such as local multi-disciplinary health/mental health conferences or the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) conferences conducted by state chapters of the organization.

Another important issue involves the number of off-site PD days school districts grant their employees each year. Shrinking school budgets often result in limits on the amount of time districts allow employees to attend these events. In addition, shrinking budgets result in decreasing financial support for attendance at these events. An interesting consequence of the current trend of diminishing support is reflected in the fact that school districts seem increasingly willing to provide professional growth activities internally. Some of these activities provide CEUs, but most do not.

In light of the virtual explosion of the CPE industry, it is important for school districts to know if their money is being well spent when they send employees off to these entrepreneurial events. It may be that the trend toward providing more in-district PD activities is a positive one.

Personal Statement

My interest in the topic of PD stems from past experiences that included developing, organizing, and implementing CPE and PD activities for social work students and practitioners at local, state, regional, and national levels. While in an administrative position extending over several years, I was responsible for identifying the CPE and PD needs of a large unit of school social workers and ensuring that various activities were provided to meet these needs. In addition, in 2001-2002 I participated in a national task force charged with revising the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services.

Sixteen of the total 42 standards address the preparation and professional development of school social workers. I feel this number reflects the importance of the topic.

I, myself, have engaged in numerous CPE and PD activities throughout my career and have found some to be considerably more useful than others. Knowing that people learn in a variety of ways, however, I was curious to learn about my colleagues' experiences with CPE and PD activities. I also wanted to add to the existing body of knowledge regarding work-related formal and informal learning.

Theoretical Framework

Several adult-learning theories framed my study. These included self-directed learning, experiential learning, situated learning, transformative learning, and reflective practice. All these theories fall under the larger theoretical umbrella of *constructivism* (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), which is the process of constructing knowledge and meaning from experience. The primary theorists associated with constructivism are Candy, Dewey, Lave, Piaget, Rogoff, von Glasersfeld, and Vygotsky (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In their discussion of constructivism, Merriam and Caffarella note, "The cognitive process of meaning making is emphasized as both an individual mental activity and a socially interactive interchange" (p. 266). This statement seems to suggest that individual learning activities represent constructivism, whereas learning through interactions with others constitutes social constructivism.

In the following section, I will highlight the main features of these theories. I will also describe the relevance of these theories to my study.

Self-directed learning. Malcolm Knowles (1968) introduced the concept of *andragogy* in an effort to differentiate the learning processes of adults from those of

children. Prior to Knowles' work, most studies of learning styles and behaviors were based on early childhood through pre-adult populations. The term that encompasses the teaching and learning of this younger population is *pedagogy*. A central feature of andragogy is self-directed learning. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), when adults engage in self-directed learning, they "participate in the diagnosis of their learning needs, the planning and implementation of the learning experiences, and the evaluation of those experiences" (p. 273).

Other elements of andragogy are based upon assumptions that the adult learner draws upon extensive life experiences, is motivated by the relevance of learning to social roles, is interested primarily in immediate application of learning, and is motivated by internal rather than external factors (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). All these elements of andragogy applied to my study, particularly the central feature of self-directed learning. This is in part related to the emphasis on self-directed learning highlighted in the NASW *Standards for Continuing Professional Education*, published in 2002.

From a school social worker's perspective, the factors involved in selecting and attending CPE events generally include: the populations he or she serves; critical issues related to these populations; level of professional expertise with these populations; critical issues in the profession; cost and accessibility of learning activities; general appeal of the training structure, format, and presenter(s); and support from workplace supervisors to engage in CPE. These were some of the factors I explored in my study.

Experiential learning. Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis (1999) have advanced the theory of experiential learning in recent years, although they remind us their model is

grounded in the earlier work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. They note, “Dewey’s philosophical pragmatism, Lewin’s social psychology, and Piaget’s cognitive-developmental genetic epistemology form a unique perspective on learning and development” (p. 2). Kolb et al. regard the learner as central to the educational process, as opposed to traditional teacher-oriented or subject-oriented educational models. When the learner is central to the process, his or her prior experiences are considered to be an important aspect of the total learning experience.

Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). He adds that it is a “process of adaptation and learning” and that “knowledge is a transformation process, being continuously created and recreated” (p. 38). Kolb and his colleagues (1999) present a four-stage learning model in which *concrete experiences* promote *reflections* that are assimilated into *abstract concepts* that can then be *actively tested*.

In my own practice of school social work, I realized the skills I acquired in experiential learning settings had the greatest impact on my work. It was always difficult, if not impossible, for me to hear an expert describe a new treatment modality and expect to develop the skills required to implement this modality on my own. The opportunity to practice new skills in an experiential learning setting always was a useful process for me. The action and reflection inherent in this process is absent in didactic presentations that simply outline the skills required to master new treatment modalities.

The work of Kolb and his colleagues (Kolb, 1981; Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 1999, Kolb & Wolfe, 1981) is often referenced and appears to be highly regarded, but their research focuses primarily on higher education settings. In their earlier works, there was

little reference to work-oriented learning other than when job roles influenced experiential learning styles. More recently, they have looked at how experiential learning theory promotes the transfer of learning from learning sites such as academia to the workplace (Kayes, Kayes, & Kolb, 2005).

The NASW *Standards for Continuing Professional Education* (2002a) do not specify the context of CPE activities social workers might elect to attend. I believe most people assume the *Standards* refer to activities that occur outside the workplace in conference facilities or community training sites. The *Standards* imply that professional growth activities include both CEU-granting and non-CUE-granting events, but they make no mention of the possibility that on-the-job learning experiences might also contribute significantly to the professional growth of social workers. Recently, a number of researchers have begun looking at the workplace as a rich source of learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) are in the forefront of this group.

Situated learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) propose a theoretical model known as *situated learning*. This form of learning is contextual. It occurs not in a workshop or conference hall, but rather in an actual social and physical environment such as the workplace. Lave and Wenger's model is relevant to my study because of the considerable amount of learning that takes place at school sites as school social workers go about their daily business of interacting with students, families, school personnel, and representatives from community agencies. I will discuss Lave and Wenger's work in greater detail later in this document.

Workplace learning can be immense, particularly when coupled with opportunities for reflection that generate new insights. The reflective aspect of workplace learning is emerging as an important dimension of adult learning.

Reflective practice. In 1983, Schön introduced the concept of *reflective practice* as a critical aspect of adult learning. He differentiates between *reflection-in-action* (p. 49) and *reflection-on-action* (p. 278). The former occurs in conjunction with actual practice interventions. An example would be when a social worker observes a client's response to an intervention in a session, considers the possible meaning of the client's response, and adjusts the intervention accordingly. The latter concept, reflection-on-action, is the process that occurs in clinical supervision or peer consultation. An example would be when a social worker describes a problem situation to a supervisor or peer, and, in the process of telling the story and gaining feedback from others, develops new insights that help guide future interventions.

The concept of reflective practice is highly relevant to my study, since clinical supervision and peer consultation are fundamental to the practice of school social work. Clinical supervision is part of the practicum experience required of all pre-service social workers and is also provided in most mental health facilities. However, when a new social worker becomes employed by a school district, he or she will be fortunate if the employer provides clinical supervision from a licensed social worker. If not, the social worker will need to seek private clinical supervision in order to advance to the highest level of state social work licensure. In school social work, this process takes approximately three years.

On the other hand, peer consultation generally takes place throughout a school social worker's entire career. It is a particularly important resource after the practitioner has attained the highest level of licensure (*independent* or *clinical* level, depending upon the state) and no longer has access to clinical supervision or no longer wishes to pay for it. As in clinical supervision, peer consultation provides an opportunity for workers to reflect upon practice interventions and wrestle with ethical dilemmas.

Reflective practice characterizes the theory of transformative learning that is gaining in prominence in the adult learning literature. Transformational learning is another term sometimes used in discussions about this theory.

Transformative learning. Mezirow (1990, 1991) introduced the concept of learning that occurs when one's basic assumptions and beliefs are challenged and there is a fundamental shift, or transformation, in the way that person perceives and interacts with his or her world. Sometimes there is a specific event that triggers this shift, but it may also result from a gradual accumulation of experiences.

It is important to note that Mezirow (2000) talks mainly about the process of transformative learning and very little about the context of this form of learning (Taylor, 2000). There is emerging discussion in the literature regarding the coupling of transformative learning with organizational change (e.g., Cummings & Worley, 2008; Marsick, Watkins, Callahan, & Volpe, 2007; Yorks & Marsick, 2000). However, these discussions focus primarily on groups and teams and the organization as a whole, rather than on individuals in the organization.

From an individual perspective, I can recall moments of personal transformative learning many times throughout my career. Sometimes the "trigger" was a client's

poignant story that opened up an entirely new worldview for me. At other times it involved a near-devastating crisis, such as being laid off from a job, having a young client fall victim to violence, or losing a colleague to premature death. These events challenged assumptions I had previously held, for example, about job security, the potential for violence, and the possibility of dying prematurely. Although these events were often tragic, they generated considerable learning for me. Thus, I decided to include a question in my interview protocol addressing the critical events or turning points in the participants' lives that prompted them to question personal and professional assumptions.

Chapter Summary

Social workers in most states are required to earn CEUs from CPE activities every year or two in order to maintain professional licensure. The content, structure, and format of professional activities providing CEUs vary considerably. However, there are many activities that are rich sources of learning for social workers that do not offer CEUs.

To my knowledge, there have been no studies in school social work regarding the value and effectiveness of CPE or PD activities other than my own research in 2005 and 2007. Attendees at professional conferences and workshops are generally required to submit evaluation forms after each session, but in reality these forms yield very little useful information.

The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of personal and professional growth experiences the participants valued and that influenced their practice. Thus, my three research questions addressed 1) sources of learning, 2) the value of learning experiences, and 3) the impact of learning experiences on practice.

I felt it was important to conduct this study because of the absence of research in this area. My interest in the topic stems from my long career as a school social worker. My theoretical framework was based on constructivism, which is fundamental to many adult learning theories. Constructivism includes self-directed, experiential, situated, and transformative learning, as well as reflective practice. The methodological tradition I followed was heuristic inquiry, as I felt this approach was consistent with the basic principles of constructivism. It is an approach “that brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher” (Patton, 2002, p. 107). I will elaborate on this approach in my methodology chapter.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Chapter Introduction

In reviewing the literature related to my research questions, I initially focused on two major areas of study: continuing professional education (CPE) and the development of professional expertise. In view of the fact that CPE has become a multi-billion dollar industry (Mott, 2000), I expected many scholars would have interest in this topic. I wanted to develop a sense of the major issues associated with CPE at the present time. In addition, I felt an exploration of the literature on the development of professional expertise would complement what I learned from the CPE literature and also help me address my research question regarding how participation in professional growth activities changes over time.

However, the findings from my pilot study conducted during the spring of 2007 prompted me to expand the scope of my literature review to include formal, non-formal, informal, and incidental learning. This occurred as the result of hearing my pilot study participants repeatedly refer to on-the-job activities they regarded as rich sources of learning. These activities varied considerably and were in large part determined by the contexts within which the participants worked. This extension of my literature review enabled me to re-analyze my pilot study data using the continuum ranging from formal to incidental learning as a primary lens.

In the first part of this section, I will discuss the literature I reviewed related to CPE. I will then turn to the literature on professional expertise. Next, I will cover highlights of the literature I reviewed on formal, non-formal, informal, and incidental

learning. I will conclude with a discussion of the relevance of these three bodies of knowledge to the professional growth of school social workers.

Continuing Professional Education (CPE)

The main search words I used to access this body of literature were *continuing education* and *continuing professional education*. In the discussion that follows, I will use these two terms interchangeably. I will begin with a definition of CPE provided by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). This will segue into a discussion of the history of CPE, followed by descriptions of CPE models. Lastly, I will describe two current issues in the field of continuing education (CE): the need for a more encompassing theory and the evaluation of CE activities.

Definition of CPE. In 2002, NASW published a document entitled *Standards for Continuing Professional Education* in which continuing education is defined as “a self-directed process, which requires social workers to assume responsibility for their own professional development” (p. 7). This process involves “consistent participation in educational opportunities beyond the basic, entry-level professional degree . . . to maintain and increase . . . proficiency in service delivery. New knowledge is acquired, skills are refined, [and] professional attitudes are reinforced” (p. 7).

The NASW *Standards for Continuing Professional Education* (2002a) emphasize the need for social workers to take personal responsibility for identifying their learning needs, pursuing and actively participating in relevant CPE activities, assessing the knowledge they gain, and applying that knowledge to professional practice. The *Standards* also remind us that a commitment to CPE is grounded in one of the guiding principles of NASW’s *Code of Ethics* (1999) that states, “Social workers practice within

their area of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise” (para. 20).

NASW (2002b) provides another document, *Standards for School Social Work Services*, which suggests that the content of CE that is particularly appropriate for school social workers includes educational reform issues and best practice methods relevant to the delivery of social work services in schools. This 2002 document is actually the third revision of the *Standards for School Social Work Services*. The original version was published in 1976 and revised in 1992. These earlier versions of the school social work *Standards* also addressed the issue of professional development (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1996).

History of CPE across the professions. Cervero (2000) points out there were many other professional groups that issued guidelines for professional practice and CPE during the 1970s. Tobias (2003) observes, “The past 200 years or so have witnessed a remarkable growth in the professionalization of occupations with the consolidation of old professions and the establishment of new ones” (p. 445). As the number of professions increased and the public became increasingly more dependent upon their services, concerns about issues of accountability emerged (Bierema & Eraut, 2004; Lymbery, 2003; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Mott, 2000; Roth, 2004; Sleezer et al., 2004; Tobias, 2003).

In the early 1960s, the medical profession responded to these concerns by developing a conceptual framework for physicians for updating knowledge and skills throughout a lifetime of practice (Cervero, 2000). Other professions followed and by the 1970s, CPE began to be used as the basis for re-certifying and re-licensing practitioners

in many professions (Bierema & Eraut, 2004; Cervero, 2000; Dirkx, Gilley, & Gilley, 2004; Lymbery, 2003; NASW, 2002a; Roth, 2004).

In 1980, Houle published his text, *Continuing Learning in the Professions*, which provided a foundation for subsequent developments in the field (Knox, 2000; Mott & Daley, 2000; Sleezer et al., 2004). In the 1980s and '90s, many professions developed comprehensive programs of continuing education and systems of accreditation for providers of these programs. The professions engaged in this process included architecture, engineering, medicine, pharmacy, nursing, social work, law, education, management, accounting, and many others (Cervero, 2000).

Mott (2000) observes that by the end of the 1990s, business and the professions reported “more than \$5 billion spent annually on a variety of CPE programs, benefiting more than fifty million professionals” (p. 24). Despite this rapid growth and expansion, some observers describe the CPE field as primitive (Cervero, 2000), highly fragmented (Mott & Daley, 2000), confusing (Bierema & Eraut, 2004), and murky (Roth, 2004). Cervero (2000) attributes the lack of a unified picture of CPE to the fact that professions are still struggling to define purposes and effective formats for the provision of continuing education.

In 1991, New Mexico joined other states in requiring state licensure to call oneself a social worker and to practice professional social work. Since then, in order to acquire and maintain licensure, social workers have had to participate in at least fifteen hours of state-approved CE activities each year. It is up to the social workers themselves to select the events they attend. There are no guidelines for making selections. And, to my knowledge, there have also been no articles in professional social work journals

weighing the benefits of one type of CE activity over another. Meanwhile, the CPE industry is flourishing, with school districts often in a quandary about which activities to fund. To this day, the characteristics of the most beneficial professional growth activities for school social workers have not been identified.

Knowing the characteristics of learning activities that are most highly valued by school social workers would enable CPE providers to develop models for delivering CE that would more consistently meet the needs of these practitioners. Cervero (2000), Daley and Mott (2000), Dirkx et al. (2004), Sleezer et al. (2004), and Tobias (2003) note that existing models generally fail to meet the needs of practitioners across the professions. A review of these models is in order at this point.

CPE models. At the present time, there are three major models for providing CPE (Mott, 2000). The first, the *update* model, emphasizes the acquisition of new knowledge in specific professions. This new information is generally provided within the framework of abbreviated courses of a didactic nature. The second, the *competence* model, is designed to help professionals develop the skills they need in specific work situations. The focus is on individual competency development, so these programs usually feature role-plays, case studies, and problem solving exercises. The last is the *performance* model, which is based on the belief that professionals are influenced by their work environments, their roles, values, and personal sense of “self,” and that they practice in complex networks of interdependent systems. This model also recognizes that job performance is complex and is not significantly influenced by a single CPE event (Knox, 2000; Mott, 2000).

The update model is the dominant form of CPE at the present time, even though there is little evidence indicating that it results in improvement in workplace performance (Bierema & Eraut, 2004; Cervero, 2000; Dirx et al., 2004; Mott, 2000). Concerns about the limitations of both the update and competence models have fueled research designed to strengthen the performance model so it more accurately reflects workplace realities (Daley & Mott, 2000).

There are researchers that advocate for a more comprehensive model of CPE than the three described above. I will discuss the concerns of these researchers next.

Need for a more encompassing CPE theory. Sleezer et al. (2004) point out that most CPE programs based on the update model are grounded in individual learning theories such as andragogy. They and others argue that these theories do not take into consideration the relational aspects of work-related learning (Cranton, 1996; Daley, 1998, 2000, 2001a; Dirx et al., 2004; Hansman, 2001; MacIntosh, 2003; Mott, 2000; Tobias, 2003).

Dirx et al. (2004) note that the update model of learning is guided by a functionalist rationality in which “knowledge is objective, distinct from the practitioners who act on it, and not related to the particular sociocultural contexts in which they work” (p. 37). They propose a model of CPE that encompasses the context of work, the collaborative and relational aspects of learning, and greater emphasis on the self in the learning process. By “self,” they mean the feelings, emotions, and interpersonal relationships of the learner. They believe that learning must be tied to the specific context of professional practice so it becomes concrete and carries meaning for CPE participants.

Daley (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001a) also highlights the connection between learning and work context. In particular, she stresses the need to appreciate the intricate and dynamic relationships between knowledge, professional practice, and the work context when developing and implementing CPE activities. She views knowledge as “a social construction of information that occurs through a process of constructivist and transformative learning” (2000, p. 35). As CPE providers struggle to develop models of practice that are more responsive to the needs of professionals in today’s workplace, they increasingly draw upon theories of social constructivism, situated cognition, context-based learning, and transformative learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Daley, 1999, 2000, 2001a; Dirkx et al., 2004; Hansman, 2001; Knox, 2000; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Mott, 2000).

In addition, many writers regard Donald Schön’s theory of reflective practice as a significant contribution to the field of CPE (Cervero, 2000; Lymbery, 2003; Mott, 2000; Postle, Edwards, Moon, Rumsey, & Thomas, 2002; Sleezer et al., 2004; Tobias, 2003). These same writers sometimes reference Schön’s (1983) image of “a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and . . . a swampy lowland where situations are confusing ‘messes’ incapable of technical solution” (p. 42).

Schön (1983) introduced the concept of *reflection-in-action*, which he defines as “reflective conversation with the situation” (p. 268). This is the reflective process that occurs as one actively engages in a situation; it is a reflective process that occurs simultaneously with engagement. In layman’s terms, it is simply “thinking on one’s feet.” Sleezer et al. (2004) elaborate on this process when they state, “CPE aims to develop

reflective practitioners who use unexpected situations to think in novel ways. In this process, they appreciate the nature of the problem, reframe it, and construct a new reality for dealing with it” (p. 28).

In addition to reflection-in-action, Schön (1983) also introduced the concept of *reflection-on-action*, which is essentially the reflection that takes place after an action has been completed. As stated earlier, this process of reflecting upon one’s actions is firmly embedded in the long-standing tradition of clinical supervision in the social work profession. Clinical supervision is a critical aspect of the two internships required to obtain a graduate degree in social work, and it is also a mandatory feature of the professional licensing process. Typically, supervisees present client situations to their supervisors in regularly scheduled sessions for the purpose of reflecting upon interactions that have occurred in order to develop plans for future interventions.

In summary, there is increasing interest among theorists to appreciate the contextual, relational, and reflective aspects of learning as they struggle to develop more effective models for delivering CPE. Perhaps part of the struggle is related to the inadequate manner in which CPE programs and activities are evaluated at the present time. The few studies I found in the literature addressing this issue are discussed in the following section.

Evaluation of CPE activities. Sleezer et al. (2004) point out that CPE evaluations are generally limited to asking participants to rate different aspects of training activities, and sometimes also how they intend to use their new knowledge and skills in the workplace. This is certainly the usual procedure at social work CPE events. Knox (2002) suggests that follow-up studies can provide information regarding the application

and benefits of CPE activities. He adds, however, that such follow-up studies are complex, expensive, and relatively infrequent. In his text, he outlines eight different aspects of CPE programs that can become the focus of evaluation. These include needs assessment, contextual analysis, goals and policies, staffing assessment, participation, program, materials, outcomes and impact.

Ottoson (1994, 1995, 1997, 2000; Ottoson & Patterson, 2000; Ottoson, Streib, Thomas, Rivera, & Stevenson, 2004) has been at the forefront of researching the application of what is learned from CPE to workplace practice in the health field.

Addressing her adult educator colleagues, she asserts:

Application needs to be anticipated during program design and pursued in program implementation and evaluation. The multitude of influences on application by participants, education programs, the innovation [presented in training sessions], and the practice context, suggest that devoting no time or little time for synthesis, integration, and planning beyond the program is inadequate preparation for application. Helping participants anticipate and plan for barriers may facilitate practice changes. Helping them plan ways to strengthen their potential sources of support and reinforcement for the innovation in their work environment may be equally important, especially if the innovation is complex and requires a long time to apply. (1997, pp. 105-106)

Ottoson and Patterson (2000) conducted a follow up study with a group of health professionals (physicians, nurses, counselors, and rehabilitation specialists) to determine how factors in the workplace influenced the application of knowledge and skills acquired in CPE. These factors included encouragement, support, resources, opportunity, and

authority. They found that the strength of any one of these factors varied across the four disciplines. They concluded that context determines application of CPE learning to some extent, but not as much as they had anticipated, and they encourage others to employ multifactor conceptual frameworks when evaluating CPE.

Some of the other factors Ottoson (1997) looked at in an earlier study included the educational program itself, the innovation to be applied, the disposition of the learner, the enabling skills of the learner, the characteristics of the context of application, and social support. Ottoson found that the disposition of the learner played a strong role in CPE application in the workplace. This included the participant's reason for attending the CPE event in the first place, his or her values and beliefs, and the decision made by that participant to actually use the innovation presented in the training.

In 2000, Ottoson proposed a Situated Evaluation Framework (SEF) for evaluating the impact and transfer of learning from CPE activities into the workplace. She developed the SEF because of the absence of evaluation models specific to CPE. Her model "situates the learner and knowledge assessment at the junction of the CPE educational context, the participant's practice context, and the evaluation context" (p. 44). She seems to be trying to align the evaluation of CPE programs with efforts in the field to increase understanding of the links between knowledge, professional practice, and work context (Daley, 1998, 2000, 2001a).

In the field of education, Guskey (2002a; 2002b; 2003) has conducted research on the effectiveness of professional development activities for teachers. He finds there is little consensus among researchers about what effectiveness actually means. He believes improvements in student performance should be the true measure of effectiveness, rather

than the self-reports of teachers. He notes there have been some efforts to link PD effectiveness with student performance in the teaching of math and science, but not in other content areas.

In summary, relatively little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of CPE activities and the impact of these activities on professional practice. One of the main reasons is the complexity of the issue. Many factors are involved, such as the quality of the CPE activity, the workplace context in which new learning is applied, and the disposition of the learner/practitioner. Many writers encourage more research in this area.

Summary. In this section, I have noted NASW's definition of CPE, outlined the history of CPE across the professions, described the three main CPE models, and addressed two current issues in the field, such as the need for a more encompassing model and the need to improve the evaluation of CPE activities.

I will now turn to the portion of my literature review that addresses the topic of professional expertise. There is a large body of literature on the general topic of expertise, and a considerable amount on the development of expertise. However, I limited my search to the development of professional expertise, with particular emphasis on how this occurs in the fields of education, health care (primarily medicine and nursing), psychology, and social work.

Professional Expertise

I felt it was important to explore the literature on professional expertise in order to support my question of whether or not school social workers' preferences for professional development activities change over time. In addition, I felt this body of literature would

help me understand how professional growth occurs in contexts that lack the format and structure of formal CPE activities.

The main search words I used to access this body of literature were *professional expertise, professional development, professional career development, and social work expertise*. I also searched the literature in fields closely related to social work, such as counseling, education, and healthcare, and was able to find a few relevant studies simply by using the term *expertise* as my search word. The sections that follow describe the results of this search.

A model of professional expertise. Dreyfus and Dreyfus published their seminal work on the study of professional expertise in 1986, and many writers continue to reference their writings (e.g., Eraut, 1994; Fook, 2002; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 1997, 2000; Jarvis, 1999, 2006; Queeney, 2000; Skovholt & Jennings, 2004). The two Dreyfus brothers, a philosophy professor and a computer engineer, developed a model of skill acquisition that includes five stages: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise. Their model reflects the skill acquisition processes exhibited by members of the four very diverse groups they studied: airplane pilots, automobile drivers, adult learners of a second language, and chess players. Dreyfus and Dreyfus point out that not all people reach the level of expertise, but their model provides a useful framework for conceptualizing the progression through the stages of skill development that might ultimately culminate in reaching a level of expertise.

The intent of the Dreyfus model (1986) was to highlight complex human processes, particularly intuitive thinking, that culminate in the development of expert knowledge and behavior. At the time, their model was intended primarily as a cautionary

note for people who were wildly enthusiastic over the prospect of developing artificial intelligence machines that would replicate human thought processes. Given their intent, the Dreyfus brothers did not attempt to expand and elaborate upon the various contexts in which these processes occur. They left that work to others.

Definitions of professional expertise. In the area of adult education, Pillay and McCrindle (2005) note, “Professional expertise develops within a given domain of knowledge only as a result of contextualized training and practice” (p. 67). Based on their study of a group of veterinarians, they offer the following definition:

It can be defined as the ability to combine domain knowledge with appropriate professional tools and strategies to solve problems within the socio-cultural context of the profession. With increasing expertise, the individual is able to bring sufficient knowledge and experience to deal with more complex and novel situations. Thus, when presented with an uncommon set of symptoms, an expert is more effective in drawing upon [a] complex set of factors . . . and diagnoses successfully, while a novice would struggle. (p. 67)

Many who study professional expertise echo Pillay and McCrindle’s (2005) definition. These researchers fairly consistently note the importance of experience, practice, and reflection, the capacity to see patterns in complex situations, and the ability to intuitively apply prior knowledge and experience to novel situations (Benner, 1984; Daley, 1998, 2003; Fook et al., 2000; Mott, 2000; Skovholt, 2001; Skovholt & Jennings, 2004; Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enzi, 2000). Some also emphasize the creative and artistic aspects of expert professional practice (Lymbery, 2003; Schön, 1983).

In addition to offering definitions of professional expertise, most of the researchers mentioned above also describe the processes that accompany the development of expertise. In 1991, Lave and Wenger addressed these processes in considerable detail. Their concept of *communities of practice* highlights the processes involved in moving from a peripheral position to a more central point of accomplishment and authority within a group of adult learners committed to a common goal.

Professional career development. Lave and Wenger (1991) studied diverse groups of people engaged in learning activities that included midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers, and recovering alcoholics. Their research enabled them to develop a theoretical model of *communities of practice* that outlines the induction and gradual inclusion of members into a professional community. They describe how newcomers or apprentices observe and incorporate the modeling behaviors of master teachers or mentors into their own ways of working as they move through the stages of skill acquisition.

The one exception to the observing and incorporating process that characterized Lave and Wenger's (1991) research groups was the community of recovering alcoholics (actually, members of Alcoholics Anonymous). The basic mechanism in Alcoholics Anonymous that accounts for the organization's success rests on self-reports of members coupled with feedback and encouragement from group members and sponsors. Once again, this process is reminiscent of the tradition of clinical supervision in the social work profession in which supervisees describe client or situational dilemmas to their supervisors and in turn receive feedback and coaching that helps inform future actions. The supervisor/supervisee relationship is most intense at the beginning of a social

worker's career. Although clinical supervision generally ends when the social worker obtains licensure as an independent practitioner, a relationship resembling mentoring may take its place and continue for many more years.

With Lave and Wenger's (1991) model in mind, I used the search word *communities of practice* to find studies in disciplines closely related to social work. The only resources I found were in the field of education, which seems to have readily embraced the concept. I also found several studies in nursing and counseling that discuss practitioner development throughout various career stages, although the authors of these studies do not specifically reference the concept of communities of practice.

Professional career development and expertise in healthcare, counseling, and education. I confined my exploration in this area primarily to the healthcare, counseling, and education professions in the belief that school social work bridges all these professions. I found studies that address the professional growth of practitioners in all these disciplines, with some placing emphasis on the attainment of a level of professional expertise.

In nursing, the research of Patricia Benner (1984) is frequently cited because of her effort to make explicit the nature of expert clinical nursing practice. Benner notes that advancement in the field of nursing is generally tied to leaving direct practice and moving into administrative or teaching positions. She wanted to make a case for the high levels of expertise that tend to go unrecognized in the direct practice of clinical nursing. In her study, she compared the responses of novice and experienced nurses to critical incidents in their practice as a way of highlighting the intuitive nature of the experienced nurses' responses to complex medical situations.

In education, Steffy et al. (2000) trace the career development of teachers and identify six phases in teachers' careers: novice, apprentice, professional, expert, distinguished, and emeritus. They discuss the qualities and behaviors that characterize each phase, and they emphasize that all teachers are capable of reaching the expert phase when provided with appropriate and adequate support.

More relevant to social work, Rønnestad and Skovholt (2001, 2003) and Skovholt and Rønnestad (2001, 2003) conducted fairly extensive research on the career development of counselors and therapists. Presumably some of the participants in their studies were social workers, but they do not separate out the pre-service training of their participants by discipline. They simply refer to them all as "counselors and therapists." They identify many themes that characterized the professional growth of their participants that have relevance to my study.

One theme is: "As the professional matures, continuous professional reflection become the central developmental process" (p. 27). However, they point out that the opportunity to reflect on interactions with clients may not often be possible in view of the reality that workplaces frequently operate in a crisis mode. They note that when clinical supervision is properly conducted, it can help offset the frantic pace of the workplace by providing space for reflection.

Another theme is: "Clients are a continuous major source of influence and serve as primary teachers" (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2001, p. 32). I found little in the literature that actually names clients as major contributors to the professional growth of therapists and counselors. But as Rønnestad and Skovholt note, "The reaction of the client, student,

or patient, however, continually gives data for reflection” (p. 33). They seem to be referencing Schön’s (1983) concept of “reflection-in-action.”

Another relevant theme in Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2001) work is: “Modeling/imitation is a powerful and preferred early--but not later--learning method” (p. 34). This theme is reminiscent of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) model of communities of practice in which learning from modeled behavior is prominent, particularly when an individual first enters the community.

In yet another theme, Rønnestad and Skovholt (2001) point out that events in one’s personal life significantly impact professional growth, such as the normal process of aging and maturation that provides increased knowledge about physical, intellectual, and emotional growth. They also mention more atypical events such as losing a job or winning acclaim for a particular accomplishment. They believe such events enhance practitioners’ understanding of the life situations clients bring to them.

And finally, a theme in Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2001) work that is unquestionably related to my study is: “Development is impacted by multiple sources that are experienced in both common and unique ways” (p. 30). Their list of “multiple sources” include: “professional elders such as mentors, supervisors, and teachers; clients, students, and patients; theories and researchers; peers and colleagues; and the larger social-cultural environment in the profession and the larger society” (p. 30).

In disciplines closely allied with school social work, I found several articles of interest. One is Guest’s (2000) inquiry into the career development of school psychologists. She found that the participants in her study tended not to conceptualize their careers in terms of stages or phases as other professionals do (Dreyfus and Dreyfus,

1986; Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enzi, 2000). Guest wonders if environmental factors such as state and federal legislation, changing mandates in special education, and increasingly diverse student populations account for this. She notes:

Because the school psychology role is so varied and there are frequently significant shifts in specific activities and responsibilities over the career course, this profession may be characterized more by something like a series of short-term careers or “mini careers” than by the perception of a single career characterized by stages. That is in contrast to teaching, for example, where perhaps the core functions remain more constant so that one may experience states of increasing competence in performing those core functions. (p. 251)

Although my study did not attempt to identify stages or phases in school social workers’ careers, I think Guest’s observation that environmental factors appeared to influence her participants’ practice is important. I certainly found that to be true in this study, and I will elaborate on this finding in later chapters.

Another article of interest is an outline by Bobo, Adams, and Cooper (2002) of a set of competencies designed to promote the development of excellence in school nursing practice. This report is part of an effort by the school nursing profession to establish a national set of standards to help guide the development of school nursing programs. The authors emphasize that nursing practice in the schools is very different from practice in medical settings, and they advocate for a separate set of guidelines to support the establishment and effective functioning of school nursing programs. The authors include a series of standards focusing on the continuing professional development of school nurses. Unfortunately, as in school social work, the standards in school nursing devoted

to ongoing professional development are fairly global and leave much open to interpretation. Needless to say, I believe it is important for student support professionals to include such standards in their national documents so educational administrators recognize the need to support activities that promote the professional growth of these practitioners.

I also found several studies specific to school counselors. Most advocate in a general way for the need to redesign school counseling programs in order to remain aligned with national educational reform efforts and address the needs of increasingly diverse student populations (Feller, 2003; Fontaine, 1998; Greer & Greer, 1995; Kaplan, 1997; Keys, Bemak, & Lockhart, 1998). Very few, however, identify the specific skills school counselors need to develop in order to align their practice with contemporary reform efforts and changing student populations. One article discusses the role of ongoing study groups as a vehicle for supporting the development of new skills (Robertson, 1998). Other publications speak of the need to develop a counselor mentoring model designed to support the acquisition of new knowledge and skills (Palsey & Benschhoff, 1996; Peace, 1995). Another article encourages school counselors to participate in professional development activities such as, “taking continuing education courses and attending workshops related to needed areas of competence . . . [and] participating in professional support groups” (Butler & Constantine, 2005, p. 61) as a way to prevent or manage burnout. Once again, the recommendations are fairly general.

The articles referenced above related to the professional growth of student support personnel (school nurses, psychologists, and counselors) are important because they address the professional development of school personnel who, like school social

workers, are “guests in a host setting” (Dupper, 2003). The host settings, of course, are the educational facilities in which these support personnel practice.

Before moving on to a discussion of the development of expertise in school social work, I would like to step back momentarily and describe the research on professional expertise in the field of social work in general. This research is highly relevant to the discussion of school social work expertise that follows.

Social work expertise. Fook et al. (2000) seem to be in the forefront of the social work profession’s efforts to conceptualize the development of practice expertise, much as Benner (1984) did for clinical nursing. Fook et al. ground their model in the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), but they make some important distinctions and also extend the number of stages the Dreyfus brothers identified. The stages Fook et al. propose include: pre-student, beginner, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, experience, and expert.

Essentially, Fook et al. (2000) have inserted the pre-student stage before the novice stage. Fook and her colleagues believe there is a mindset in the pre-student stage that is based upon personal experiences and influences that are culturally determined. They also insert an “experience” stage before the expert stage. In their view, “Not all experienced practitioners are expert, since expertise involves other dimensions which cannot simply be developed from experience and long practice” (p. 180). They elaborate by saying, “Reaching the expert stage may involve factors such as an openness to new ideas, a preparedness to think creatively, [and] a frame of reference which frames problems in complex, as opposed to routine, ways” (p. 180).

School social work expertise. Although Fook and her colleagues (2000) discuss the development of professional expertise among human services workers in general, their concepts most definitely apply to school social workers. They describe many behaviors that characterize expert practitioners, all of which I can easily attribute to school social work colleagues I regard as experts in our field. The behaviors they describe include the ability to: recognize multiple viewpoints and multi-faceted aspects of situations, use an amalgam of knowledge to create new knowledge, respond effectively to change and unpredictability, draw upon a wide variety of skills, re-cast skills in relation to context, demonstrate a sense of personal agency, engage in creative risk-taking, remain grounded yet transcendent, and recognize one's commitment to the profession as a "calling" (pp. 181-184).

Schön (1987) uses the term *professional artistry* to describe behaviors some professionals display in "unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice" (p. 22). Schön's discussion of the term reminds me of the creative behaviors Fook et al. (2000) describe that characterize expert practitioners. I have observed the work of school social workers I greatly admire that assumes almost a dance-like quality, so I appreciate Schön's concept of professional artistry.

The work of Steffy et al. (2000) is also applicable to school social workers, such as their six phases of teacher development: novice, apprentice, professional, expert, distinguished, and emeritus. Their examples apply to school social workers, too, such as when they describe expert teachers as people who:

Are able to reflect on their practice, . . . are committed to the newest and best ideas in the profession, . . . are usually connected with other expert teachers

within the district, region, and state, . . . [and] hold leadership roles in professional associations” (pp. 8-9). In addition, they refer to distinguished teachers as, “the ‘pied pipers’ of the profession . . . [that] impact education-related decisions at city, state, and national levels” (p. 9).

There are people in school social work that I, too, consider to be “pied pipers.” These are the folks who step forward and actively lobby for legislation at state and national levels addressing the social and emotional needs of students.

Summary. In this section, I discussed my review of the literature relevant to the development of professional expertise. I reviewed the pioneering work of the Dreyfus brothers (1986) and offered definitions of the concept. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) model of communities of practice was relevant to this discussion. I also outlined the literature on the development of expertise in the fields of healthcare, counseling, and education. Fook and her colleagues (2000) are taking the lead in conceptualizing professional expertise in social work in general, but I found nothing in this area specific to school social work. Rather, the emphasis in the school social work literature is on the need for practitioners to develop new competencies in order to support school reform movements. I will discuss some of this work in the summary at the end of this chapter.

In the literature on professional expertise, I felt Rønnestad and Skovholt (2001) placed the greatest emphasis on how informal learning opportunities contribute to the development of expertise. For example, they name clients, peers, and mentors, and personal life experiences as important sources of informal learning. In the next section, I will discuss the literature I reviewed on the continuum of formal, non-formal, informal, and incidental learning.

The Formal, Informal, and Incidental Learning Continuum

In actuality, there is much confusion about the terms *formal*, *non-formal*, *informal*, and *incidental* learning. Most of the literature in this area has appeared in the last two decades. I will highlight the major contributors to this body of knowledge in the sections that follow.

Formal learning. Eraut (1990) defines formal learning in its broadest sense as having at least one of the following characteristics: a prescribed learning framework, an organized learning event or package, the presence of a designated teacher or trainer, clearly stated outcomes, and the award of a qualification or credit. Other definitions are similar, but use more specific descriptors, such as: they are institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, structured by specific learning objectives and strategies, facilitated by a teacher or trainer, involving learners who participate intentionally, and granting some kind of credit or certification (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2006; Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Caffarella and Zinn (1999) cite professional meetings, workshops, and conferences as examples of formal learning.

Non-formal learning. Most of the literature on non-formal learning comes from European sources. Eraut is credited with introducing the term *non-formal* (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2003), although he does not actually define it. Instead, he describes formal learning (as noted above) and implies that all other forms of learning are non-formal (Eraut, 1990). It is interesting to note that Eraut initially rejected the term *informal learning*, in part because he felt the word *informal* had unwanted and confusing

connotations. However, in 2001, the European Commission¹ published a report describing non-formal learning as an intermediate category between formal and informal learning. The Commission views non-formal learning as located primarily in the workplace, community, or voluntary setting; a trainer, coach or mentor generally structures the process; it is intentional on the part of the learner; and it usually provides no form of certification (Colley et al., 2006). By contrast, Björnåvold (2001) believes:

The term non-formal learning encompasses informal learning which can be described as unplanned learning in work situations and elsewhere, but also includes planned and explicit approaches to learning introduced in work organisations and elsewhere, not recognised within the formal education and training system. (p. 24)

A different perspective is offered by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2008). That organization states that non-formal learning is “learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view” (p. 133). To add to the confusion, Colley et al. (2003) point out that non-formal and informal learning are often used interchangeably in the literature.

Informal learning. There have been many attempts in recent years to define and describe the process of informal learning in the workplace. In Australia, Beckett and

¹ The European Commission is a component of the European Union, a conglomerate of twenty-seven European countries that embrace the concept of life-long learning as a way of bolstering employment in the workforce (Colley et al., 2006).

Hager (2002) conceptualize practice-based informal learning as contextual, organic and holistic, activity- and experience-based, often collaborative and collegial, located in situations where learning is not the primary goal, and activated by individual learners rather than by teachers or trainers.

In this country, Marsick and Watkins (1987, 1990, 2001) have been at the forefront of researchers attempting to understand the nature of informal learning in the workplace. They describe informal learning as a process that is “not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner” (1990, p. 12). They add, “Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organization or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning” (p. 12).

The Education Development Center (EDC) in Newton, Massachusetts, conducted a two-year study of seven United States manufacturing companies widely regarded as high performing work sites. The study sought to determine the nature and extent of informal learning in the workplace. As a result of their research, the EDC defines informal learning as follows:

Informal workplace learning is any workplace learning in which the process through which workers learn is neither determined nor designed by the organization, regardless of the goals toward which the learning is directed, or the setting or activities in which learning occurs. (Aring & Brand, 1998, p. 210)

The EDC built their study on a U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics report published in 1996 indicating that as much as seventy percent of all workplace learning is informal. The EDC believes their findings provide “compelling

evidence that informal learning is the fundamental way that workers develop competence, and acquire new skills and information” (p. 9).

The definitions provided by Beckett and Hager (2002), Marsick and Watkins (1990), and the EDC (Aring & Brand, 1998) emphasize that informal learning rests with the learner, not the organization in which he or she works. The European Commission does not make this point; they say only that informal learning “ in most cases is incidental rather than intentional” (as cited in Colley, et al., 2006, p. 57). Again, the terminology is confusing.

Incidental learning. In 1987, Marsick and Watkins offered the following description of incidental learning in the workplace:

It occurs as a natural offshoot of engaging in professional work when individuals learn to reflect on their experience, design personal learning experiments and engage in self-directed learning projects. . . . Incidental learning is defined as a spontaneous action or transaction, the intention of which is task accomplishment, but which serendipitously increases particular knowledge, skill, or understanding. Incidental learning, then, includes such things as learning from mistakes, learning by doing, learning through networking, and learning from a series of interpersonal experiments. (p. 187)

It should be noted that Marsick and Watkins (1990) include incidental learning in their conceptualization of informal learning rather than separating it out. But in differentiating incidental learning from informal learning, they write:

Incidental learning is defined as a byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture,

trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning. . . . [It] almost always takes place although people are not always conscious of it. (p. 12)

Elsewhere, Marsick and Watkins (2001) write, “When people learn incidentally, their learning may be taken for granted, tacit, or unconscious. However, a passing insight can then be probed and intentionally explored” (p. 26). They point out that in order to enhance this form of learning, it is important to engage in “critical reflection to surface tacit knowledge and beliefs” (p. 30). Otherwise, the beliefs and assumptions generated by incidental learning may prove to be incorrect and lead to inappropriate behaviors and interventions.

Summary. This section addressed the confusion surrounding the terms formal, non-formal, informal, and incidental learning. This lack of clarity prompted a group of British researchers to review several models of learning that employ these terms. Their observations are worth noting and are described in the next section.

A Challenge to Existing Adult Learning Frameworks

In 2003, British researchers Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm published their findings from a major review of ten models of learning that attempted to differentiate between combinations of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. They ended up challenging the formal/non-formal/informal learning framework that serves as a foundation for policy-making regarding workplace learning in many European countries at the present time. In reviewing the literature devoted to these three forms of learning, Colley et al. found that most models emphasize the boundaries between them rather than the commonalities. They reject the notion of boundaries when they assert, “In practice, elements of both formality and informality can be discerned in most, if not all, actual

learning situations” (p. 29). They point out that many writers acknowledge learning is highly complex, so their study convinced them that “differences between learning settings cannot be boiled down into two or even three major types” (p. 29) of learning.

Colley et al. (2003) feel it is important to look at some of the deeper organizing concepts of learning. They believe there are four concepts that characterize learning: purpose, content, processes involved, and the location and setting in which learning takes place. They describe these concepts as *attributes* of learning. They provide numerous examples of learning activities framed by these attributes that highlight the co-existence of formal and informal learning. They conclude their report with the following statements:

- All learning situations contain attributes of in/formality.
- Attributes of formality and informality are interrelated in different ways in different learning situations.
- Those attributes and their interrelationships influence the nature and effectiveness of learning in any situation.
- Those interrelationships and effects can only be properly understood if learning is examined in relation to the wider contexts in which it takes place. This is particularly important when considering issues of empowerment and oppression.

(p. 65)

In essence, Colley and her colleagues believe we can broaden our understanding of learning if we consider the fundamental aspects of learning, rather than remaining preoccupied with whether learning is formal, non-formal, or informal.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the three main bodies of literature I reviewed prior to collecting my research data. These included continuing professional education, the development of professional expertise, and the formal to incidental learning continuum. I also described the work of Colley et al. (2003) who challenged such a continuum and proposed that researchers consider the attributes of learning instead. They identified four main attributes: purpose, content, processes involved, and the location and setting in which learning occurs. They believe that every learning experience contains all elements of the learning continuum and urge theorists to shift their focus to the more fundamental aspects of learning.

Despite extensive review of the literature over many semesters, I found very little research that focuses on the characteristics of CPE and PD activities that most effectively promote the professional growth of social workers--much less school social workers. The closing summary of a chapter in a book written primarily for providers of CPE did grab my attention, however. The cryptic comments of the social worker who wrote the chapter are excerpted as follows:

Given the certainly of change . . . social workers will need constant retraining and continuing education throughout their careers. The changing composition of families, an ever-enlarging aging population, work shortages and work place changes, including rapid advances in technology, a move from public sector to privatized services, and finally the relentless attack on the profession and the marginalized populations served; all of these areas are the challenges facing social workers now and well into the future.

Continuing education for social workers will need to focus on how to do more with less, in a shorter period of time, and in a hostile climate. . . . An integrated approach to education that spans the breadth of the profession's interests and skills and incorporates new technologies and methods, in both micro and macro practice, is the most likely approach to succeed and to keep the profession from splintering even further.

In conclusion, social workers are licensed professionals with mandatory continuing education requirements in most states. Providers should, however, keep in mind that social workers are poorly paid, relative to their professional training. They therefore tend to prefer educational offerings which, along with being license approved, are also low cost, half day or full day events, conducted in settings close to where they work and reside. *Providers of continuing professional education for social workers would also do well to familiarize themselves with the critical issues facing the profession and with the Council on Social Work Education's "Millennium Project."* (Mills, 1998, p. 198, italics in original)

Although Mills (1998) is speaking about the CE needs of social workers in general, there is much she says that is relevant to school social workers. The points she makes about the certainty of change, shifting demographics, advances in technology, changing family constellations, and the need to do more with less are issues that most certainly affect the schools, including student support personnel employed by the schools.

Tracy and Hokenstad (2006) have written a chapter in a recently published sourcebook for school-based support service providers in which they discuss the special

features of working in school settings. They suggest that school-based professionals make a point to engage in CPE events that address these features, such as developing the skills needed to work in a host setting, assessing children within the context of the school and community setting, working on interdisciplinary teams, and effectively combining micro and macro level roles (p. 1184).

Writing specifically about school social work, Franklin (2005) addresses the socio-cultural trends and educational reforms that are increasingly impacting American public schools and have strong implications for school social workers. She outlines a set of competencies school social workers must master in order to work effectively in schools of the future. These competencies include: working with increasingly diverse at-risk populations, conducting interventions supported by evidence-based practice, exercising leadership roles in school environments, making greater use of accountability measures, incorporating technology into service delivery, and developing marketing and contract management skills.

My concern, of course, is how the knowledge and skills embedded in the competencies Franklin (2005) and Tracy and Hokenstad (2006) describe will be incorporated into meaningful CE and PD activities for school social workers. What are optimal learning environments for school social workers? What forms of learning environments enable school social workers to master these competencies? How do research findings about best practice methods become incorporated into service delivery in the schools through CE/PD activities? What forms of support do school social workers need in order to translate new knowledge into service delivery? Are the needs of novice and experienced workers different in relation to mastering the competencies Franklin

describes? If so, how are they different? What adjustments need to be made in CE and PD activities to accommodate these differences? Are CEU-granting activities the primary source of learning for school social workers? If not, what other kinds of activities promote learning? How available are these other kinds of learning activities? These questions are variations of the basic research questions my study addressed.

Chapter III: Methodology

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter I will briefly review the purpose of my study, discuss the methodological tradition I used, and revisit my original research questions. I will also describe my data collection methods and data analysis process, and will conclude by discussing the limitations of this study.

Methodological Tradition

As I stated in the first chapter, most of what we know about school social workers' experiences with professional growth activities is limited to checkmarks and hastily written comments on one-page evaluation forms that are collected at the end of professional workshops and conferences. Furthermore, we know very little about how workplace activities support the professional development of school social workers other than what we can surmise when we read accounts of their work.

I struggled to identify a methodological approach that would help answer my research questions. The two-page questionnaire I used in my pilot study was pretty much useless other than providing demographic information about the participants. I therefore discarded the notion of relying on questionnaires or surveys for this study.

However, the semi-structured interviews with my pilot study participants were such rich sources of data that I decided to rely solely on a qualitative approach for this study (other than using half-page demographic questionnaires). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) note:

The word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meaning. . . . Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed

nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning. (p. 10)

But then the question became, “*Which* qualitative approach?” I initially considered a multiple-case approach but eventually discarded that idea. Then I considered narrative inquiry and phenomenological and grounded theory approaches. But none seemed to “mesh” with my research interests. Finally, I opted to use heuristic inquiry because, quite simply, “It just felt right.”

According to Patton (2002), the “foundational question” of heuristic inquiry is, “What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?” (p. 107). He adds, “Heuristics is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher” (p. 107). I felt heuristic inquiry was appropriate given my long career as a school social worker, including nearly a decade of managing and facilitating the professional development of more than 100 social workers in my school district.

Clark Moustakas is the primary architect of heuristic inquiry, which has “strong roots in humanistic psychology” and “Polanyi’s (1967) emphasis on personal knowledge, indwelling, and the tacit dimension” (Patton, 2002, p. 108). According to Patton, “The rigor of heuristic inquiry comes from systematic observation of and dialogues with self and others, as well as depth interviewing of coresearchers” (p. 108). In this document, I refer to Patton’s “coresearchers” as my “participants.”

According to Douglass and Moustakas (1985), heuristic inquiry is derived from phenomenology, but differs from it in four major ways:

(1) Whereas phenomenology encourages a kind of detachment from the phenomenon being investigated, heuristics emphasizes connectedness and relationship. (2) Whereas phenomenology permits the researcher to conclude with definitive descriptions of the structures of experience, heuristics leads to depictions of essential meanings and portrayal of the intrigue and personal significance that imbue the search to know. (3) Whereas phenomenological research generally concludes with a presentation of the distilled structures of experience, heuristics may involve reintegration of derived knowledge that itself is an act of creative discovery, a synthesis that includes intuition and tacit understanding. (4) Whereas phenomenology loses the persons in the process of descriptive analysis, in heuristics the research participants remain visible in the examination of the data and continue to be portrayed as whole persons.

Phenomenology ends with the essence of experience; heuristics retains the essence of the person in experience. (p. 43)

Moustakas (2002) lists six phases of heuristic inquiry that guide an investigation and represent the basic research design. The first phase is “initial engagement,” in which the task is “to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meaning and personal, compelling implications” (p. 270). The second and third phases are “immersion and incubation,” a continuous process of total immersion in the data, followed by a period of stepping back and then re-immersing again. The fourth and fifth phases are “illumination and

explication.” Illumination is a process in which “essential qualities and themes are discovered” (p. 270), followed by “an elucidation and explication of the themes until an *individual depiction* of the meanings and essences of the experience investigated can be constructed” (p. 270). After the individual depictions have been completed, “a *composite depiction* of the experience is constructed” (p. 270). Finally, “two or three *exemplary portraits* are developed, that is, profiles that are unique yet still embrace and characterize the group as a whole” (p. 270). The final phase of heuristic inquiry is a “creative synthesis,” which is “an original integration of the material that reflects the researcher’s intuition, imagination, and personal knowledge of the meanings and essences of the experience” (p. 270). Moustakas (1990) adds one additional step that relates to the validation of the research:

In heuristic investigations, verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants, sharing with them the meanings and essences of the phenomenon as derived from reflection on and analysis of the verbatim transcribed interview and other material, and seeking their assessment for comprehensiveness and accuracy. (pp. 33-34)

Other qualitative researchers refer to this process as “member checking” (Cresswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002; Tisdell, 2002), which serves to strengthen the internal validity of research findings.

Patton (2002) notes that “heuristic research epitomizes the phenomenological emphasis on meanings and knowing through personal experience; it exemplifies and places at the fore the way in which the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative inquiry; and it challenges in the extreme traditional scientific concerns about researcher

objectivity and detachment” (p. 109). Patton’s statement echoes Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) words cited earlier regarding an emphasis in qualitative research on “the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied (p. 10). This phenomena is precisely the reason I elected to use heuristic inquiry to frame this study.

Research Questions Revisited

The original intent of this study was to examine the characteristics of continuing professional education (CPE) and professional development (PD) activities that most heavily influence the practice of school social workers. The study was designed to explore school social workers' experiences with both formal and informal learning activities. It was intended that particular attention be paid to how content, structure, and format influence the value school social workers attach to these activities.

My original research questions were:

RQ#1: What are school social workers' preferences for continuing education and professional development activities in terms of the content, format, and structure of these activities?

RQ#2: Do school social workers’ preferences for different forms of continuing education and professional development activities change over time?

RQ#3: To what extent are school social workers able to use what they learn in continuing education and professional development activities in their practice in the schools?

However, early in my study I was struck by the fact that each participant’s practice in the schools was totally unique. I had begun to sense this in my pilot study with five school social workers, but did not fully appreciate it until I worked with a larger

sample. Although the initial focus of this study was fairly circumscribed, the data that emerged from the first few interviews prompted me to revise my scope of inquiry. I placed much less emphasis on the specifics of CPE activities and focused more on the characteristics of general learning experiences my participants valued most while engaged in the practice of school social work.

In the early interviews, I was also impressed by the profound impact the participants' life history experiences had on the way they approached their work. These experiences were both personal and professional. I therefore revised my research questions to include personal growth experiences the participants valued and assimilated into their practice. The research questions that subsequently guided my data collection and analysis are as follows:

RQ#1: How do school social workers acquire knowledge and skills that inform their practice over time?

RQ#2: What professional and personal growth experiences do school social workers value most?

RQ#3: How do professional and personal growth experiences impact the practice of school social workers?

I felt these revised questions were far more encompassing than the initial set of questions. They expanded my scope of inquiry by highlighting the value and impact of workplace, prior, and outside learning experiences that were both personal and professional in nature. They freed me up from my initial focus which centered primarily on CPE activities. By orienting my research to this new set of questions, I feel I was able to gather data that greatly enriched this study.

Methods for Collecting Data

Sample. I drew the twenty participants in this study from the membership of two state school social work organizations located in the southwestern region of the country. Altogether they represented five different school districts. This was a convenience sample, as it consisted primarily of school social workers I had known and worked with over the years. There were only two participants I had not known prior to the study. I met them at their state school social work conference and they expressed a great deal of interest in my research topic, so I invited them to participate.

The group of participants also represented a purposive sample. I selected individuals that for the most part had extensive experience in a variety of assignments and were regarded as highly qualified practitioners. In other words, I regarded them as dynamic individuals--and they also happened to be quite articulate. Even the two participants I did not know prior to the study impressed me with their poise and curiosity when I first met them, so that is what prompted me to invite them to participate.

There were six other school social workers that said they were interested in participating in the study. However, they did not return the consent forms I sent them. One of the six asked me to resend the packet (cover letter and consent forms; see Appendices A and B), but again she did not return it and I did not persist.

My sample included seventeen women and three men. I was comfortable with this ratio because it reflects the predominance of women in the larger school social work community. Eight of the women were people of color (Native American and Hispanic); the rest were Anglo. All three males were Hispanic. Such a high percentage of people of

color is *not* representative of the general school social work community, as it is a profession in which Anglo women predominate (Kelly, 2009).

Most of the participants had extended careers as school social workers, although a few were in the early to middle stages of their careers. They ranged in age from the mid-thirties to mid-sixties. They covered all levels of K-12 education (elementary school, middle school, and high school). Six participants worked in either an alternative school for high-risk students or an intensive day-treatment program for severely emotionally disturbed students. (See Appendix G for more complete profiles of participants.)

Data collection. My primary method of collecting data was through semi-structured interviews with the participants (see Appendix D). Eleven of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, eight by telephone, and one by email. The face-to-face and telephone interviews averaged two hours in length. The shortest interview lasted a little more than an hour and the longest interview ran close to three hours. Interestingly, the participant with the shortest interview provided the most extensive follow-up email responses (five), all of which were very comprehensive. Actually, I conducted one face-to-face interview with two participants at the same time. It was one of the longer interviews and in many ways felt like a mini focus group, as the two continually played off each other's ideas. Many of the phone interviews were broken up into three or four segments in order to minimize the discomfort of holding a telephone to one's ear.

In the single email interview I conducted, I sent the participant a list of questions and she returned her responses in two installments. Her comments were candid and succinct, but also very comprehensive. She had retired from school social work and moved out of the country, but jumped at the opportunity to participate in the study. She

explained it would give her an opportunity to reflect on her work experiences and consider new ventures.

As the interviews progressed, issues emerged that I had not anticipated, so I addressed these issues in subsequent interviews with the remaining participants. For example, after the first few interviews I began asking the participants if they felt any of their experiences outside the workplace influenced their practice. I also began asking about the extent to which they felt trust and emotion were involved in the learning experiences they regarded as significant. (See Appendix D for original and revised interview guides.)

After transcribing each interview, I made follow-up contacts with the participants. These contacts enabled me to clarify information the participants had provided, as well as to explore additional issues that emerged as the interviews progressed. These follow-up contacts were made either by telephone or email, or a combination of both.

The demographic questionnaires were another source of data (see Appendix C). Among other things, I asked about the number of schools the participants covered and how their positions were funded. This became very important data, as I will explain in later chapters.

I kept field notes throughout the data gathering process that primarily recorded my observations of the participants' school sites and workspaces. I noted the size and location of their offices (e.g., close to or far away from administrative offices; in the main building, adjacent building, or barracks, etc.); the presence or absence of windows; the equipment and materials the participants used; the placement and apparent comfort of furnishings; the display of students' work; the presence of features such as sinks,

refrigerators, and microwaves; personal decorative touches; and the general appeal of the room.

I also kept a journal throughout the data collection process. I used it to reflect on the interviews and develop questions to pursue in my follow-up contacts with the participants. I also recorded my thoughts while listening to the tape recordings and transcribing the interviews, making note of whenever the participants spoke enthusiastically about something. This was particularly helpful for addressing my second research question regarding the extent to which the participants valued their learning experiences. In addition, I used the journal to keep track of references from the literature that were relevant to the participants' narratives.

I continued to make entries in the journal throughout the data analysis process, writing comments about the themes that emerged and the interrelationships I found among these themes. My notes on the interrelationships of themes provided the foundation for the theoretical model that gradually took shape.

I felt the journal served as a vehicle for recording my reflections during the "immersion and incubation" phases that Moustakas (2002) attributes to heuristic inquiry. I frequently reread the journal and used it as a springboard for generating associations in my data. I felt this action supported both the immersion and incubation processes.

The combination of several data collection methods (interviews, follow-up contacts, demographic questionnaires, field notes, and research journal) enabled me to *triangulate* my data. Merriam (1998) describes triangulation as a process in which multiple sources of data and multiple methods for collecting these data are used "to

confirm the emerging findings” (p. 204). She adds that it is a procedure that helps establish the validity of the research study.

Data Analysis

The collection and analysis of my data were actually co-occurring processes. After transcribing each interview and phone conversation, or after receiving an email, I color coded the texts identifying categories and subcategories associated with my research questions. I proceeded to compare each new set of data with data I had already collected--a process in qualitative research known as cross-case analysis (Patton, 2002). I also added or collapsed categories as the interviews progressed. Whenever I added a new category, I reviewed the interviews I had already coded to determine if they, too, contained information related to this new category. For example, issues of trust and the significance of emotion associated with learning experiences became new categories part way through the interview process. Also, in one interview I was particularly impressed by the many examples the participant provided related to facilitating the learning of others. So, I added that as a category and once again reviewed all previous transcripts searching for similar examples. I felt this process represented the “illumination” phase Moustakas (2002) describes.

I subsequently developed lists of themes for each participant--the “explication” process Moustakas (2002) associates with heuristic inquiry. Under each theme I listed the participants’ activities that supported the themes. I also developed a separate set of documents listing the themes followed by the participants’ statements relevant to these themes. I sent both documents to the participants asking them to review and edit them to ensure I had represented them accurately (see Appendix E for samples of these two

documents). I asked the participants to either return the edited documents in the enclosed stamped self-addressed envelopes or telephone or email me with any additions, deletions, and/or corrections. This action represented the final step Moustakas (2002) describes, which is seeking verification from the research participants regarding the accuracy and comprehensiveness of my analysis of the data they provided. In addition to the data collection methods I described above, I felt this step also helped establish the validity of my study (Merriam, 1998).

All but one of the participants called or emailed me to say the documents accurately reflected their words. The one participant who returned the documents in the mail had made a few minor changes, such as writing in the name of her school in several places as well as spelling out the name of the prestigious award her school had won. I, of course, had disguised these names in an effort to protect her identity. But I was aware she had played a significant role in her school's achievement, so I felt she probably just wanted to make sure I "got it right"!

After developing "individual depictions" (Moustakas, 2002) of the participants' learning experiences, I stepped back for an extended period of time (another period of "incubation") to consider what my data revealed. It was during this period of reflection, accompanied by multiple journal entries, that a theoretical model emerged. Again, using Moustakas' terms, I felt this represented the "creative synthesis" phase of the heuristic inquiry process, as well as a "composite depiction." In a later chapter, I will present "exemplary portraits" of two participants that will further illustrate the interrelationships between the components and attributes of the model.

Limitations of the Study

Because this was essentially an exploratory study, it is possible I overlooked important issues related to my topic. This might have occurred during any stage: while designing my study, selecting my participants, gathering data, and analyzing and interpreting my data. In particular, I might have missed gathering important data because of the questions I asked or the way I asked them. Because of my familiarity with the topic, I might also have missed opportunities to push for details of certain professional growth activities because I made assumptions about what the participants told me.

My sampling procedure might also have imposed limitations on this study. First, it was a convenience sample comprised of school social workers employed by school districts in five large cities in two southwestern states. Thus, for the most part my findings are not representative of the professional growth experiences of school social workers in smaller communities and rural areas in either of these two states or across the nation. In addition, it was a purposive sample consisting primarily of highly experienced school social workers. Therefore, my findings do not represent the experiences of newer and younger practitioners in the profession. Because of these two factors, the reliability of my findings is therefore a major limitation.

In addition, my sample of twenty participants was relatively small. However, if I could add the five participants in my pilot study, that would boost the number. In actuality, the only major difference between this study and the pilot study was that I eliminated many questions in the pilot study questionnaire that did not generate useful information. Also, in this study I conducted the follow-up contacts on an individual basis rather than gathering the participants together in a focus group as I did in the pilot study.

But the basic interview questions in both studies were essentially the same, so I feel I can justify combining the number of participants in the two studies and claim that a total of twenty-five individuals participated in my research. Nevertheless, it is still a relatively small number.

Another possible limitation relates to the fact that all but one of the participants were people I already knew. In fact, I had engaged in numerous professional growth activities with most of them. I therefore had background information about them that might have colored my interpretation of their responses. Also, I had been in a leadership position in one of the school districts and had actually supervised some of the participants in that district, so this power differential might have biased the accounts of their experiences. Even though I had retired from that position prior to beginning this study, I feel it is an issue that could represent a limitation of this study.

Lastly, since I relied so heavily on the narrative accounts of my participants, I must consider the possibility of memory loss and the reconstruction of events not entirely faithful to the original events. This might have been particularly true in relation to my third research question that asks about the impact of learning on practice. I think it is probably less of an issue regarding my first two questions (sources of learning over time and the extent to which learning experiences are valued).

Chapter Summary

I used heuristic inquiry as my methodological approach in this qualitative study. Altogether, there were 20 participants. Semi-structured interviews and follow-up contacts with the participants were the primary methods I used to gather data. I also distributed a

half-page demographic questionnaire, kept a research journal, and wrote field notes recording my observations of the participants' work settings.

Part way through the interviews I found I needed to revise my research questions. Essentially, I wanted to identify learning activities the research participants valued most and also determine how these learning experiences impacted their practice. My revised research questions placed much less emphasis on formal learning activities and more emphasis on work-embedded learning. The revised questions also addressed personal learning, not simply professional learning experiences.

In accordance with the heuristic inquiry tradition (Moustakas, 1990), there were six phases in this study: 1) initial engagement, 2) immersion, 3) incubation, 4) illumination, 5) explication, and 6) creative synthesis. An additional step involved verifying with the participants that my representations of their comments were accurate.

I felt the combination of my data collection methods helped establish the validity of my study. However, a major limitation of the study is reliability. My sample was relatively small and the participants all worked in large city school districts in one section of the country. It therefore does not reflect the learning experiences of school social workers in smaller districts or in other parts of the country.

Chapter IV: Analysis of Data and Report of Research Findings

Chapter Introduction

The original intent of this study was to examine the characteristics of continuing professional education (CPE) and professional development (PD) activities that most heavily influence the practice of school social workers. The study was designed to explore school social workers' experiences with formal, informal, and incidental learning activities. It was intended that particular attention be paid to how content, structure, and format influence the value school social workers attach to these activities.

However, very early in my study, I was struck by the fact that each participant's practice in the schools was totally unique. I had begun to sense this in my pilot study with five school social workers, but did not fully appreciate it until I worked with a larger sample. Although the initial focus of this study was fairly circumscribed, the data that emerged from the first few interviews prompted me to expand my scope of inquiry. I subsequently placed much less emphasis on the specifics of CPE and PD activities and focused more on the characteristics of general learning experiences my participants valued while engaged in the practice of school social work.

I was also impressed in the early interviews by the profound impact my participants' personal and professional histories had on the way they approached their work. I therefore revised my research questions to include the personal growth experiences my participants valued and assimilated into their practice. The research questions that subsequently guided my data collection and analytical processes are as follows:

RQ#1: How do school social workers acquire knowledge and skills that inform their practice over time?

RQ#2: What professional and personal growth experiences do school social workers value most?

RQ#3: How do professional and personal growth experiences impact the practice of school social workers?

In this chapter, I will describe the themes and subthemes that emerged from my data in relation to my research questions. These themes and subthemes evolved into a list of six major findings, which I will outline at the end of the chapter. I will interpret and synthesize these findings in the following chapter.

I am presenting my findings in two separate chapters because of Bloomberg and Volpe's (2008) suggestion that it is an effective way to manage vast amounts of qualitative data. This chapter includes a minimum of references to relevant literature, and they are included only to define theoretical concepts related to my data analysis. I will cite many more references in the following chapter for the purpose of supporting the interpretation and synthesis of my findings.

Themes Related to Research Questions

As noted, the research questions for this study focused on sources of learning for school social workers, the value of learning experiences, and the impact of these experiences on practice. I will discuss each research question in turn and report the themes that emerged in relation to each question. I will also include participant comments that support these themes. I am providing the participants with pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity.

RQ#1: How do school social workers acquire knowledge and skills that inform their practice over time?

Two major themes surfaced from my analysis of the data in relation to this question: 1) the significance of the context of practice, and 2) the learning that occurred within the context of practice. Both themes were equally important; neither one prevailed. They actually appeared “hand-in-hand.”

A key phrase in this question is “over time.” This is because over the course of a career many changes occur that inevitably affect what school social workers learn and how they practice. According to the participants, such changes included new assignments, contextual changes at all levels of the educational system, new responsibilities, expansion of interests, shifts in focus of practice, and life-changing personal events. The repertoire of knowledge and skills that accumulated as a result of these changes represented personal and professional growth throughout the participants’ working lives. I will discuss these changes one by one and provide examples from my participants’ experiences.

New assignments. New assignments characterized the career trajectories of the majority of my participants. These assignments primarily included new schools, new programs, and new school districts. Only four of the twenty participants had remained with their original assignments. Every new assignment precipitated a change in the context of practice and the beginning of a new acculturation cycle. It involved learning about a new school community, developing new relationships, and determining what role to play in supporting the educational goals and needs of the school, as well as the needs of the students in that school. For example, Lynne had worked at a middle school and an

alternative school for pregnant teens before being assigned to a large high school and a small elementary school. This is how she characterized her role in these assignments:

- I'm a different person in every school building. Not my personality, but my role.

In the larger schools, I'm seen as much more specialized--that is, I'm there just to work with the special ed kids. But in the alternative school [for pregnant teens], every girl under the roof was a student I might work with.

Joan shared her experience of leaving her job in a school located in a psychiatric facility and taking a new position in a private alternative school:

- The alternative school was a very different kind of school and it was very difficult.

But once I felt comfortable, I learned a lot--not so much from any specific person, but from the philosophy of the program. It was a Frierean model. It was very different from mental health, which is more of a medical model. That was an extremely important learning environment for me.

Lastly, Lisa moved from an itinerant position serving three elementary schools to a full-time position in her district's program for the most severely emotionally and behaviorally disordered elementary school students. She realized she needed to strengthen some of her skills:

- I wanted to brush up a little bit on the theory and use of sand tray therapy, especially with young kids. So, a couple of times I went online when I felt I needed some consultation. You know in your mind the difference between traditional sand tray archetypal basics and sand play, also play therapy. I know you can use them all and blend them, but I just felt it was important to know what

I was doing--to have it distinct and clear in my mind. I also consult a lot with psychologists and other therapists about play therapy.

New assignments came about for the participants for a variety of reasons. For example, Lynn's position at the alternative high school was cut during a budget crisis, so she was reassigned to a regular high school and elementary school; Joan was hired by an alternative school after leaving her job as a program manager in a day treatment program where political and financial issues conflicted with her sense of ethics; and Lisa filled a position that became available when a school social worker retired.

Contextual changes. Changes occur constantly at all levels of educational systems, including site, district, state, and national levels. District administrators generally are the conduit for disseminating information about policy changes at the state and national levels and are responsible for organizing in-services for school personnel addressing these changes. In addition, staff meetings at school sites further diffuse information about policy changes and the new procedures that accompany them.

At the *site* level, the participants experienced changes in administration, staff, student populations, programs, curricula, school structures, the availability of equipment and materials, and personal tragedies that affected entire educational communities. For example:

- When I first started here, it was such a small school that we had almost daily team meetings. Kids were being staffed constantly. But it's a very different school today. We don't have team meetings any more. We have a staff meeting once a month; the district prescribes that and it's mostly teacher driven. I was so lucky I

had that training early on. If I had come here now and couldn't have had that experience, I think it would have been a lot more difficult. (Pia)

- We were struck by tragedy at our school on several different occasions. I think that was profound for all of us. I think after the death of our principal's child, it changed her and it changed us all. It was the suicide of a young person. It's about mental illness--and it's *scary*. . . . You don't want to do the wrong thing, but there's no clear path to help a child manage his or her sadness, frustration, or family situation. We just try to do the best we can. (Marian)

At the *district* level, the participants encountered policy and procedural changes, structural changes, political issues between departments, and the increase or decrease of funding for materials and professional development. Several participants also made reference to the presence or absence of district support for their work. For example:

- The person at central office in charge of us really understood social work. So, while our monthly meetings tended to be largely just catching up on the latest district policy regarding blowing your nose or something like that, at least during one of our professional development days she would devote something to social work. But when she left, that all changed and the meetings really became an opportunity for administration to come in and tell us how we were supposed to do our jobs. There wasn't really any good give and take or discussion among the social workers anymore. (Alice)

Alice missed the discussions with peers because it provided a source of support and also opportunities for peer consultation.

Most of the participants who provided clinical supervision for either social work interns or new social workers in their districts said they felt they learned as much from this experience as their supervisees learned from them. However, in one school district these supervisory positions were in jeopardy because of administrative conflicts. For example:

- There's some animosity between the two departments that oversee our work. For example, one department didn't want to pay for clinical supervision this year, because they feel the Medicaid money it generates doesn't come back to them and instead goes to the other department. That was the whole debate, so we didn't get paid to do supervision for a while. But then something happened and we got re-instated. But, for next year, we've already been told we won't be getting paid to do supervision anymore. (Luisa)
- There's no budget now for professional development. It's *gone*. So, we've been on our own. But I think all that training a while back really helped me improve the kinds of things I use with my clients. (Gabriel)

Marian commented about the availability of equipment and materials in her district:

- Social workers were supposed to get some money from special ed to buy supplies and materials. Some years you'd get it, but other years you didn't. It was either feast or famine.

Marian added that when there was no money for the materials she needed to use with her students, she had to learn to "make do" with what she already had. She also found the Internet to be a good resource for her. For example:

- learned a lot from the books and materials I collected over the years. Now there's a lot on the Internet, but we didn't have access to computers for a long, long time in our program . . . maybe not until the past 5 or 6 years. And then to get a computer in your room that *works!*

At the *state* level, new mandates and funding policies represented additional sources of change. One such mandate involved statewide testing every year. One participant was able to use the annual event as an opportunity to learn more about the students at her school:

- I proctor for the standard-based assessments every year. I spend two solid weeks in third grade classrooms because third grade is so critical. If a child can't read or do math by then, he needs intervention *immediately*. During that time, I've been able to identify children with learning disorders and get them the preventative services they needed so they didn't have to go into special ed. (Teresa)

At the *national* level, federal legislation such as Public Law 107-110: The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) carried significant policy changes that greatly affected public schools throughout the country.

- Next year will be harder because of NCLB. We won't be able to pull kids out during either literacy or math time, so then I'll have to vie with the SLP [speech and language pathologist] and OT [occupational therapist] that have to pull their kids out, too. The bonus for me is that I typically get the kids with disruptive behaviors, so the teachers say, "Take them whenever you want!" (Dana)
- We're definitely feeling the effects of NCLB. A couple of years ago, three or four principals were shuffled around and we got one of them. They moved her here as

an assistant principal, but she didn't want to be here. It affected her work and we had to deal with it. They put her in charge of special ed, but some of her comments made me question her knowledge of the population. (Gabriel)

Gabriel also shared his despair that his school was so focused on NCLB that programs he wanted to implement were being neglected. For example, he had attended a two-day training and learned how to set up and facilitate a risk assessment team, and he was anxious to develop one in his school.

- I'm concerned about our school and how to get something happening here. We've had deaths and suicides for the last three years and we need something. We haven't even been able to sit as a team to decide it's important. Right now our principal is completely focused on NCLB issues. She wants our counselors pushing more testing and guidance about college, so I guess it's not a priority for them to get a suicide prevention curriculum going in this school.

The above statements illustrate how changes at all levels of the educational system continually influenced the knowledge and skills the participants needed to acquire in order to practice effectively. Some of the biggest changes were prompted by federal mandates to adopt school reform policies.

New responsibilities. New responsibilities were often tied to changing levels of practice, such as from micro to macro levels of practice. Broadly speaking, micro level practice targets personal transformation of clients, whereas macro level practice focuses on changing the social/environmental systems in which clients or educational communities are immersed (Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kemp, Whittaker, & Tracy, 1997). More specifically, school social workers with a micro level orientation focus primarily on

counseling and therapy with individual students or with small groups of students, whereas macro level practice is characterized by program development and policy-making activities that are systems-oriented and often preventative in nature (Chavkin, 1993; Clancy, 1995; Dupper, 2007; Dupper & Evans, 1996; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kelly, 2008; Kataoka et al., 2003; Streeter & Franklin, 1993). Some writers add a third intermediary level of practice called “meso” (Allen-Meares, 2007; Clancy, 1995), but I differentiated between only two levels of practice in this study.

New responsibilities for the participants involved a variety of activities in both the context of practice within their school district and outside professional activities. These included creating and facilitating student support teams, coordinating school-wide activities, serving in leadership roles in professional organizations, joining community or state advisory committees, developing grant-funded programs, teaching and consulting with university social work programs, and moving into administrative, semi-administrative, or supervisory positions. For example:

- [Regarding becoming a representative of colleagues on a district level steering committee]: When we decided to have regional reps, I became one of them. It gave me a whole new perspective on administrative issues and a more global view of the district. That was a very meaningful period of my career. And that position transitioned into a cluster leader position that led to doing more supervision and being involved in administrative and program planning activities. (Mario)
- The university asked me to teach the school social work elective, and I said, “Yes, absolutely!” I remember what that class meant to me before I started working in the schools. It was crucial! So, I met with a colleague who had taught the course

before and went over all the stuff she had. She was great! She shared everything with me--so I put it together and taught the class. (Gabriel)

- Back in the late '70s, I was appointed to a national committee--a task force on school social work--and it was a *really* dynamic group. There were practicing school social workers, administrators, faculty members, and consultants at the state level. We were beginning to have a discussion about the need to develop national school social work standards. (Sal)

As the participants described the new responsibilities they had assumed, they often made statements such as, "It really opened my eyes," "It helped me see the larger picture," or, "I learned a *lot* from it." These new responsibilities enabled them to develop new skills and also helped heighten their sense of professional identity.

Expansion of interests. The participants' examples of expanding interests included learning and experimenting with new treatment modalities, conducting workshops and training seminars, forging new school and community linkages, learning to write grants, attending conferences sponsored by other disciplines, writing for publication, delving into the literature on school law, incorporating technology into practice, and integrating personal outside interests into practice, such as artistic endeavors, family traditions, and pet ownership. For example:

- When I moved into the mediation unit in our district, it got me out of direct practice and into human relations and crisis work involving inter-group conflict. The key was not just that the work shifted, but that it was crisis after crisis after crisis. And being at the central office gave me more flexibility with my time, although I ended up working a lot on weekends and other times. But I gave

myself more flexibility in my day-in and day-out work, so I did a lot more reading. And that's when I got involved in the resiliency literature, also the literature on the philosophy of learning and education. (Patricia)

- The community service provider at one of my schools was an art therapist. I'm an artist and a social worker, but I was never trained in art therapy. Any clinician can use art as a tool, but it's very helpful to have a trained professional at our team meetings who knows how to do art and use it in a therapeutic way. I'd present a case and she'd bring up an intervention she had used for maybe something like anger management. She'd tell me how to do it, and being an artist, I was familiar with how to do it, but would need the support from her. So, we'd debrief afterwards, and she would recommend books for me to read and we'd exchange articles. There was a *lot* of peer support there. (Lisa)
- I started going to gang-involved youth conferences after someone in the mental health department gave me some funding. I got to see what was happening on a national level and realized that what we were doing here was very significant. Then people in this state would contact me and they'd start their own programs [for gang-involved youth]. That was kind of exciting! It was a *huge, huge* turning point in my career. It's all about doing something at a grass roots level that you really believe in and having someone say, "That's pretty good stuff!" It just exploded and took on a life of its own! (Tiana)

In many respects, new responsibilities and expanding interests are very similar. The main difference might be that the former tended to be assigned to the participants, whereas the latter were more likely to be self-selected.

Shifts in focus over time. Many participants described a shift in the focus of their practice over the years, and their learning experiences reflected this. As they matured professionally, they tended to adopt more holistic, multi-level approaches in their practice. This shift influenced their preferences for learning activities, such as information they accessed on the Internet, professional literature they read, or conferences and workshops they attended. For example:

- When I first came into the district, I wanted to develop specific skills for working with students, like play therapy or whatever. But now, it's more systems issues that interest me--for example, how to deal with errors in the system, or how to fit a Medicaid diagnosis into an educational document like an IEP [Individualized Education Program] when there's conflict between two different systems, or how to develop skills in helping schools understand how important it is for families to be involved. These are *big* systems issues. (Sal)
- In the beginning of my career, I was much more tuned into the kids. I was working with kids with severe developmental disabilities--and I was really thinking of the medical aspects of their situations. I had some training in that area, and I had some life experience, too, because my brother-in-law had an accident and became a quadriplegic. I was really learning about that kind of stuff then. But as the years have gone by, my interests have shifted more to families. We've had a lot of family therapy training, and I feel fortunate to have a healthy family and a long marriage. I feel good about working with parents because I feel pretty solid and can be supportive of them. I can be kind of a buffer sometimes between teachers and families. (Luisa)

- These days when I go to conferences and workshops, the ones that are specific about how you actually need to work with students and families are more helpful than just general knowledge and theory--the preliminary stuff. When you're younger that's probably very good, but as you get older you become sort of arrogant and think you know some of those things. You want more specifics. (Marian)
- When I first started working in the schools, I was open to any and every training I could get. But I think as I've gotten older my personal life experiences have made me especially interested in grief work. I think as soon as I can get far enough along with my own grief work, I'd like to focus more on issues associated with that. (Carla)

Thus, the participants' interests in learning opportunities shifted over the years, but not necessarily in the same direction. For example, Sal's interests shifted from specific interventions with students to systems issues; Luisa's focus on children's medical problems decreased as she became more interested in family work; but, unlike Sal, Marian eventually lost interest in systems-oriented and theoretical knowledge and wanted to learn more about specific interventions she could use with students and families. Carla's learning interests changed drastically as the result of losing a sister to cancer.

Summary of themes related to RQ#1. The participants provided considerable data addressing my first research question regarding the acquisition of knowledge and skills that informs practice over time. The predominant themes related to this question

were: 1) the significance of the context of practice, and 2) the learning that occurred within the context of practice.

The participants experienced numerous changes throughout their careers that determined the knowledge and skills they needed to acquire. These changes included new assignments, contextual changes at all levels of the educational system, new responsibilities, expansion of interests, shifts in focus of practice, and life-changing personal events. The knowledge and skills they accumulated as a result of these changes promoted personal and professional growth and strengthened their sense of professional identity.

In reporting the themes related to my first research question, I have focused primarily on professional learning. The participants also described many significant learning experiences that took place prior to their employment with the schools or outside of educational settings. Much of this was personal learning. I will subsequently refer to these sources of learning as “prior learning” and “outside learning.” I will elaborate on these forms of learning in my discussion of findings related to my second and third research questions. These questions address the value and impact of significant learning experiences.

RQ#2: What professional and personal growth experiences do school social workers value most?

The level of value the participants attached to various learning activities was the predominant theme related to this research question. These activities were not confined to the workplace, but also included prior and outside professional and personal learning experiences.

The participants indicated overwhelmingly that their most significant *professional* learning experiences were directly related to their work and occurred over an extended period of time. The experiences they valued most included formal, informal, and incidental learning. They also valued facilitating the learning of others. I will describe these different types of activities separately.

Highly valued formal professional learning experiences. The types of formal *professional* learning activities the participants valued most included clinical supervision, on-going case-oriented sessions with consultants, training from consultants on specific treatment modalities, and intensive two- or three-day experiential workshops on specific topics.

Supervision. Many participants received clinical supervision from a licensed independent social worker (LISW) during the early years of their careers. This varied from district to district. Clinical supervision consists of regularly scheduled sessions in which discussion focuses primarily on the supervisee's caseload, district policies and procedures, and professional dilemmas. It is also a source of personal support.

- My supervisor was just fabulous--he coached and guided me *so* much. We met every week, but he worked at my school off and on, so we would have little impromptu sessions sometimes. I've had wonderful supervisors--I feel so fortunate for having had great, great supervisors! (Carol)
- I got *great* supervision. What made it so good was that we talked not only about the kids, but also about the culture of the school I was in, because an alternative school is different. We can't do things like the other schools do. We don't have the resources that the other schools have. It's a very small intimate school, and

because the culture is different, my supervisors were very open to my doing things differently. (Pia)

Even though Lynne had worked in one school district for several years, she insisted upon receiving clinical supervision when she was hired by another district. This was after she had spent several years at home raising young children:

- I wanted supervision when I came into this school district, but more than just for signing off on my paperwork. I felt ethically, having been out of the field for seven years, that I needed clinical supervision to help clear the cobwebs--also because this is a different district and I'm learning a new system. I wanted that extra support.

On the other hand, Alice was very unhappy about the nature of supervision provided in her district:

- There was always a question about supervision for Medicaid billing. It amounted to an LISW signing off on paperwork. There was no actual supervision, no meetings between the supervisor and supervisee. I was *appalled!* The district viewed Medicaid as a cash cow, so they started pressuring the social workers to bill. I and three or four others refused to bill, mainly because we felt we were not providing billable services. But the other reason was the issue of supervision.

Elaine was also unhappy about the lack of adequate clinical supervision in her district.

She ended up purchasing supervision from a licensed clinical social worker who specialized in working with children but had no school social work experience.

In all, fourteen of the twenty participants in the study received clinical supervision from senior school social workers during the early years of their careers. Four received

clinical social work supervision in other settings prior to working in the schools.

However, they were not eligible for clinical supervision in their districts because they had already obtained LISW licensure. One participant had to purchase outside supervision, and one received no clinical supervision at all. These six participants therefore had to adapt their social work skills to an educational setting without much support.

Consultation. Other professional experiences the participants valued included ongoing relationships with consultants on contract with their school districts. The consultants were regarded as experts in specific treatment modalities. The participants spoke very highly of these people and attributed much of their professional growth to them. The intervention skills they learned included family therapy, group work, mental health consultation, grief resolution, mediation, bibliotherapy, sand tray therapy, and Solution-Focused therapy. The long-term nature of the participants' relationships with these consultants promoted trust that enabled them to openly discuss issues that arose as they struggled to develop new skills.

The participants described two different formats that characterized their consultation sessions. In the first, they learned about a treatment model, generally did some role-playing, and then worked to implement the model in their practice. Jill described the format in the following way:

- I think the Solution-Focused training I took was useful because of the way it was presented. We went for a block of time over a period of several weeks. I think that anytime you're learning a new way to do something, that's a good way to learn it. That way you have time to practice it and integrate it into what you're doing in the schools. And then you are able go back to the training sessions and say, "This

worked, or this didn't work," and then figure out how to make it work the next time. (Jill)

The second format was more case-oriented. Group members took turns presenting student cases in order to develop appropriate intervention strategies. Participants indicated that while they learned a great deal from the consultants using this format, they learned as much from other members of these groups. Jill felt this form of consultation was as useful to her as the first one:

- In the consultations, I learned as much from my co-workers as I did from the consultant because of the sharing and brainstorming. Somebody would have an idea that you'd never even thought of. It wasn't that you necessarily couldn't have thought of it yourself. It's that other perspectives were so helpful. It's just being outside a situation. It's just presenting your case and hearing from a new person, hearing something for the first time, and it's something like, "Oh, my gosh, why didn't I see that?" Or, they would say something to you and you would think, "Why yes, that's it. It's right there!" But you get so involved in it that you don't see it.

The participants who worked in special programs (alternative schools and programs for seriously emotionally disturbed students) had access to consultants during mental health team meetings. These meetings focused primarily on student issues and program development and were not geared to provide training in specific treatment modalities.

Trainings conducted by senior social workers in a school district. Some participants engaged in trainings conducted by senior social workers who had expertise in

certain treatment modalities. The format of these trainings was similar to the first of the two consultation models discussed above. The participants would learn about a new model and subsequently take it back to their schools to use with students and families. Meanwhile, they would continue meeting with the trainer to fine-tune the skills they were learning. The participants who had access to this type of training felt it was a particularly useful format for learning about new treatment modalities and developing new skills.

This is how Beas described a training with one of the senior social workers in her district:

- The instructor was so organized and focused! And she was a school social worker herself, so she knew the populations we were working with. So she came with that knowledge and she incorporated it into all the activities we did. She helped us learn how to gauge staff and administration when we set up and ran our groups, and how to get the kids on board in a group. So, it was the way she structured the sessions and how she presented her material, plus all her knowledge that came from doing a whole lot of groups in the schools.

The participants who took part in these trainings valued them because they felt the senior social workers were particularly knowledgeable about the political processes in their school districts. Also, since most of trainers were clinical supervisors, they often had knowledge about the politics inherent in various schools. Bea referred to this when she noted how the trainer helped group members “learn how to gauge staff and administration” in order to successfully set up and run student groups.

Intensive two- or three-day workshops. The participants also found intensive two- or three-day workshops that included role-plays and other experiential exercises to be a useful format for developing new skills. For example:

- I took a class on narcissism and found it to be very interesting and helpful to me in my practice. It helped me understand where people come from, how narcissistic they are, and what feeds them--especially in my work with families. It was a three-day weekend course. We had to read books beforehand and there was an experiential component that involved evaluating our own narcissism, including our own personal drives. That interested me much more than attending a conference that just provides a smattering of something in a ninety-minute or two hour lecture. (Marilyn)
- [Regarding the value of a two-day grief resolution training facilitated by both a school social worker and counselor]: The training was really good because they taught us we had to experience our own grief ourselves. I had just left a job I had for twenty-five years--which was *very* difficult for me. I had to be able to let go of that. Most of the time we were in small groups and we talked about what was going on regarding our own grief and loss. One of them [the facilitators] used a guitar a lot, playing soft music in the background as we talked. They took me through the steps to do that [let go of loss] so I could take my kids through the steps, too. (Pia)

In summary, the formal professional learning activities the participants valued most included clinical supervision, on-going case-oriented sessions with consultants, trainings conducted by senior school social workers on specific treatment modalities, and intensive two- or three-day experiential workshops. All except the workshops extended over long periods of time, thereby enabling the participants to access guidance from

supervisors, consultants, or trainers as they attempted to incorporate new knowledge and skills into their practice.

Highly valued formal personal learning experiences. Examples of *personal* formal learning activities the participants valued included personal growth work and therapy, regularly scheduled church and volunteer activities, and classes that helped them develop new skills and contributed to their sense of well-being. For example:

- I started an art class in oil painting. I just *love* it! Every year at the social work conference I kept buying all the raffle tickets for XX's paintings. I've always been a very visual person. I would see pictures in my head, and I would think if I only knew how to draw, I would draw it. (Lynda)
- I can't tell you how many therapists' offices I've been in over the years, also therapeutic groups and self-help groups--also reading, meditating, and listening to tapes. At some point I woke up to the idea that whatever I needed to learn in life, I wasn't going to learn it all by myself. Secondly, I was noticing I was someone that was taking myself a bit too seriously and needed to learn to lighten up a little. (Alice)

In general, when the participants described highly valued personal learning experiences that were formal in nature, they made a connection between those activities and their work in the schools. For example, Lynda drew upon her artistic skills to create pictures and diagrams to illustrate concepts she wanted her students to understand, and Alice realized she was often too hard on herself both at work and in her personal life.

Highly valued informal professional and personal learning experiences. Examples of informal learning activities the participants valued included regularly

scheduled site-based team meetings, periodic meetings with district administrators, relationships with mentors, student groups facilitated with other social workers or colleagues from different disciplines, and consultations with peers. They also valued experimenting with new materials and/or treatment modalities, accessing professional information on the Internet, writing for publication, networking with other service providers at conferences, interacting socially outside of work with teachers and administrators, raising families, serving as therapeutic foster parents, keeping personal journals, and participating in volunteer activities.

Regarding writing for publication, Gabriel described the process of learning to write a chapter for a sourcebook edited by three school social work educators:

- When we came back to school after the summer, we sent in our first draft and they just *tore* it to pieces. It was fifty pages long, and they said they only needed ten! (Laughing) So we cut it a little and tried to argue with them that it needed to be longer, but they just said, “Ten!” So, we cut it some more and ended up with a bare bones chapter. Then they said, “Yes, that’s what we want, but now add graphs, charts, and case histories.” That whole experience was definitely a highlight of my career!

On a different note, Jill spoke of how important her working relationships with other student support service providers were to her:

- When we were at a region office and all the support services were there too, that was the first time I really got to know how the different role groups work in special ed--what an OT [occupational therapist], PT [physical therapist], APE [adapted physical education teacher], and SLP [speech and language pathologist]

could really do. And then in the district program at a school site [for the most seriously emotionally disturbed middle school students], I used those people just as much as I used social workers. I found their knowledge was so incredible--and the way we interfaced with them was really, really valuable!

Marian echoed Jill's comments about the value of collaborating with co-workers:

- I did groups with our SLP--we loved doing groups together! So that was more *our* need, but we could pull it off and say it benefited the students. I say it was *our* need because we liked to work together; we liked each other professionally and personally. I liked her style and she liked mine, so we combined our ways--just as in "two heads are better than one." She had her knowledge base and activities related to the students' language needs and deficits, and I had my social work knowledge, so we would combine the two.

Other participants stated they felt fortunate to have mentors who were professionals from other disciplines, such as educational administrators, psychiatrists, and clinical psychologists. For example, Sal referred to a number of people he regarded as mentors:

- I really appreciate that people have sort of pushed me and said, "Go ahead, you can do this." So I've been willing to take that step, because I know I have people I can consult that will support me. They've not only been social workers, but also professionals in other disciplines--like the psychiatrist who would make home visits with me for very challenging cases, and also a couple of psychologists who taught me a lot. Both were very skilled family therapists, and in fact one would often join me to work with families together.

On a personal level, Carol was very active with her church and Marilyn regularly kept a journal. Both stated these activities were very important to them because they provided insights that were useful in their work. For example:

- I've always been a writer even though writing has been difficult for me. I have tons of journals and drawings. They're just for my own personal use as a way of processing things. (Marilyn)

As these examples illustrate, many of the informal learning activities the participants considered valuable involved collaborative relationships with other people. Yet, other activities such as journal writing were private. Nevertheless, the participants felt these types of activities helped broaden their perspectives and enabled them to acquire new skills and insights that carried over into their work.

Highly valued incidental professional and personal learning experiences.

Examples of incidental learning the participants valued included learning from mistakes, working outside the school district, engaging in private practice, raising children, helping family members with disabilities, becoming involved in church activities, and owning pets. This form of learning was unintended and occurred as a by-product of purposeful activities.

For example, for a while Carol worked part time in the schools and opened a small private practice in her community. She felt it was a very important learning experience for her professionally:

- I've always valued school social work, but I get frustrated with the politics either in the schools or the district. But my private practice really opened my eyes to what an amazing kind of position it is. My young clients talked so much about

things going on at school, and I felt so removed from the action. I could work with them on general kinds of things like coping skills and anger management, but I found I needed to be in touch with either their school social worker or counselor quite a bit. I felt my hands were really tied--and I felt frustrated because I couldn't be more effective. I remember thinking several times, "Man, I wish I worked at that kid's school--I think I could *really* help!"

Sal had a similar eye-opening experience when he took a respite from school social work to work elsewhere:

- I left the district for several years and worked at a child guidance agency, a private school, and a family services agency. I learned some things in all those places, but the main thing was that I really missed school social work. School social work is systems work and I missed working with all the systems. In the child and family agency, we would often see kids in isolation without having much contact with their parents. (Sal)

On a personal level, Marilyn came to realize she had a learning disability herself when her son was diagnosed with the disorder and she learned how to support him in his development. Although challenging, she felt her disability greatly sensitized her to the needs of many of her students and families:

- As I grew up, they really didn't know what learning disabilities were all about. I used to think I was just *stupid*. I discovered my own disability when I went through the process with my son.

Actually, all the participants shared numerous examples of incidental learning in a variety of settings. Although many of their experiences were difficult, such as Marilyn's, they nevertheless valued them for the insights they generated.

Highly valued experiences of facilitating the learning of others. Thus far, I have described the participants' learning experiences as if they represented a one-way street in which they were recipients and other people were providers. In reality, it was a reciprocal process. The fact that the education and training of social workers is so different from that of educators means they bring a very different perspective to every situation they encounter in the schools (Allen-Meares et al., 1996; Bronstein & Abramson, 2003). However, if they have developed good working relationships with others in the educational community, there is a good possibility they will facilitate learning in their interactions with them (Strom-Gottfried, 2002).

The participants provided countless examples of helping others think and act in different ways. They generally spoke with much pride about these experiences, indicating they greatly valued this aspect of their work. In fact, Teresa asserted, "I'm not a teacher, but I'm an educator because I *also* teach children how to learn. It's not curriculum driven per se, but it's clinically driven--and it's just as vital." Teresa is the participant who implemented violence and bully prevention programs for every classroom in her elementary school. As part of the programs, she created a little sign she used while on playground duty:

- I do playground duty at least twice a week and I take my little sign out with me [showing me a sign that says "Stop" on one side and "Think" on the other]. The idea for making the sign evolved from the Second Step and Bully-Free Classroom

programs. I kind of blended things together from different programs. If kids are fighting on the playground, I'll hold up my little sign and say, "Stop and think." Then they begin to process what's going on. It interrupts the cycle of anger and gets them to stop fighting.

All the participants mentioned serving as consultants to school personnel. For example, Pia had been at an alternative school for many years and felt she represented a source of support for her principal:

- Many times when the principal has something to do, she comes to me and wonders, "What do you think if we did it this way or that way?" And I always tell her, "Well, this has worked or that hasn't worked before, but maybe if we put a different twist on it or something..." I feel like I've helped establish the program here--and that makes me feel good.

Alice also spoke of assuming a consultant role with her principal. She related her conversation with her principal after reporting a teacher for alleged sexual abuse of some of his students:

- The principal's response was, "Why did you feel you had to do that? I was taking care of it." And I said, "No, you don't understand. There's an obligation to report this to the authorities. This is not something you can handle internally." Then he said, "Okay, okay, I'm just trying to get my head on straight about this. This has never happened to me before and it's difficult."

Alice remarked that as a result of reporting the abuse, she subsequently felt rejection from the male teachers in her school. She felt this reflected their fear that she

would “make trouble for them” as well. She also recounted a conversation with a social work colleague because she felt the latter’s behavior was totally inappropriate:

- One of my social work colleagues disclosed having one of her students in her home on numerous occasions, spending the night and going for walks in the woods with her dogs, etc. That was one of those times when my professional demeanor did *not* get in the way of my shock! I just turned and looked at this person and said, “You did *what?!?*” It had never occurred to her that this was inappropriate. I said, “Let me just ask you something. What do think would happen to you if this kid went home and said so-and-so molested him?” The person responded, “Oh, that will never happen.” And I said, “Don’t you ever think ‘never’! Not only are you doing this child a disservice because you’re not establishing a professional distance, but you’re also putting yourself right in front of losing your license!”

Bea was a retired participant in my pilot study, so she spoke in the past tense. She did a great deal of work with her students’ families and wanted school personnel to appreciate their struggles and their strengths:

- I often tried to take teachers on home visits with me so they could see the other side of the story. I remember taking one teacher who was very, very judgmental. He went with me and was silent half the way back. Finally he said, “I had no idea that’s how they lived and that this was their situation.” So, that was an extremely helpful thing to do, because they *don’t* know. I did it especially with teachers or other staff that were very judgmental. . . . I just wanted them to see the other side of how the family lived--what *their* reality was. Oh yes, we had to go through an

alley to get to the back door, over beer cans and everything, but it was for them to see the other side. And it always worked. There were often tears, but their perceptions of families changed. They had to experience it themselves.

Joan had worked at a school housed in a psychiatric facility. Psychiatric residents rotated through the facility and worked in partnership with school personnel. This was Joan's comment about the experience:

- I thought it was critical to teach these young psychiatrists coming out of school-- and I would say to them all the time, "If you're going to work with children rather than adults, then you're going to have to collaborate with their families and their schools, and their communities."

The participants also described efforts to enlighten professionals in the community about their work in the schools. For example:

- I think our work is not well known, nor is it appreciated. After I left the child guidance agency and returned to the school district, they would invite me back to talk to their staff about what we do in the schools. I always felt it was an opportunity to talk about the extent of the work we do in the schools. I think people at that agency were surprised about the multi-level work we do and how we have to have very good skills. (Sal)

Two participants taught school social work courses in a university social work program. One of them outlined the expectations she set for her students:

- My big thing is that I think any social worker should be able to stand in front of a group with only two minutes notice and talk about something like how to report child abuse. There are some basic things a social worker should be able to do--and

be comfortable doing. I want to elevate our profession and I want my students to be professional. So, on the day they're scheduled to present [what they've learned from their internships], they have to dress professionally and speak professionally as if they're presenting at a conference. They're representing their agency and that may be the only time that people decide whether they're going to use their services. I *really* push that. That's my thing, but I know not everybody feels that way. (Tiana)

Tiana also said she liked the seminar format of the course she was teaching because she enjoys group work so much.

Thus, facilitating the learning of others is a fundamental aspect of school social work. Generally, only one social worker is assigned to a school, although this same social worker may cover more than one school (Kelly, 2009). Because their training is very different from that of educators (Bronstein & Abramson, 2003), they offer a different perspective in any given situation. Advocating for clients is an important role school social workers play. As advocates, they help school personnel recognize students' social and emotional needs that interfere with the learning process (Allen-Meares et al., 1996; Constable, 2009; Dupper, 2003; Lee, 2007). Thus, facilitating the learning of others is critical to the process of advocating for students and families.

Summary of themes related to RQ#2. The major theme related to this research question was the level of value the participants attached to various learning activities. These activities included workplace, prior, and outside professional and personal learning experiences.

The professional and personal learning experiences the participants felt were most useful extended over a period of time. These experiences were also either directly related to their practice or at least contributed to their practice. The activities were formal, informal, and incidental in nature. They represented prior personal and professional experiences, as well as experiences that occurred outside the workplace. They also included moments when they found satisfaction in facilitating the learning of others. Even though these were “moments,” the participants’ success in these endeavors was grounded in the trusting and respectful relationships they had developed with others over a period of time.

One would expect that the learning experiences the participants rated as “very useful,” “important,” “extremely valuable,” etc., would in some way impact their practice. I will address this topic next in relation to my third research question.

RQ#3: How do professional and personal growth experiences impact the practice of school social workers?

The predominant theme that emerged from my analysis of the data related to this question revolved around the participants’ practice behaviors. Other major themes included context of practice, contextual learning that was both adaptive and developmental in nature, prior and outside personal and professional learning activities, and the personal qualities and competencies of the participants. Minor themes specific to the participants’ context of practice included the strength of working relationships, the resolution of professional dilemmas, and the impact of professional orientation on practice behaviors.

Altogether, the participants' professional and personal growth experiences provided a frame of reference that helped guide their selection of practice interventions. It is important to point out that the only real prescription in school social work practice is to begin with an assessment of the "presenting problem." As Woolley and Bowen (2008) state, "Assessment is the foundation for social work practice efforts" (p. 67). Thomas, Tiefenthal, Constable, and Leyba (2009) define the school social work assessment as "a systematic way of understanding what is happening in the pupil's relations within the classroom, with the family, with peers, and between family and school. It provides a basis for deciding which interventions will be most effective" (p. 409). Although there is growing interest in implementing evidence-based interventions in school social work practice (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2009; Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Rosemond, 2005; Franklin, 2001; Franklin & Hopson, 2004; Franklin & Kelly, 2009; Frey & George-Nichols, 2003; Raines, 2004; Teasley, 2004), in reality there are no rules outlining the intervention strategies practitioners should implement after an assessment has been completed. The only certainty is that effective interventions rest upon the strength of relationships school social workers establish with school personnel, students, families, and community service providers within their context of practice (Harris, Franklin, & Hopson, 2007; Openshaw, 2008). In other words, there is no established curriculum for school social work practice beyond the assessment process.

Impact of general contextual learning on practice. Just as each school social worker's practice is unique, so are the educational environments in which they work. Every setting has its own culture and climate that are determined by many factors:

administration, teachers, support staff, student populations, the families of these students, to name just a few.

Stolp and Smith (1995) define school culture as “historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and myths understood, maybe in varying degrees, by members of the school community” (p. 13). They add that many educators think of their school’s culture as “the way we do things around here” (p. 13). They define school climate more narrowly as “people’s shared perceptions of the work units” that include their “impressions, feelings, and expectations” that are generated by “the organization’s structure and setting, as well as by the social interactions among those who work and learn there” (p. 15). It should be noted that culture and climate are concepts that also apply to the neighborhoods, districts, and larger communities surrounding school social work practice.

One participant compared her experiences working in an alternative high school that drew students from all over the district with another high school in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in her district. She learned she had to approach families differently in each of these schools:

- I find parents in this neighborhood don’t want me making home visits. They’d rather make an appointment to come to school. My alternative high school families were used to having a *lot* of people coming to their homes. But here, it’s a more guarded attitude. I think they don’t want their neighbors wondering if the people coming to their door are investigating them. (Lynne)

Lynne’s example provides a snapshot of one of many things she needed to learn as she became acculturated to her new assignment.

Ellström (2001) differentiates between two forms of workplace learning: *adaptive* and *developmental*. Although he believes these two forms of learning are complementary, he places them on a continuum ranging from *lowest* to *highest* levels of learning.

Adaptive learning includes *reproductive* or routine learning and a form of *productive* learning. Developmental learning includes a higher level of productive learning as well as *creative* learning. In creative learning, “the learner has to use his or her own authority not only to evaluate outcomes or choose methods but to define the task and the conditions at hand; the learner must diagnose a perhaps unclear and puzzling situation” (p. 424).

Lynne’s comment about how she practiced in the alternative school versus her current practice in a very affluent school community reflects adaptive learning on her part. Over time, she came to appreciate many other differences in the culture and climate of the two schools.

I will present additional examples of adaptive learning in the next section, followed by a discussion about developmental learning. Both sections will emphasize how these forms of learning impacted the participants’ practice in the schools.

Impact of adaptive contextual learning on practice. Adaptive learning refers to the need to master basic organizational processes and negotiate the political culture of an organization (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Ellström, 2001). It involves “working in accordance with prevailing routines in an organization” (Ellström, Ekholm, & Ellström, 2007, p. 85) in which one assumes a conforming stance (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). It essentially refers to the acculturation process required of social workers as they learn to work in school settings.

A common expression among school social workers during their early years of practice is, “I finally *got* it! I finally got what it means to be a social worker in the schools!” What they mean is that they have succeeded in adapting their basic social work skills to an educational setting. Thus, adaptive learning for school social workers refers to the need to become familiar with the culture, climate, and general routines of the context of their practice. One of my pilot study participants reflected upon how he finally “got it”:

- Some of the mistakes I made in the beginning were when I’d go in and say, “Okay, we’re going to do a behavior program and I want you to mark down every time the kid does something wrong. Just make a check.” And they’d say something like, “You know, I’ve got twenty-five students here, and I don’t have time for your checks. Besides, it’s not going to help anyway.” (Mario)

As a result of those experiences, Mario began to shift away from focusing almost exclusively on students to becoming more attentive to teachers’ needs for support. He added, “I had to learn that. As a clinician, I wanted to go in and provide them with all this expertise, but it wasn’t helpful. And worse, it was talking down to them.”

Mario had come into the schools with a strong mental health background gained from working in psychiatric facilities, so his acculturation process was lengthy. On the other hand, Gabriel had completed his second year internship in the schools and subsequently was hired by the same school district. Even so, he had this to say about the length of time it took him to settle into his job:

- It took two or three years after getting into the work to learn what the other student support providers did. It took meeting them, seeing them work, and

reading their assessments in student files. The more I had students getting those other services, the more I started working closely with them. The first year it felt like I never even crossed paths with any of them. Maybe by my fourth year I really felt comfortable understanding what they did. It took multiple times hearing them talk at IEP meetings about the work they were doing. (Gabriel)

Both comments reflect incidental learning in the workplace. They were unintended learning experiences (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). In the first example, Mario was trying to develop an intervention plan for a student, but the teacher rejected it. In the process, he realized he needed to be more attentive to teachers' needs. In the second example, Gabriel was trying to learn more about the students on his caseload by reading through their files. These files contained assessments and progress reports from other student service providers. In the process of reading files, he learned something about the roles of these people and the types of interventions they conducted. Again, it was unintentional learning. Learning about the roles of others was a by-product of Gabriel's intent to learn about his students.

Adaptive learning can also be formal or informal. I will discuss the impact of these two forms of learning on the participants' practice in the following sections.

Impact of formal adaptive learning on practice. The most common formal adaptive learning activities the participants described were district and school in-services, district-sponsored trainings, and clinical supervision. A few also mentioned regularly scheduled meetings with special education administrators that were devoted primarily to topics such as district mandates, policies, and procedures.

Impact of in-services and trainings on practice. The participants had mixed feelings about in-services and trainings. Some felt certain ones were helpful, whereas others found them to be of little value. Teresa and Lynne had positive things to say about some of them:

- [Regarding a district-sponsored in-service on gangs]: The main thing I got out of it was learning whom to contact in the district. The only resource I had before was with the city. When I see kids throwing gang signs right in front of me, I immediately contact the parents, but now I also report it to the gang unit in the district. (Teresa)
- I went to parent-involvement training in the district. Something the guy said turned a light bulb on in my head. I thought about the little area we have at our school where parents just drop off their kids, but rarely come into the building. I began thinking that instead of waiting for them to come in, why not go out to them and offer a cup of coffee or hot chocolate? The school liked the idea and there was a Starbucks down the street that donated coffee. Everything just fell into place. (Lynne)

On the other hand, Dana and others spoke negatively about district in-services and trainings:

- I don't feel the district has the kind of training I need. It's not advanced enough-- at least that's my opinion. (Dana)
- All of our trainings now are prescribed. I don't know if it's because of No Child Left Behind, or if it's just our district. They create the training for you, and it doesn't matter if you're pre-school, elementary, or high school. Our last training

was on resources, and some of them you can use, but some you can't, because they're not [appropriate] for your age group. (Pia)

In general, the participants spoke more favorably about in-service meetings at their work sites than at the district level. One participant noted that the in-services conducted at her school gave her information that was more relevant to her students' needs than the general information she obtained from district in-services.

Impact of supervision on practice. There are two forms of supervision in school social work: supervision provided by educational administrators and supervision provided by mental health clinicians. The most prevalent form is educational supervision (Garrett & Barretta-Herman, 1995b; Kelly, 2009), but both play a critical role in the adaptive learning process. Educational administrators provide important information about educational structures, policies, and procedures; clinical supervisors do also, but focus primarily on clinical strategies appropriate for any given situation.

Nearly all the participants who received clinical supervision during the early years of their practice felt it had a very strong impact on their practice. They believed it hastened the acculturation process and helped them adapt their basic social work skills to educational settings. For example, the participant I interviewed by email (Donna) had conducted a private practice prior to working in the schools. One of my questions was, "How did you learn to adapt your basic social work skills to working in the schools?" Donna wrote:

- I think a lot of it was common sense. Also, I was supervised by the most experienced school social worker on the staff and she helped set the boundaries because I tended to want to macro manage every referral and be at the school and

in the home and doing individual and family therapy and consulting with the teachers!!! I tend to go overboard; she reined me in and guided me as to how to approach each case from a school social work point of view.

Joan also talked about how much she appreciated the support and guidance her supervisor provided when she moved into a new position:

- My first job as a day treatment program manager was a very traumatic experience. I had to fire the secretary for embezzlement and also fire two therapists. I was just thrown into it--but boy, did I learn quickly! I was located about 25 miles away from my agency, so I was out there just kind of winging it. Day treatment is a very intensive situation! Fortunately, I had a really good supervisor. The agency was difficult, but he was a *very* good teacher. He was always available to me, and he knew I was new at being a manager. We had weekly meetings together and then I had access to him by telephone. I also attended weekly meetings at the agency.

Unlike the other participants who were employed by school districts, Joan worked for a community agency that contracted with a school district to provide services for the most severely emotionally disturbed students in the district. There has been an expansion of these forms of collaborative arrangements in recent years (Taylor & Adelman, 2006) in an effort to better serve the needs of students with serious mental health disorders. Fortunately, Joan had extensive experience as a school social worker (employed by a school district) prior to her employment with the community agency. Thus, the focus of her adaptive learning related to her new management role rather than acculturation to an

educational setting. She credited her supervisor with providing the support she needed in order to succeed in this new role.

In summary, the participants' formal adaptive learning activities included district and site in-services, district-sponsored trainings, and supervision that was administrative and/or clinical in nature. The participants who received clinical supervision spoke very highly of it. They felt it helped them tailor their basic social work skills into interventions that could be conducted effectively in educational settings.

Impact of informal adaptive learning on practice. The informal adaptive learning activities the participants described included reviewing district policies and procedures; becoming familiar with IEP processes; observing student interactions in classrooms, hallways, and on school grounds; developing relationships with mentors; and interacting with other professionals at their school sites and in their communities.

For example, Pia has been at the same alternative school for the entire thirteen years she has worked in her school district. She has worked with several different administrators and has found all of them to be rich sources of information:

- I've always gotten a lot of information from principals. They've helped me a lot. I think it's always difficult for social workers to come into a school system, because the system is so academically oriented and we are so mental health oriented, or people oriented, or systems oriented. I have gotten so much information from principals about how the school works so I know how I can fit in. I think that's so important. It's easy to be an outcast in a school system.

Pia remarked that each principal had his or her own unique leadership style, so she had to figure out how to work with each one so she didn't become an "outcast."

Another participant worked in a middle school going through changes in administration. She felt the new special education administrator had little interest in supporting the needs and rights of special education students. She therefore used the Internet to become more informed about special education legislation so she could advocate effectively for her students and families:

- The new assistant principal thought special education was a complete and utter waste of money and should just be eliminated. So, in IEPs and when dealing with parents, I didn't have any kind of administrative support for what I would recommend. It was a constant battle. I struggled for a while because I was feeling I was really out there on my own. So, every time I went into an IEP and talked about a kid, I had to be *really* prepared, because I knew I was going to get questions about why I said or recommended something and what the theory was behind it. It actually made me much more knowledgeable about many things. . . . By and large, I relied on the Internet. I did a lot of reading. I read the law itself and went to the US Department of Education website to read a lot of their stuff.
(Alice)

These are just two of many examples of the participants' informal learning experiences. As noted in my discussion regarding my first research question, they continually had to adapt to changes in the schools. It appeared they were able to do so primarily because of informal learning opportunities.

Impact of incidental adaptive learning on practice. I have already provided two examples of incidental adaptive learning (i.e., when Mario realized he needed to attend to teachers' needs rather than focusing exclusively on students, and when Gabriel

learned about the roles of other student support providers while reviewing student records). Again, this is a form of unintentional learning that occurs as a by-product of some action or event (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). All the participants shared many examples of this form of learning.

For example, Pia talked about how she completely reversed her assumptions about schools during her first few years of working at an alternative high school. She had previously worked for many years in a community youth agency serving gang-involved youth. She described her first few years in the schools as follows:

- When I came to work for the schools, I had to look at everything in a different way. I had to look at why the kids were here and how much the school was doing for them. When you're on the outside, you don't see that. You just think they're throwing kids out of school for no reason--and you fight for the kids to stay. Here, they're doing so many things for the kids that people on the outside aren't even aware of. The school is offering many resources [and] many programs. . . . It was very interesting to learn that, but it didn't happen overnight. It took awhile.

Just as Pia had been a strong advocate for her clients in the community agency, she ultimately became a fierce advocate for her alternative school students. For example, she began organizing family potluck dinners featuring awards for every student. She spoke with much pride about these events. This is her account of the most recent family night:

- The awards dinner wasn't just for students and parents. It also ingrained in teachers the idea that every student has a positive side. So when they saw the student the next day on campus, they didn't see someone that was always cussing

and doing the wrong thing. Instead they saw a student who had a special quality, whether it was playing the guitar, or being on time every morning, or having a beautiful smile. After the dinner, every teacher knew one positive thing that every student brought to school to make this a community. And, after the dinner the teachers treated the kids differently.

Thus, over time Pia drastically changed her impressions of her school district.

While working in a community agency, she believed schools were just “throwing kids out of school for no reason,” but she eventually came to appreciate how many resources the schools provided for them. She acknowledged she had made many mistakes early in her career at her school, but gradually began questioning her assumptions and ultimately reversing her opinion of her school district. Marsick and Watkins (1990) point out that the process of making mistakes that leads to questioning personal assumptions is fundamental to incidental learning.

Summary. In summary, the participants experienced adaptive learning that impacted their practice in a variety of ways. Adaptive learning encompassed formal, informal, and incidental learning--the process of becoming acculturated to their work environments over a fairly extended period of time. Adaptive learning is different from developmental learning (Ellström, 2001), as the next section will illustrate.

Impact of developmental contextual learning on practice. Ellström (2001) describes developmental learning as a higher, more complex form of learning than adaptive learning. Boud and Middleton (2003) note that this form of learning involves “dealing with the atypical.” They point out that there are situations in which there are no set processes or procedures in place and “learning is required to address a problem or

contradiction in ways which lead to an acceptable outcome” (p. 201). This is in line with my earlier assertion that there are no set procedures to follow after a school social work assessment has been completed. Thus, based on Boud and Middleton’s definition of developmental learning, it appears this is a significant form of learning for school social workers.

Indeed, the participants’ comments verified the significance of developmental learning! They reported that no two days were ever the same. They would arrive at school in the morning with a general idea of how their day would go, but nearly always had to revise their schedules. Students they planned to see would be absent, families they arranged to visit would not be home, meetings they expected to attend would be cancelled, and crises erupted that needed attention. The list goes on and on...

Nearly every participant stated that the number of crises they handle has steadily increased over the years, and they have had to learn ways to manage their practice as a result of this. Luisa explained how she had modified her practice in order to respond to her administrator’s frequent requests to help handle crises:

- My site administrators are pulling me all the time for various crises and assignments. It cuts into the time I have to see my kids. So, the other social worker at my school and I are running three or four groups all the time just to meet the kids’ IEP requirements. Pretty much all of them need to work on social skills, but it’s hard to really get to know them if you only see them in a group. It seems like most of my work takes place in the halls (chuckling), like when I see a kid and ask how they’re doing. Then, if they really need to talk, I’ll squeeze in a quick fifteen-minute session somewhere.

Luisa said she hadn't conducted many student groups before, but she enjoyed co-facilitating them with her colleague, so they were learning how to run the groups just by doing them.

Luisa's comments are typical of the other participants' explanations about how they have handled the increasing number of requests to assist with crises in their schools. Most, like Luisa, were doing less individual work and more group work to free up time to respond to these crises. Some said they had been fortunate to work with a consultant who had expertise in group work, so this helped them make the shift to running more groups.

Impact of formal developmental learning on practice. Formal developmental learning activities in the workplace primarily included regularly scheduled sessions with consultants on contract with school districts (such as the group work consultant mentioned above), trainings conducted by senior school social workers who had expertise in specific treatment modalities, and again, clinical supervision. The participants shared many examples of how they incorporated what they learned from these activities into their practice.

Consultation. Carla had taken extensive training on Solution-Focused Therapy with a consultant who contracted with her district. Here is how the training impacted her practice:

- I use the scaling question from the Solution-Focused Therapy training a lot, like, "On a scale of one to ten, how are you feeling today?" I like the positive emphasis in Solution-Focused interventions. They build upon kids' strengths. I'll ask them how they managed to do something, such as how they were able to get to school

in spite of everything happening to them. I like the philosophy behind that approach.

Patricia had taken advantage of an opportunity to work with a consultant on incorporating mental health consultation into her practice:

- There was a paradigm shift for me when learning to use the mental health consultation model. As a therapist, you're supposedly the person that's well and the patient is not. The shift in the mental health consultation model is that there is an equalitarian relationship between the consultant and consultee. Your focus is helping the consultees with the mental health aspects of their jobs. So, they are mentally well and expert in their job, regardless of the situation. You focus on their strengths and the fact that they're expert at their job. They know things about being a principal that you don't know. It's your task as a mental health consultant to analyze and examine the situation they bring to you--and to assist them with what they've tried and also help them through the conversation. They're going to come up with some suggestions themselves.

Sal spoke of a consultant on contract with his district who was a specialist in family therapy:

- What I learned from the family therapy consultant was to look at families as a system--and to look at the dynamics of family interactions. He reinforced the fact that families need to be respected by school people so they can learn what parents want for their kids. He was familiar enough with the schools that he could point out some of the systems barriers that we needed to be aware of in our work with families. His ideas had a big influence on my work.

Sal did a great deal of work with families and had made many home visits over the course of his long career. The following anecdote illustrates how his training with the family therapy consultant impacted his interactions with one particular family:

- I began making home visits with a family whose kids were often truant. They were Native American [and Sal is not], so I took it really slowly with them wanting to learn about their culture. I didn't push anything. I just wanted to establish a relationship with them, especially with the father who was a big man and intimidated school people. Well, he finally trusted me enough to say, "The reason I don't trust schools is because they put me in special ed, but later they found out I had a hearing loss. They never even took the time to give me a hearing test! They just took it for granted that I was mentally retarded, and they put me in special ed." Well, guess what? This man is now a world famous artist! It is very important to him to try to preserve the beauty and values of his family's culture.

Sal shared another story about his work with an Arabic family. Once again, he took a long time getting to know the family and their culture. For several months, the oldest daughter served as a translator between Sal and the father. Then one day the father responded to Sal in English. I asked Sal if this surprised him, and he said it didn't. He had always been fairly certain the man spoke English, because the family had been in the country for quite a while. But Sal felt the man was testing him. Here again, he felt that by taking the time to work slowly and respectfully with the father, he gradually came to trust him. And, once again, Sal referred to how important his on-going contacts with the family therapy consultant had been to him.

Marilyn described her involvement in formal training activities that were part of a grant-funded project serving autistic students:

- It was a weeklong training. But first, we had a ten-week class using Internet Blackboard, and then several professors from three universities around the country trained us on all aspects of autism. The project is in conjunction with the Center for Disease Control.

As a result of this training, Marilyn has implemented several programs emphasizing social skills development for autistic students and many other students in her school. Soon, she and others who took the training will train teachers, counselors, and social workers around her state to set up similar programs in their schools.

Clinical supervision. I have written extensively about clinical supervision elsewhere, so will only mention here that the participants felt it provided them with a forum in which to discuss complex and challenging situations in their practice. Ellström (2001) points out that developmental learning occurs when “the learner must diagnose a perhaps unclear and puzzling situation” (p. 424). These are generally the types of situations supervisees discuss with their supervisors.

On the other hand, one participant shared an example of how *she* benefits during supervisory sessions with her social work interns:

- When we’re talking about a student’s situation, I sometimes get flashes about my *own* experience with students and think, “That’s what I need to do with *my* student’s situation.” (Carol)

Mario also felt he benefited from his supervisory sessions with interns:

- In addition to simply learning from what the social work interns were saying, I felt challenged to try to become a little more informed about various treatment modalities, even if it just meant re-thinking stuff I already knew but had taken for granted. I had to be able to understand and verbalize and communicate those things when I was supervising the interns. I had to be able to label and name what I was doing in practice – not just *do* it!

Thus, both Carol and Mario regarded clinical supervision as a reciprocal process that benefited both their supervisees and themselves.

Trainings by senior social workers in school districts. Dana had participated in an experiential education course offered by a senior school social worker in her district that extended over several weeks:

- I did the experiential education training with XX and that *is* what I do with the kids here. I predominately do group work, usually ten or twelve students at a time. I love the bigger groups! It's all experiential learning. It has really met the needs of the students because it's all social skills--and that's usually their issue. The games we play draw that out like you wouldn't believe! That's where they start getting into conflicts, so I *love* that!

It is important to note that the formal developmental training activities described above all extended over long periods of time. The outside consultants who contracted with school districts often worked with the social workers for several years. The district consultant Carla mentioned conducted a twelve-week training, and Marilyn's training on autism also extended over several weeks. The purpose of these learning activities was to help the participants acquire new skills, not simply obtain new knowledge.

Two- or three-day trainings. The participants also mentioned another type of formal developmental learning activity that was more organizationally oriented. They reported that these activities were generally time limited, but they nevertheless enabled them to set up structures in their schools that expanded support services for both general and special education students. These trainings generally lasted two or three days and were devoted to teaching the participants how to set up and facilitate mental health, crisis intervention, or threat assessment teams. In most cases, the participants received a manual to guide them as they organized and facilitated these teams. The following examples illustrate how this type of training impacted the participants' practice:

- We had all that training about how to identify kids that might do something like what happened at Columbine. Now, there's a whole protocol in place about what we need to do. XX and I are the co-chairs of the mental health team, so [when we have a crisis] we get activated and then call everybody. It can take two or three days to do everything we need to do. (Tiana)

These relatively brief trainings supported the participants' macro level interventions in their schools. They were generally offered by school districts in conjunction with mandates that all schools develop the types of teams mentioned above.

Altogether, these formal learning activities appeared to have a strong impact on the participants' practice. Interestingly, most of these activities were sponsored by their school districts, so they did not cost the participants anything other than a commitment of time. And, since they were offered by the participants' districts, these activities were relevant to school social work practice. In some instances, these activities (such as the

two to three day trainings) actually expanded the participants' practice by enabling them to develop and facilitate teams serving entire school populations.

Impact of informal developmental learning on practice. Informal developmental learning covered a wide range of workplace activities. They included participating in multi-disciplinary team meetings, co-facilitating student groups with others, conducting classroom groups, consulting with colleagues, and interacting with students, families, and community providers. The following examples illustrate how these activities contributed to the participants' practice:

- I think I learn the most clinically through weekly mental health/multi-disciplinary teams. The first teams I joined were part of a pilot project with the university and included a doctor who was usually a psychiatrist, a nurse, a therapist from the community assigned to the school, teachers, and an administrator. I think I got good in-depth clinical on-the-job training in those groups. I learned to address mental health issues not just from a social work perspective, but also from a medical perspective and an educational perspective. (Lisa)

Luisa said she very much enjoyed conducting groups with other professionals because it gave her the opportunity to process what happened in the group with another person:

- A few years ago, I did a couple of groups with some school psychologists. And I like to do them with our occupational therapist and our speech therapists. I like doing them with other people just because it's a lot more fun! You're sharing the experience when the kids are kind of off the wall, and afterwards you can say to the other person, "Did you see *that*?! Oh, my gosh, what did you *think*?!"

Elaine described her process of learning to conduct classroom groups and how she wants to continue improving her skills in this area:

- A local agency gave us a grant to help offset the loss of a federal grant. But they wanted us to teach a set of health lessons in the classrooms. Some of the other counselors were really quite upset about it, but I'm actually enjoying it as I get more experience with it--although I do come out of the classes feeling exhausted. The kids can be quite unruly. I've thought about taking some courses on how to present lessons and manage classrooms. I've asked teachers about these things and they've given me some suggestions. I think I'm getting a little better about managing the classes, but if I had to do it over again, I'd want the teachers to stay in the room while I'm doing the lessons.

Thus, the multi-disciplinary team meetings expanded Lisa's perspective regarding student behaviors; jointly-facilitated student groups followed by debriefing increased Luisa's understanding of group dynamics; and the questions Elaine posed to teachers about classroom management helped her develop skills in conducting classroom groups. These are examples of informal developmental learning experiences that impacted the participants' practice and supported their professional growth.

Impact of incidental developmental learning on practice. The participants shared numerous examples of incidental developmental learning that impacted their practice. Two participants who worked at the same high school described a series of events that affected them deeply. Two of their colleagues were placed on administrative leave while the school district investigated their actions prior to the suicide of a student. They were later cleared of any wrongdoing, but the way the investigation was handled

was very distressing to these two participants. Here is what one of them learned from this tragic situation:

- That was a turning point for me because I thought, “Wait, I’ve always done what’s right for kids. I do ethical work and I’ve always known I could get sued for anything at any time, so that doesn’t bother me. I get called for those things all the time, so it could have been me. But to see it happen the way it did, I realized, “Wait, wait! I’m at the point where I want balance. If kids aren’t on my caseload, they need to be referred!” I don’t mean to sound awful about it, but I’m really going to stop people and insist they refer a kid before I get involved. This was a turning point for me because I thought, “You all come to us in times of crisis because we *handle* it so well. But you don’t help *us* very well when it comes down to something like this!” We need clarification about protection and those kinds of things. (Tiana)

Tiana’s social work colleague, Gabriel, echoed her comments, and both said they were rethinking their role in the school as a result of this incident, including their role as co-facilitators of the school’s mental health team. I felt this was a form of incidental developmental learning for both of them. It was unintentional learning that had a very great impact of the way they subsequently carried out their practice. Both Tiana and Gabriel regarded the incident and the series of events that followed it as a turning point in their careers.

Summary. In summary, the participants experienced developmental learning whenever they were faced with atypical situations for which there were no prescribed intervention strategies beyond the assessment process. As with adaptive learning, the

participants' developmental learning was formal, informal, and incidental in nature. I think one could safely say that school social work practice consists of an endless series of atypical problematic situations for which solutions must be devised. The process of finding solutions to these problems is when developmental learning occurs (Boud & Middleton, 2003).

My data also revealed three major factors that contributed to the participants' adaptive and developmental learning at their worksites. These included the strength of their professional working relationships, the professional orientation that drove their practice, and the dilemmas they faced within their practice. I will discuss how these three aspects of contextual learning impacted the participants' practice in the following sections.

Impact of strong working relationships on practice. The participants indicated that trust is an important factor in professional relationships, and it influences the amount of learning that occurs within these relationships. Pia described her relationships with other social workers assigned to her school during the thirteen years she had been there:

- [Re her current colleague]: She's worked in psychiatric hospitals and places like that, and I haven't had that experience. So she *really* helps me. We've worked together for three years and had a great relationship right from the start! I worked with another social worker like her and it was similar. But I worked with three other social workers before that, and it didn't work that way at all. They were *very* territorial.

As mentioned before, many participants spoke of their pleasure in conducting student groups with other social workers and colleagues from other disciplines. They

made statements such as, “We work well together,” and “It’s just more fun doing groups with another person.” Lisa spoke of the “chemistry” that characterizes strong working relationships:

- When you’re putting yourself in a situation to learn, you’re vulnerable and may be exposing a weakness. I think the people I’ve learned the most from are those I have good working relationships with. There’s a chemistry there--and since there is, there’s a natural sort of trust. They know I’m not going to feel threatened--like with the teacher that said to me, “Well, you’ve done group and you’ve done individual work with him and it hasn’t worked, so why don’t you go to the playground with him and intervene immediately when you see him bothering others?” She didn’t say it in a critical way and she knows I’m not going to take it personally. We were problem solving together and she came up with something I could do with her student. In building good working relationships with certain people, there’s already trust--and those are the people I learn the most from.

Without exception, the other participants echoed Pia and Lisa’s comments regarding the importance of developing trusting relationships with co-workers. Such relationships enabled them to be open to learning experiences that positively impacted their practice.

Impact of professional dilemmas on practice. I repeatedly heard stories about the dilemmas the participants faced in their practice. They often wrestled with issues that challenged their sense of professional ethics. These dilemmas propelled them into reflective modes that resulted in decisions that significantly impacted their practice. For example, many of the participants struggled with Medicaid billing:

- When I look at things like Medicaid billing, I'm saying, "Guys [social work colleagues], what I'm telling you is right." The director of special ed may be saying, "I don't care [about your concerns]. I want you to *bill*. But, I say to them, "You have to decide what's more important--being a skilled professional social worker or doing what your employer is telling you to do." (Alice)

Carol also expressed distress about administrative pressure to bill for Medicaid reimbursement:

- I feel my braided contract [combined funding sources] gives me permission to work with kids who need the services and are not on my caseload. We occasionally get terse memos saying our caseload kids must come first, so (chuckling) I have to watch my step a little bit. I feel really pressured by special ed administration about that. They're looking at time, numbers, and generating money. I think there's a lack of understanding about what social work is. . . . No matter what is said, I've thought all along it's just about the *money*!

Other dilemmas related to issues that arose in the participants' practice rather than Medicaid billing:

- The teachers always want us to do classroom groups using some sort of curriculum. But classroom groups don't necessarily work for the growth we social workers would like to see. So it's always kind of a Catch-22. You end up doing classroom groups, but I think you're lowering the bar. You have to make the group work for the lowest functioning member of the class, but then you lose the top functioning members. I think it's better to create your own groups so you can pull kids together that are pretty much alike. (Jill)

- I tried to help the mom make arrangements for her son's burial. But, administration discouraged me from doing much more than that because the school system seems so paranoid about being sued. There's that piece--and yet you're dealing with a student's death. So, I sort of resolved it in my mind by thinking, "Okay, there are people who deal with that part of it [the administrative aspect], but I'm dealing with the emotions of the people involved." (Anna)
- It is such a dilemma to know what to do in this particular situation--like how much I should insist that the boy stay with the grandparents or if I should make a child protection referral and get the police involved immediately. We didn't exactly know where the gun was that the mother was threatening to use. Then there was the dilemma about whether to contact the family's [private] therapist at all, because she says and does some things that make me shudder--but I finally did. Another dilemma was how much to communicate with the grandparents, because I don't have a release of information. But to me it's an emergency situation. I was thinking this kid could be "homicide bait," so I decided to call them. (Carol)

In all these situations, the participants indicated they engaged in a considerable amount of reflection in order to resolve dilemmas. Alice and Jill's reflections involved conversations with social work colleagues, whereas Anna "resolved it in my mind" without engaging others. Carol, on the other hand, involved a number of people in dealing with her dilemma: school personnel, the family's therapist in the community, and the student's grandparents. The day before our interview, she learned the grandparents' phone had been disconnected and she was distressed about losing access to them. She

spent considerable time talking about this situation, and it occurred to me that she was using the interview to reflect upon how she should proceed.

Impact of professional orientation on practice. A course in school social work is generally an elective in graduate social work programs. Very few schools have entire tracks devoted to school social work. In addition, there is much variation in the theoretical underpinnings of graduate social work programs. Thus, social workers generally come into school systems with an array of orientations to the profession of social work in general, and the specialization of school social work in particular. These orientations range from clinical social work to multi-level systems-based work, which equate to the micro and macro levels of practice discussed earlier. Some participants named their specific practice orientation, whereas others appeared to have an “eclectic” orientation that had evolved over the course of their careers.

Interestingly, the participants who primarily adopted a clinical approach tended to be funded solely by special education, covered more than one school, and regarded themselves as peripheral to the educational reform efforts taking place at their sites. For example:

Schools have their goals, but I don't ever feel I'm involved with them. I don't know how I could have input into a school's goals. And they don't say, “This is the area we'd like you to be involved with.” I don't really know the process, but maybe it's because I cover three schools. (Anna)

Anna essentially moved between her three schools working with students individually in a micro level mode to meet the social work goals listed on her students' IEP documents.

On the other hand, participants who viewed their interventions as systems-oriented tended to be based in only one school. Their work generally involved creating programs benefiting large groups of students, changing the attitudes of school personnel, and developing school-community partnerships. They did see students on a regular basis individually or in small groups, but this was not the main focus of their practice. For example, Lynda did a great deal of work with school staff and often conducted mediations with them:

- A lot of my colleagues do not get involved with teachers' issues. They want to work with students and then just consult with their teachers. When I talk with them about the mediations I do with teachers and students or teachers and educational assistants, they look at me like I'm from another planet! Also, I know they do groups with students but don't include staff. I always include staff. I do groups in classrooms and make certain teachers are involved.

As another example, a large part of Marilyn's practice involved working with entire classrooms on social skills and creating programs in her schools that benefited many students:

- My belief is that a lot of the psychotherapy that goes on really isn't valid in a school setting. I think teaching kids about awareness of body signals, emotions, and self-talk is much more useful. I feel helping them develop these concrete skills is much more valuable than bringing kids to your office, closing the door, and thinking you're going to fix them. If they come in and you shut the door and they tell you how they feel and then walk out and clobber someone, I don't find

that helpful. I think a systems perspective involving the teacher, parents, student, and resources in the community is much more effective.

Lynne echoed Marilyn's comments:

- Sometimes at school social work gatherings, there are still those that insist on calling themselves "clinical social workers" in the schools. They haven't made that leap to really understanding what school social work is all about. I find myself not wanting to go to those meetings. It's like the movie, "Ground-Hog Day," where you just keep going to the same meeting every time. It gets a bit old.

Lynne was the only participant who had enrolled in a school social work track in graduate school, so she was very clear about her role in the schools. She did a considerable amount of systems level work in addition to individual work with students and families. There were actually quite a few participants like Lynne who struck a balance between micro and macro levels of practice. On the whole, these participants tended to be the more experienced social workers in my sample.

Donna (the participant I interviewed by email) did not align herself with any particular professional orientation, as most of the other participants did. This was her response to my question, "What interventions or treatment modalities do you use the most--and how did you acquire the skills to use these interventions effectively?":

- I use an eclectic mix of theories and techniques but I can never work with a technique that has not become part of me; it comes across phony and ridiculous. Also I had a brilliant teacher in my undergraduate studies that had the courage to say you have to fall in love with your client. That was a no-no in her day and now, but I found it to be true. I had to see the incredible beauty, potential and value in

their being and be willing to give them the respect and the opportunity to let their light shine, but first I had to see the light. Since my specialty was ANGRY teenagers, it could be a challenge, but I loved their rage too; it was honest. I loved them all and if I didn't or couldn't it was best to ask that person to be re-assigned.

As I indicated earlier, Donna also stated that she tended to go overboard and take on too much, needing her supervisor to help "rein me in." She ended her long email by saying, "I never thought I could burn out. I've always felt blessed to do what I do and thrilled each day to be a school social worker." But, she eventually did "burn out" and needed to leave the profession. This was after she lost two students to suicide and a member of her own family died—all within a brief period of time.

Thus, the professional orientation of the participants ranged from clinical (micro) to systems (macro) levels of practice. Many worked at both levels, particularly the more experienced participants. At any rate, the participants' professional orientation guided them in their selection of learning opportunities and shaped the way they practiced.

Summary of factors impacting workplace learning. Factors that influenced the participants' learning experiences included the strength of professional relationships, workplace dilemmas, and professional orientation. Strong professional relationships characterized the participants' learning experiences that had the greatest impact on their practice. Workplace dilemmas promoted reflective thinking and collegial dialogue that generated insight that guided practice activity. And, professional orientation generally determined the extent to which the participants engaged in macro level systems-orientated practice.

Skills acquired from prior and outside learning experiences and the participants' personal qualities also impacted their practice. These topics will be addressed in the following sections.

Impact of prior learning experiences on practice. I felt the unique quality of each participant's practice reflected the depth of knowledge and wide range of skills he or she had acquired prior to working in the schools. The participants' prior experiences provided a foundation upon which to build their school social work practice. These experiences were both professional and personal in nature, but I will discuss them separately.

Impact of prior professional learning on practice. The first question I always asked in the interviews was, "How did you decide to become a school social worker?" Several of the participants recalled childhood and adolescent memories in response to this question:

- My mother was an educator in Chicago. She was a vice-principal in a K-8 school, and in her last job she ended up being a principal of a school in a psychiatric hospital. And then my grandmother was a social worker in Germany, so I guess I was destined to be a social worker--and the education piece just kind of fell into it. . . . I'm a very macro person, but most of us aren't. We get very little training, but the university I went to was very macro. That's obviously why I'm active on a state level, rather than just at the local level in my schools. (Joan)

Joan added that her grandmother worked as a community organizer in Germany. With her grandmother's experiences in mind, she selected a graduate school that had a strong community organization orientation. Several of Joan's positions in the schools enabled

her to assume leadership or managerial roles. She had also been an officer in her state's school social work association for many years and was involved in advocacy efforts with her state legislative body.

As mentioned earlier, Lynne had enrolled in a school social work track in graduate school that offered several courses attended by social workers, teachers, and administrators. She felt these classes helped her understand the orientation teachers and administrators bring to their work, and she felt this enabled her to work effectively with educators in her schools.

- I think it's human nature to think that if something is in *your* brain, then it's in *other* people's brains and everyone thinks like you do. But, [because of those classes] I realized I couldn't be mad at an administrator for thinking like an administrator, nor be mad at a teacher for not thinking like a social worker. It was a *very* visceral experience learning how we all approach things differently. The important thing is not to fight it, but to accept it and work with it.

Two participants had worked as "psych techs" in psychiatric hospitals before attending graduate school. These positions enabled them to observe licensed practitioners conduct patient groups, and they felt those experiences helped them enjoy facilitating student groups in the schools. For example:

- I worked in a psych hospital for three years. We had morning check-in groups, lunch groups, afternoon groups, and substance abuse groups--all kinds of groups. So, I got a lot of experience doing groups in the psych hospital. (Tiana)

Five participants had completed internships in the schools during graduate school. They felt these supervised experiences hastened the acculturation process as they settled into social work positions in their districts. For example:

- What helped me be comfortable doing classroom groups was having taught a class in the alternative school where I did my internship. It was one hour a day on two different days and I got to create the curriculum. It was about the adolescent girl's experience in a social context throughout history. My students had to create portfolios that I graded. I guess that's where some of my comfort working in classrooms comes from. (Lynne)

Alice had been a teacher before turning to a career as a political lobbyist at the national level. She earned her MSW later in life and eventually assumed a leadership role in her state school social work association. She very actively guided colleagues through the process of working with legislators on school social work issues. Because of her teaching background, she also felt very comfortable conducting classroom groups on social skills or sitting with individual students in a classroom to coach them on appropriate behaviors.

Marilyn also felt comfortable conducting classroom groups. This was because of her prior experience as a social worker in the military:

- I actually started working with groups in the military. I was told to do stress management for a group of about one hundred and fifty. Before I would go into the room to give the talk, I'd be lying on the bathroom floor hyperventilating--I learned the hard way!

In addition, Marilyn felt her military experience reinforced her orientation as a “systems-thinking” practitioner. As a result, she initiated many innovative programs for students in her schools. She preferred developing and facilitating programs for large groups of students rather than adopting a more clinical approach of working with students individually in regularly scheduled therapeutic sessions.

Lisa had been a professional artist before coming into the schools, so she frequently used art activities with her students. However, after working closely with an art therapist on a community mental health team that served her school, she became proficient in designing interventions for her students that were grounded in art therapy principles.

- One of the techniques the art therapist taught me was how to make an “anger box.” We did it with our group of third and fourth grade emotionally disturbed boys. It’s a personal box, and it actually took 2 or 3 sessions because it involves painting, collage, and gluing images inside the box. It was a very creative project. Some of the kids used the outside of the box to show how their anger would come out in the world. And the inside of the box would be how they really feel inside. Or, for some of them, the inside would show where the anger came from. Some of them just used the whole box as a container. They’d say, “All my anger is in here, and it’s going to stay in here.” I remember one kid saying other kids bug him, so he made these little bugs that were hanging down inside. To me, that was a really creative intervention she taught me to do--and now I use it with my groups.

Lynda had worked as a claims adjuster prior to obtaining her MSW. She had considerable experience conducting mediations between her company and its customers.

She indicated that she seized every possible opportunity to facilitate mediation between students and teachers, as well as between school personnel who found themselves in conflict with each other.

Carol had spent many years in the field of medical technology prior to obtaining her social work degree. She had, in fact, advanced to a supervisory position. She felt her knowledge of medical systems enabled her to help families maneuver these systems. She had enjoyed the supervisory aspect of her position, so as soon as she felt well established in her practice in the schools, she began supervising interns from a local university social work program.

Patricia was also familiar with medical systems, having worked for many years as a social worker in a pediatric oncology unit immediately after completing graduate school. She was attracted to the position because of the nature of the clinical supervision they offered. She now regularly supervises new school social workers in her district because she feels she received excellent supervision in her first few years of medical social work practice.

Alice and another participant had worked in child protective services before coming into the schools, as had three of the five participants in my pilot study. They all felt their child protective background was useful when helping school personnel make referrals to state agencies for suspected child neglect and abuse.

Several participants had worked in youth-oriented non-profit organizations prior to becoming school social workers. Their motivation to work in the schools stemmed from their belief that social and emotional support for young people in the schools might

help keep them out of pathology-oriented systems such as juvenile justice and mental health facilities. For example:

- The reason I wanted to be in the schools so much was because this is where I thought I could do preventive work. I felt that's what I was doing [in undergraduate school] in a volunteer mentoring program in the schools. We were catching kids early, before they got locked up. So I planned both my internships very strategically. The first one was in the juvenile jail and the second one was in the schools. Once I got here, I absolutely knew this is where you can make an impact. This is where you can make a difference, before the kids get into jail.

(Gabriel)

Teresa had also worked in correctional systems and felt those experiences sensitized her to student behaviors in her school:

- We've had major gang wars here. One day I arrived at school and the whole school was tagged. So, what I did with a lot of others was to create a safe zone here. I know what gang affiliation is and what it looks like, because I worked at the juvenile detention center for two years. I also had another year at the women's prison. So if I see it, I report it, and deal with it--and it won't happen here at *this* school. Period! Slowly things have changed and we don't have as much of it anymore.

Interestingly, three participants with experience working in non-profit organizations had been in managerial positions. Two others had also obtained management experience in business and government organizations. Most of the

participants with this type of experience had taken the lead in organizing programs in their schools to benefit students and school personnel. For example:

- I believe I've done a lot of real progressive stuff here. I had the awards dinners where we would have about 200 to 300 hundred people there. They were potluck dinners. I was the activities director last year and we had our first dance. It was *very* successful. I also headed up an art program where we won [an award from the city] and the pictures were presented to the district attorneys. Each person in the district attorney's office picked a kid and had their picture placed in a frame on a wall in their office. Then we took the kids down on a tour of the DA's offices and the pictures were hung there and framed real nice. Out of all the schools that entered the contest, we had fourteen [students], and the other schools had maybe just one. (Pia)

Unfortunately, the participant who had many years of prior experience as a public health administrator expressed much disappointment over the lack of leadership her director exhibited with the social work unit in her district. She tried unsuccessfully to organize regular peer consultation sessions with her colleagues. At the time of the interview, she was seriously considering applying for a position in a neighboring district that provided extensive professional development activities for its social workers.

Impact of prior personal learning on practice. Nine participants had personal experiences with disabilities. These included learning, developmental, and physical disabilities, as well as autism and mental illness. The participants felt these personal experiences sensitized them to the needs of students and families dealing with similar disorders.

Slightly more than half of my participants represented minority populations. Although primarily Hispanic, a few came from Native American and gay and lesbian populations. Extended family and personal social networks had always been important sources of support for these participants, so most of them made a concerted effort to involve families in their work with students. These participants spoke candidly about how their experiences as members of minority groups impacted their practice. They had personally experienced and witnessed discrimination and injustice and were determined to break down biases they encountered in the schools. For example:

- I think my experience living in a developing country and being a visible minority as a white woman for five years probably more than anything contributed to my foundation of being a compassionate and tolerant social worker. Also, being a minority myself here, being openly lesbian and knowing how that's affected my life, and knowing there are times when it's hurt my career--those things have made me a more sensitive and better social worker. (Lisa)

Tiana shared her experiences as a teenager and later as a college student growing up in mainstream society:

- I think my motivation [to start a program with gang-involved youth] goes back to my own high school experience of seeing the inequity that exists. Being a light-skinned Mexican woman, I knew what white privilege was like because I got treated with white privilege. And I got to see how really bright Hispanic kids were left out. Then I went to a really good college and we had a Chicano graduation. We were told that less than one percent of all Hispanics graduate from college. Instead of feeling proud, I felt very, very sad. So, it comes from me at a real deep

level. It's unacceptable to me that less than one percent graduate. At that time in my life, I wondered if there might be a way I could help motivate bright Hispanic kids to stay in school and graduate.

Gabriel is also Hispanic and throughout the interview pointed out the discriminatory practices that exist in school systems. He cited his own experiences as a student:

- In undergraduate school, I always knew I wanted to work with young people. I think a lot of it had to do with my background and how I grew up. I was born on the west coast but was pretty much raised here. When I looked back at the resources that were available to me in the school district here, I realized there were none. So, I wondered who was out there helping the young people, particularly the teenagers.

As a result of these personal experiences, Gabriel and Tiana are currently actively involved working with gang-involved youth in the large high school where they both work. Over the years, they have conducted groups for these students and have also organized activities as a way of integrating them into the larger student population.

- The group has evolved and we're now known in the school. We try to get them involved and linked to school, because they're kids that are not in the traditional sports, or the band, or cheerleading, and those kinds of things. We try to get them connected in ways where they can fund-raise at school. A lot of the kids are Mexican American, so we're able to sell snacks introducing others to their culture. We're known as the vendors that put "salsa valentine" on the popcorn and sell burritos or Mexican candies. They've been able to share their culture and their

pride by selling food they know. Other kids will come by to see what they're selling, so that's a natural way for them to talk with other kids.

Some participants referred to family-of-origin experiences that impacted their practice. One in particular incorporated her family-of-origin's love of board games into her interventions with students. She recounted her work with a homebound student recovering from a bullet wound inflicted by a gang incident.

- The kids' needs are so great that I have to look at just little things that will make a difference. For example, I was working with a young man who was shot a month ago and is now in a full leg cast. He's being home schooled, but he didn't have any activities. He really doesn't like to read, so I brought him several games to play with his younger sister. One of them was Scrabble, but he had never played it. So, I ended up teaching him and his younger sister and cousin. Very basic--teaching him how to play it. Board games were *very* important in my family--and they still are! (Patricia)

One of the participants in my pilot study described her experience with a medical social worker in a hospital organ transplant unit. She said the experience motivated her to "become the very best social worker" she could possibly be. It was following her request for an organ transplant that the hospital social worker disclosed a long-held family secret. It was in a session that included the woman she had grown up calling "mother." He revealed they were not closely enough related to consider a "match." My participant said she sat in total shock as "my world turned upside down at that very moment." Partly because of this experience, she actively participated in sessions with a family therapy consultant and made family work a priority in her practice.

In general, when the participants found their own personal life experiences to be similar to those of their clients, they felt this served as an advantage. They felt it increased their empathy for these clients, even though they did not necessarily disclose their own personal situations. But when they did, it was only because they felt self-disclosure would enhance the therapeutic relationship they had established with these clients.

In summary, the participants provided many examples of prior professional and personal experiences that impacted their work in the schools. Invariably, they made the connections between prior and current experiences themselves. I rarely had to delve. When the participants described interventions they used in their practice, I would ask, “How did you learn to do that?” Their responses always underscored the impact of prior experiences on their current practice.

I will now move on to present my findings regarding the impact of outside experiences on the participants’ practice. Here again, the participants often spontaneously provided the link between these activities and their practice in the schools.

Impact of outside learning experiences on practice. For the purpose of this study, I am defining outside learning experiences as activities that occur outside the workplace. Although they may relate directly to school social work, they are not sponsored by the practitioner’s school or school district. As with prior learning, these experiences can also be separated into professional and personal activities. And, as with workplace learning, they can be of a formal, informal, or incidental nature.

Impact of outside formal professional learning on practice. Outside formal professional learning activities include conferences, workshops, professional training

events and academic coursework. They are a source of continuing education units (CEUs) that school social workers must regularly earn in order to maintain a state license to practice. The participants had mixed reactions about these programs. Marian, Patricia, and Elaine provided examples of positive experiences:

- One of the trainings I found most useful was one about playing therapeutic games with students. I ended up using them a lot. I knew when I took the position that I'd be expected to do classroom groups. I was very nervous about it because I hadn't done any before. In the beginning, I thought I was going to throw up every day when I'd go to work knowing I'd have to do one of these groups (laughing). I didn't know what the heck I was supposed to be doing--I was really pretty clueless. But then I began using the games in the classrooms and things worked out. So the training I attended on therapeutic games was *very* helpful to me for doing that part of my job. (Marian)

Patricia attended summer seminars devoted to the philosophy of learning, and she also did extensive reading about the connection between intellectual and emotional development. She felt those experiences significantly changed the way she practiced:

- I haven't really articulated it until now, but an important paradigm shift for me was to begin focusing more on the child's relationship with the teacher rather than emotional issues outside the classroom. I have always struggled with the concept of providing mental health treatment on a school campus. When kids get therapy at school, clinicians have to be *so* careful that whatever they open up, they make sure to close back down so the child can transition back into working in the classroom. Engaging in classroom learning has therapeutic value in itself. I

learned that when I was doing so much reading and talking with people about the philosophy of learning and education.

Elaine also made use of summer breaks to increase her knowledge and develop new skills. One summer she participated in a weeklong training on cognitive behavioral therapy. She liked the training because the presenters used many videotapes and even conducted live sessions with clients in front of the attendees. This is how she has incorporated the model into her practice:

- I use the cognitive behavioral framework for a lot of what I do. I've had to adapt what I learned in the training last summer because the model is really for adults. They have worksheets that I use, but I'm still experimenting with the model. It seems to work best with the older kids, so I do mostly play therapy with the younger ones.

Dana learned how to structure student groups as the result of attending an outside workshop:

- Last year I attended a seminar conducted by a psychologist in private practice who also works in the schools. He does groups in his private practice similar to the kinds of groups I do, such as game playing along with processing the experience. What I learned was that when kids are not doing well in a group, you shouldn't waste your time trying to keep fitting them in. Instead, you need to pull them out and do individual work with them. So, that's what I do. It's when a kid is in too much personal crisis to be able to handle a group that I pull them out for individual work--and then *they* tell me when they're ready to go back to the group. They ask, "When can I be in the group again?"

On the other hand, several participants expressed disappointment with some types of social work events offering CEUs:

- I've gone to the state social work conference a couple of times, but I really don't like them. They don't feed me. They give a wide smattering of information, but nothing that really builds on what I'm already doing. I'd rather go to a conference that really interests me where I can take away some tools to incorporate into my practice. (Marilyn)
- I feel there is a lot of repetition [in our annual state social work conference] and it's just not quite what I'm looking for in terms of professional development. Typically, I look for outside seminars, like in the flyers that come in the mail--and I'm always just hoping I get involved in a good training. A couple of them have flopped pretty badly, but a couple of them really have changed the way I do things. A really good outside training can be pivotal for me. (Dana)

Jill referred to the obligatory nature of the CEU-granting events:

- It's nice when something comes through that you're interested in, but a lot of times you just go--like at the end of the year when you haven't gotten your CEUs and you frantically go to pretty much anything.

Thus, the participants had both positive and negative experiences with formal CEU-granting events. They said they relied on the brochures advertising them to try to get a sense of what to expect. They also sometimes asked colleagues what they knew about the presentation style of the speaker(s) before registering for these events. Even so, they were not always satisfied with the events they attended.

The participants also engaged in outside professional activities that were formal in nature but did not offer CEUs. Perhaps it would be appropriate to think of these activities as “quasi-formal.” These activities included teaching and consulting with university social work programs, conducting a private practice, serving on advisory committees, and assuming leadership roles in professional organizations. The following accounts illustrate how these activities impacted the practice of some of the participants:

- What I like about being a consultant [for the social work program at the university] is that I get a different perspective when they assign interns to me that are working in the schools. I *love* it because I see how uniquely people practice and how they deal with issues that are unique to their school populations. Every school is different and there are different issues to deal with. You get all these different perspectives and see how people become creative in getting what they need. We’re a high-need school here, so we get a lot of resources. I didn’t realize other schools might be resource-poor until I did that work. (Tiana)

Gabriel also served as a consultant for a university social work program:

- It’s been great meeting all these agency instructors at places I never knew existed or never knew what they did. It’s helped me professionally to learn about the services these agencies provide. Now I have a better idea of where to send my own students and families.

Patricia served on the national school social work association’s board for a couple of years and had this to say about the experience:

- I was amazed at how much we have in common across the country in terms of struggling as professionals. So, that was good information, to learn that the things

happening in my district are the same as in other places. However, it was a little disenchanting to spend so much time talking about political stuff. I learned that's not my area of expertise. It's not something I feel I can do well. But that experience gave me a chance to have contact with social workers from all over the country, so I'm really glad I had that opportunity.

In summary, the participants' reactions to formal outside events granting CEUs were mixed. Some participants, such as Marian and Dana, got exactly what they needed from these events in order to grow professionally. However, others were often disappointed. On the other hand, the activities that did *not* offer CEUs seemed to consistently enrich the participants' practice by enlarging their worldviews and often informing them of resources they did not know existed. I have arbitrarily identified this latter type of activity as "formal," although the participants indicated there was a considerable amount of informal and incidental learning associated with them as well.

Impact of outside informal professional learning on practice. The participants described numerous outside informal professional learning experiences that were very diverse in nature. These included networking at conferences and professional meetings, preparing to conduct workshops, reading professional materials, writing for publication, perfecting technological skills, searching professional websites, visiting community agencies, and so on. These activities supported the acquisition of knowledge and skills that ultimately impacted their practice. For example:

- Workshops become very repetitive because they're usually geared towards new professionals rather than those of us that have been in practice for several years. It gets to be a real challenge to find things that are new. That's what I appreciated

when I found the School Social Work Association of America's website. I finally felt this was where I could go to keep sharpening myself. I also found validation for much of what I was doing in my school. (Teresa)

Unlike Teresa's experience with a specific website, Gabriel found validation for his work from reading research reports in preparation for writing a book chapter:

- Sometimes you read something and think, "Yes, that's what we do!" It's kind of reaffirming to see there's research supporting what we were doing all along.

Writing that book chapter *forced* us to go out and find the research that supported what we were doing. We then realized it was there all the time in plain black and white. We just hadn't put it in that format because we had no need to. We just were doing what we were doing. Of course, I think we knew it from graduate school and what we believed in--that it was the right practice for helping young people. But to read the research out there, such as resiliency theory and all these other things, was very affirming. (Gabriel)

Thus, the participants found informal professional activities to be informative, affirming, and energizing. These activities were primarily self-selected and tended to meet the immediate needs of the participants.

Impact of outside incidental professional learning on practice. Outside incidental professional learning experiences also covered a wide range of activities, often occurring in relation to the formal and informal learning activities mentioned above. For example, several participants described how validating it was when people responded favorably to presentations of their work, as it encouraged them to continue pursuing their interests. Tiana described such experiences in the following way:

- I made a presentation to a group of administrators in the district about the gang work I do. That was a huge turning point in terms of people acknowledging my work. I was doing it for free because it was my passion, but now it was being acknowledged at a higher level. People got turned on to it when I presented, and they got excited about it. I knew what I was doing was a good thing, but it was on top of everything else. Then I got called to go talk with the superintendent and also present my work to other people--and then I started presenting at conferences. There was *huge* interest in what I was doing and I started getting a lot of calls. It was validation for what I was doing knowing I was one of only a few people in the nation doing this kind of work.

Dana had many personal friends who were educators and administrators, and they would sometimes say things that piqued her interest:

- I have administrator friends who say, “It would really be much more helpful if the social worker or counselor would do this or that.” So, I think to myself, “Now that’s interesting.” And then I sort of bring it back here and ask my administrators, “May I sit in on this?” Or, “Can I do this or that?” And they like that, because they feel they have support.

Thus, the participants’ outside professional learning experiences were formal, informal, and incidental learning in nature (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). The participants readily shared how they incorporated the knowledge and skills they acquired from these activities into their practice. They used terms such as “pivotal,” “a turning point,” “a paradigm shift,” “affirming,” and “validating” when describing how some of their most important outside professional learning experiences impacted their practice.

Impact of outside personal learning on practice. All outside personal learning experiences undoubtedly contribute to a school social worker's practice, since the "personhood" of the social worker is the vehicle through which services are delivered. All personal experiences help shape a social worker's orientation to the world, in addition to providing a lens through which he or she perceives and interacts with others (England, 1986; Lee, 1983; Rapoport, 1968).

The participants repeatedly interjected personal references in their accounts of professional learning and practice. It was as if the separation between personal and professional learning experiences was a very fine line. This is not to say that the line between personal and professional *behavior* is also a fine line. To the contrary, maintaining a keen awareness of one's personal and professional boundaries is a cornerstone of the social work profession (Reamer, 2003, 2006). Personal reflection, clinical supervision, and training in ethical decision-making are a few ways social workers develop and maintain appropriate boundaries in their practice. Thus, while the participants felt their outside personal learning experiences enriched their practice in the schools, they indicated that they used much discretion in sharing any of these experiences with clients.

The accounts that follow represent outside personal experiences that significantly impacted the participants' practice. In many respects, they signaled turning points in their careers. These experiences provided the participants with new lenses that colored their orientation to the contexts in which they worked. For example, two participants had recently lost younger siblings. One spoke poignantly of the impact of her loss on her practice:

- Even though I was always sensitive and my heart was in the right place, it was only when my niece became motherless that I realized how kids could feel really empty in a lot of ways. It really hit me as far as the level of trauma is concerned, both physiologically and the way it changes your life and *everything*. I felt it inside me, and so it made me a little softer, especially with the girls here at school. (Carla)

Carla had also suffered an earlier family tragedy that pointed her in an entirely new direction in her career. It influenced her outside interests and activities and provided her with information and skills she was able to incorporate into her practice:

- My cousin's husband had a severe brain injury. One day he was a normal man, and the next day he had lots of weird things going on with him. He eventually died from it. When there was an opening for a school social worker in the district's traumatic brain injury program, I took it. I participated in trainings with the Brain Injury Association. And since their trainings were funded, I attended their two-day conferences every year. I also volunteered for the Brain Injury Association board of directors for a year or so.

One participant took a few years off from her job to begin raising a family. She felt this experience greatly enriched her practice after returning to work:

- When I became a stay-at-home mom, I started a group for moms and created a support network for myself. It was my saving grace some days, because the neighborhood emptied out during the day when everybody went to work. My network saved me on days when I didn't know what to do and felt like climbing

the walls. It helped to talk with others with similar experiences and learn to deal with situations. (Lynne)

As a result of her experience, Lynne worked very hard at developing a support group for parents of developmentally disabled high school students. She was surprised at how difficult it was to pull a group together, but she persisted. This was her observation:

- I wasn't expecting it, but the hardest population of parents at the high school level is the group whose kids are in the ISP [intensive support program] classrooms. They're a pretty difficult group to engage. The kids are profoundly disabled, maybe MR [mentally retarded], autistic, non-verbal, or wheelchair bound. I was scratching my head about it at first because I came in thinking we could get this really strong support network together. But I think these are families that have had a revolving door of service providers throughout their lives. I think they've learned not to get too attached or too invested.

Ultimately, Lynne began organizing monthly luncheons for these parents. The food was either prepared by staff members at the school or donated by local businesses, and these meetings were much more successful.

Other participants who had children sometimes referred to their own parenting experiences that helped them appreciate issues their students' families faced. These participants also seemed more inclined to maintain contact with the parents of students on their caseloads. For example:

- I think because I'm a parent I'm able in general to develop a good relationship with the families I work with. I'm not judgmental about what it's like to be a parent, because I know it's difficult. I don't do as much work with families as I

would like, but I definitely make myself very available. I periodically check in with them. Each time I see a child, in general I write a brief note to the parents about what we covered. I have a little form I use and give it to the child to take home with them to let the parent know just the subject of our session that day-- and I ask if they have any questions. (Elaine)

On a different note, raising a child with Asperger's disorder helped one participant sharpen her assessment skills related to students with this disorder:

- It took us two years to get a child properly diagnosed with Asperger's disorder. I *knew* he was autistic; I *knew* he had Asperger's! I had no doubt about it, but the head special ed teacher felt he was an oppositionally defiant kid. My son has Asperger's and this student exhibited *exactly* the same symptoms. This head special ed teacher had never in her life dealt with autistic children! She wanted to put him in a class for emotionally disturbed children and I fought that for two years! The mom took him to get thoroughly evaluated, and yes, he had Asperger's disorder, along with some other difficulties. So, that child was finally appropriately placed after two years. It took *two years!!* (Teresa)

Three participants described how their engagement in long-term therapy and personal growth work carried over into their professional practice. For example:

- Something I draw from so much is my own personal sand play process. I've been with a sand play therapist for about four years. It's Jungian work, and it's been hands down the most *amazing* process I've gone through in my entire life! It's all about drawing out your own issues, of course, but it's that symbolism and knowing that what I'm putting there in the sand is so important to me. It is

symbolic; it is big; it is *huge*; it is harnessed right there! Since I now know that because of my own process, I know it with my kids here at school. I know that this space (pointing to the sand tray) is very important to them. So, that's changed me a lot. I think my kids' worlds in the sand tray are much different now that I've gone through my own process. (Dana)

Although not as dramatic as the participants' accounts above, other participants identified personal outside interests and traditions they incorporated into their practice. For example, Lisa adopted and trained a small dog. Eventually she decided his temperament made him suitable to include in therapy sessions with some of her most challenging students. As a result, she witnessed changes in student behaviors that enabled them to become more fully engaged with their schoolwork.

- I have three kids that I work with that specifically include my dog. One of them has very poor social skills. He has a hard time connecting with others. He doesn't show much compassion or connection with other people. His community therapist and I thought if he could work with an animal and form a bond with an animal and build some skills, then maybe he could transfer those skills to interactions with people. And it has--it has! Yes, it *has*! He *adores* the dog. He has literally broken down and cried a couple of times when the dog couldn't come. He was also in the social skills group, and the last day of group he didn't realize it was the last meeting. We were having a party and when he found it was the last day, he started bawling and crying and sobbing, saying, "This is the first time I've made friends." He's been aware he's really made a lot of progress. He still has his behavior outbursts, but they're fewer in frequency and they're not as extreme as

before. His parents have also confirmed that he's really built up his social skills a lot.

Lisa is also a professional artist and uses visual modalities extensively with her students. She especially appreciates how drawings, paintings, and hands-on art projects can be vehicles of expression for students with language disabilities.

- If you can get kids to think creatively about a problem or their issues, it gives them kind of a container with which to work on their issues. They can distance themselves a little bit from it and talk about it, and express how they feel about it in ways other than words.

Lynda also uses visual strategies with her students, but in a different manner. She said she doodles a lot when she's thinking--"just like my father." So, she makes certain to always have paper handy so she can draw images to help her students visualize outcomes of behavioral choices. Eventually she succeeded in obtaining an office with a whiteboard and she explained how she uses it:

- If I'm in my office working with seventeen year-olds that are acting up in class, I'll go to the whiteboard and draw a line on it. I'll ask them to tell me the characteristics of eleven year-olds, and I'll write down what they say. Then I'll ask them about the characteristics of eighteen year-olds and will write that down, too. In seeing the comparison, something just seems to click with them.

Yet another participant became the primary caretaker of aging parents. With the help of her technologically savvy students, she learned to use the Internet so she could gather information in the evening about her parents' disabilities and find resources for them in the community. She regarded this as a "win-win" situation because it empowered

her students when they assumed a teaching role with her regarding the Internet. It also helped her locate critically needed resources for her family.

Elaine was active in the parent-teacher association at her children's school and served as president for two years. She became an advocate in her community on behalf of students and teachers, and she felt these activities helped her appreciate political issues inherent in school communities.

Lastly, Anna commuted two hours each day between her home in a Native American community and her school district. In the days following the accidental death of one of her students, she sought relief through a native healing tradition of washing away sadness in the river in her community. Following intense interventions with classmates of the deceased student at her school, she would retreat to the restroom to splash water on her face as a modification of her clan's healing ritual.

In summary, my participants provided numerous examples of personal interests and activities outside the workplace that impacted their practice. These experiences ranged from life-changing events to family traditions and cultural rituals. These experiences influenced the participants' perceptions of events in their practice that in turn prompted changes in their practice behaviors.

Impact of personal qualities on practice. I regard *personal qualities* as the personal characteristics that make each of us unique. To me, the concept of *personality* is shorthand for personal qualities.

Many of the participants' comments revealed their personal qualities. These qualities included integrity, trustworthiness, self-awareness, humility, authenticity,

hopefulness, determination, assertiveness, enthusiasm, flexibility, versatility, perseverance, creativity, congeniality, resourcefulness, passion, and self-efficacy.

My findings suggest that the personal qualities of the participants greatly impacted their practice behaviors. Several participants described themselves as team players. Bea had recently retired, but she characterized her practice as follows:

- It was just a part of who I am to want to be a team player. I guess respect for other people's knowledge--and respect for their profession--you know, with teachers that were in BD [behavior disordered] classrooms that were burned out. I mean, I could see why! So just having respect for their knowledge---and how was I going to plug into that knowledge and still be able to change their views that were negative towards a kid or family. I don't think that was something that I learned. I think it's just something-- that's who I am.

One very charismatic participant was able to work full-time in an elementary school only because her principal paid half her salary. To her knowledge, she was the only social worker in her district whose principal helped fund her position. This enabled her to conduct violence and bully prevention programs for the benefit of the entire student body. Teresa shared many examples of assertive, proactive behaviors, including this one:

- I'm very outspoken when I see things that are not right or need fixing. I'm a very systems-oriented person to begin with--and if it can be fixed, it's best to fix it. And I think those are things principals really want. But they can't be everywhere and they can't do everything. But if they know you have sound judgment, and if

you're able to really help correct situations and make a difference, they're going to pay attention to that.

Joan also provided an example of assertive, proactive behavior:

- The woman I'm working for now is an extremely difficult person. I really didn't want to work for her because she's got such a terrible reputation. So after I took the job, I sat down with her and said, "Okay, XX, you know your reputation and I know that a lot of people tip toe around you because they're afraid of your anger. But I don't want to do that with you, 'cause you're not my mother. (Chuckle) You're my supervisor, but in a lot of ways you're a peer." She's only a couple of years older than I am, but at this point in my career I don't need to have someone to kind of idolize. Then around winter break, there were some things that happened and I was just *furious* with her! So, I sent her an email about it and we sat down and talked for two hours. It's being able to do those kinds of things that keep me honest and fairly even-tempered so I can get through difficult periods at work.

Pia indicated that she, too, worked at her school in a pro-active manner. She organized many events for the total student body and always distributed door prizes at family night celebrations:

- I have no problem asking anyone for a donation. All they can say to me is "No," or laugh in my face! It doesn't matter. I could ask for *anything*!

I had worked in the same school district with Donna and found her to be an outspoken woman who was highly committed to having her students succeed. I felt she highlighted those qualities very well in her email:

- The internship I did in the legislature opened up avenues and a feeling of being powerful and able to effect change, and I could translate that to the young people. Don't give up, fight, gather information, never just "cave." Never give up, take it to the top if you need to--but get done what you need to get done.

Several participants made statements illustrating the strong sense of integrity they brought to their work. For example:

- I'd rather people think that when I say I'm going to do something, I'll do it. And I'd like them to believe I'm helpful and have integrity, and that people can't get me to do something I don't think is right. I had a teacher who wanted me to sign off on an IEP that I didn't attend. She got all bent out of shape. I told her I was sorry but I couldn't sign it since I wasn't there. I felt that if she doesn't like me for that, I'm sorry. Maybe she'll at least think I have integrity. It makes *me* feel good knowing that about myself. (Lynda)

Marian had just retired when I interviewed her, so she spoke of events in the past tense. She felt her trustworthiness enabled her to make a significant contribution to a program that served the most severely emotionally disturbed elementary school students in her district:

- I'd been with the program a long time and people trusted me. They knew if they told me something, I wouldn't divulge it. My role in the program was helping keep the ship afloat every day and helping staff members get through it. People would come to me and say this or that, and I'd just listen and let them try to figure it out, or maybe give them a little advice or direct them in a way that they could solve it in a more productive manner.

Many of the participants exhibited leadership qualities. Anna provided evidence of leadership when describing her work in a previous setting:

- I was in acting positions many times at the pueblo because they couldn't hold onto directors. Every time they lost one, they would think I could fill in. So, I'd fill in and it would be a challenge. But I *would* fill in!

Tiana also exhibited leadership qualities as she responded to a tragedy at her school by doing "what just came naturally":

- The first real big crisis I was involved in here was before we had a crisis response team. Some of our kids were murdered in a store burglary and that was *huge!* Nobody really knew what to do, but I did what just came naturally. I put out big pieces of paper for kids to write on and tried to support them with tissues. But we didn't have any kind of coordinated response, and nobody really knew how to handle it. We had kids blowing out *everywhere*.

Concerned about the absence of a coordinated response, Tiana assumed a leadership role in developing a crisis response team that became mobilized whenever tragedy struck her school.

On a different note, Marilyn described the sense of spirituality that underlies her work:

- I'm a journal writer, so I reflect everyday on my life. Virginia Satir talks about the use of self and I always think about how I use myself in my work. Whenever something bothers me, I process it through my writing. It's kind of a way of praying for me, too. I've always done that--I *have* to. It's not even a choice. If I ignore it, it affects my own mental health. I think everybody takes care of

themselves in different ways, but I believe life is a spiritual journey. We're here for a reason, and we all have things we need to learn. So, for me it's really about being a student of life.

I believe a person's "style" of working also represents a personal quality. This was most apparent when the participants shared their preferences for conducting student groups. Several participants said they enjoyed conducting these groups with colleagues simply because it was "more fun." For example:

- When you work with another person, you feed off each other's ideas. They help you connect the dots because they're coming from a different place. When you're doing a group by yourself, you're always thinking, "Oh, gosh, what am I going to do next week?" But when you work with another person, you bounce ideas off each other. There's a synergy and you come up with something. It helps me because I learn new techniques that I can then adapt to groups I run by myself.
(Lisa)

By contrast, Dana preferred conducting students groups alone:

- I prefer that the teachers leave. They tend to get on the kids about every niggly thing. That just makes the kids frustrated and mad, and they don't respond very well. I'm happy to tell the teachers, "Go take a break. We've got it okay in here." I probably let the kids get away with more than somebody else would. But if the kids get mad, they have to take a time out and sit away from the group. I let them be mad when they sit out, as long as I can see them. I don't say anything to them. I don't redirect them in any way. But I don't know if another person would do that or would be tolerant of that. I don't nail the kids for every little niggly thing.

Dana shared other examples of her preference for working independently, adding that she would “catch a little bit of flack from the counselors sometimes.” But, she made clear that she had her own way of working, and she felt her style was effective.

In summary, the participants’ personal qualities appeared to factor into how they used learning experiences to impact their practice. Some preferred to conduct student groups with colleagues; others preferred to work alone. Some described themselves as self-conscious and reserved; others shared examples of assertive and proactive behaviors. Some regarded themselves as social workers “to the core,” whereas others regarded themselves as educators even though their training was in social work. There was considerable variation in the way they described themselves. Thus, variation in personal qualities appears to be yet another factor contributing to the impact of the participants’ learning opportunities on their practice.

Summary of themes related to RQ#3. This research question asks how professional and personal growth experiences impact the practice of school social workers. I was looking for responses from the participants that indicated how learning activities changed practice behaviors that ultimately promoted practice effectiveness.

Several major themes surfaced from my analysis of the data related to this research question. The predominant theme revolved around the practice behaviors of the participants. Other major themes included: 1) the participants’ context of practice, 2) their adaptive and development learning experiences within the context of practice, 3) their prior personal and professional learning experiences, 4) their outside personal and professional learning experiences, and 5) their personal qualities and competencies that helped shape their practice behaviors.

Three minor themes emerged that were related to the participants' context of practice and contextual learning: 1) the strength of working relationships, 2) the resolution of professional dilemmas, and 3) the influence of professional orientation on practice behaviors. These minor themes factored into the level of impact the participants' contextual learning experiences had on their practice.

Summary of Themes

In analyzing my data in relation to my research questions, seven major themes emerged, There were also several subthemes within each major theme. The major themes included: 1) the significance of the context of practice, 2) learning that occurred within the context of practice (i.e., contextual learning), 3) the practice behaviors of the participants, 4) prior personal and professional learning experiences that influenced practice, 5) outside personal and professional learning experiences that influenced practice, 6) personal qualities and competencies that influenced practice, and 7) the level of value the participants attached to various learning experiences (see Appendix F for entire list of themes and subthemes).

Research Findings

The seven major themes translated into the following research findings:

1. Each participant's practice was totally unique.
2. The context of practice (work environment) was also unique for each participant and largely determined what he or she learned and subsequently needed to learn.
3. The participants' learning experiences within the context of their practice influenced the way they practiced (i.e., their practice behaviors).

4. Prior and outside learning experiences and the participants' personal qualities also influenced their contextual learning experiences and practice behaviors.
5. The participants placed high value on prior, outside, and workplace learning experiences that occurred over an extended period of time.
6. Learning that occurred over an extended period of time generally had greater impact on the participants' practice than learning activities that were time-limited.

I felt these findings answered my research questions. However, two additional findings emerged when I began interpreting these findings. I will report and discuss these additional findings in the following chapter.

Chapter Summary

As mentioned earlier, school social workers have considerable latitude in their selection of intervention strategies. The participants clearly indicated that the context of their practice largely determined the decisions they made with and on behalf of their clients. Their learning experiences within the context of their practice were both adaptive and developmental in nature and involved formal, informal, and incidental learning.

The participants also indicated that trusting relationships were fundamental to the learning experiences they valued and that most heavily impacted their practice. In addition, their professional orientations influenced the way they worked. It also factored into the way they resolved dilemmas in their practice. Some favored clinical or micro level solutions to dilemmas, whereas others preferred to respond in a systems-oriented or macro level manner. Actually, most participants combined both levels of interventions, although the ratio of micro to macro level practice varied.

The participants' prior learning and outside learning experiences also impacted their practice. These experiences were both personal and professional in nature. Lastly, the personal qualities of the participants influenced the way they practiced. These qualities often determined the extent to which they demonstrated proactive behaviors in their practice.

My findings related to my three research questions led to the development of a theoretical model showing how the context of school social work practice, contextual learning, practice behaviors, prior and outside learning, and personal qualities inter-relate. I will describe the model in detail in the second part of the next chapter.

Chapter V: Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis of Research Findings

Chapter Introduction

The intent of this study was to identify and examine the types of continuing professional education (CPE) and professional development (PD) activities that most heavily influence the practice of school social workers. The study was designed to explore various forms of learning experiences that school social workers value and incorporate into their practice.

This was a qualitative research study using in-depth interviews and follow-up contacts with twenty participants as the primary method for gathering data. I learned from my mixed method pilot study that questionnaires were not particularly useful other than for gathering demographic information. However, it turned out that the participants' responses to two questions I asked in the very brief questionnaire I distributed in *this* study were very important. The questions asked how many schools the participants covered and how their positions were funded (see Appendix C).

Early in my data analysis process, I modified my research questions to include personal learning experiences. I did this because personal learning emerged as a subtheme under the major themes of prior and outside learning experiences. My revised research questions are as follows:

RQ#1: How do school social workers acquire knowledge and skills that inform their practice over time?

RQ#2: What professional and personal growth experiences do school social workers value most?

RQ#3: How do professional and personal growth experiences impact the practice of school social workers?

There are two parts to this chapter. In the first part, I will organize my findings by “analytical categories.” This is a strategy proposed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) to support the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of findings. When analyzing findings, Bloomberg and Volpe suggest that the researcher look first at *each individual finding* to determine what it means. The next step is to look *across the findings* to learn how they “are related and/or interconnected with each other” (p. 136). The final step is to look *across cases* to determine similarities and differences among participants in the study. They propose that by following these steps, the researcher will be able to develop analytical categories that will aid in the interpretation of the findings.

At the end of the first part of this chapter, I will present two additional findings that emerged as I continued to analyze my data. In the second part of this chapter, I will present a theoretical model that reflects the entire process of analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing my findings.

PART 1

The Initial Major Findings

As reported in the previous chapter, my initial major findings were:

1. Each participant’s practice was totally unique.
2. The context of practice (work environment) was also unique for each participant and largely determined what he or she learned and subsequently needed to learn.
3. The participants’ learning experiences within the context of their practice influenced the way they practiced (i.e., their “practice behaviors”).

4. Prior and outside learning experiences and the participants' personal qualities also influenced their contextual learning experiences and practice behaviors.
5. The participants placed high value on prior, outside, and workplace learning experiences that occurred over an extended period of time.
6. Learning that occurred over an extended period of time generally had greater impact on the participants' practice than learning activities that were time-limited.

I felt these six major findings largely satisfied my three research questions.

However, I believe the two additional findings represent a significant outcome of this study. The discussion that follows regarding my three analytical categories will serve as a backdrop for presenting the additional findings.

The Three Analytical Categories

By following Bloomberg and Volpe's (2008) steps, I was able to develop three analytical categories. All three relate directly to my research questions and incorporate my initial findings. The analytic categories are:

- 1) The significance of the context of work in relation to professional development and practice. This category is related to RQ #1 and incorporates my first four findings regarding the uniqueness of each participant's practice and context of practice, as well as how contextual, prior, and outside learning influenced their practice.
- 2) The level of value attached to various learning experiences. This category is related to RQ #2 and incorporates the fifth finding regarding the extent to which the participants valued various learning experiences.

- 3) The impact of learning experiences on professional practice. This category is related to RQ #3 and incorporates the sixth finding regarding the impact of both brief and long-term learning experiences on practice.

Analytical Category #1: Significance of context of work in relation to professional development and practice. The significance of the context of practice was unquestionably a major finding in this study. The uniqueness of each participant's practice was very much related to the context of his or her work. The participants' work contexts determined the learning opportunities that were available to them and the skills they needed to acquire. Gambrill (1997) underscores the significance of context in her statement: "Social work is carried out in a political, social, and economic context that shapes the definition of problems and their proposed resolutions" (p. 16).

In discussing the context of work, it is important to differentiate between the different levels of context. These levels run the gamut from federal regulations all the way down to workspace conditions. Bowen (2007) uses the term "suprasystems" to identify contextual influences outside the site of a school social worker's practice. He names three levels of influence: district, local community, and institutional organizational fields. The institutional organizational fields include federal and state public welfare policies, funding sources for education and social services, court decisions, labor unions, teacher associations, and teacher training programs.

However, as I listened to my participants, the contextual influences they mentioned seemed to fall under the categories of federal, state, district, school site, and workspace. Federal regulations impacting school social work practice include Public Law 94-142: The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1974, which was renamed

Public Law 101-476: The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990, and Public Law 107-110: The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Influences at the state level include funding and mandatory testing practices. District level policies also include funding, as well as the allocation of school social work positions and the availability of professional development opportunities. Influences at the work site level include culture, climate, student populations, interpersonal relationships, power issues, and the availability of support for social work services. In a very concrete sense, work site context involves workspace, such as shared or unshared space, size and location of office(s), adequacy of equipment, and the availability of space for large group activities.

Federal regulatory context. Allen-Meares (2007), Franklin and Kelly (2009), and Raines (2004) address how federal regulations have shaped the practice of school social work over the course of the profession's history. Many participants reported that the most recent federal legislation, NCLB, has dramatically changed their practice. Because of NCLB, the participants were not able to pull students out of class during specific blocks of instruction. Therefore, in order to serve students on their caseloads, many worked with them in their classrooms. This sometimes involved sitting with individual students and coaching them on appropriate behaviors or conducting social skills lessons for entire classes. They felt they had no other choice, so for the most part they learned to work in new and different ways "simply by doing it." In the adult learning literature, Schank (1996) defines "learning by doing" as a process that "entails trying things out, formulating hypotheses and testing them" (para. 95).

Eight of the twenty participants had teaching or managerial experience and felt very comfortable working in classrooms. Others balked at conducting whole classroom interventions. For example:

- When you go into a classroom with a curriculum, the whole class does the curriculum whether individual kids are at the level of the curriculum or not. And most of it is a lot of role-playing. It's already set up and you just do it. But I don't think that kind of group is as successful as when you can actually set up your own group based on individual needs. (Jill)

Carole initially resisted conducting classroom groups and struggled with them when she finally began. Eventually, she came to realize they served as an important venue for helping students learn to deal with conflict:

- I find myself doing more and more classroom groups, valuing them more, and feeling more comfortable with them. When I first started, I really didn't feel comfortable with groups at all, so for a couple of years I didn't do any. Finally, I tried a group and felt like it kind of flopped. I thought, "I'm lousy with groups." But then the demands of time made me realize that in order to provide services, I *had* to do groups. So I forced myself to do them and began to realize that a lot of good things come out of groups. That's *truly* where the action is. If something is going on in the group, like when one kid gets mad at another, then there is the perfect opportunity right there to work with them on anger management skills.

The participants who were clinically oriented and worked primarily with individual students or small groups of students seemed to struggle the most with the limitations NCLB imposed on their practice.

State context. Annual statewide testing associated with NCLB also represents an aspect of the context in which school social workers practice (Allen-Meares, 2007).

Although many of the participants complained about the restrictions NCLB imposed on their practice, Teresa made these restrictions work to her advantage. As mentioned in the previous chapter, she proctored in third grade classrooms during the two weeks the state tests were administered. This enabled her to observe student behaviors and identify students in need of additional support.

State funding sources and the documentation required by state departments of education also affected the participants' practice. Many of them commented that an increase in paperwork has decreased the amount of time they have to work with students and families. They indicated that more paperwork is required because of new and cumbersome procedures related to referring students for special education. There is also considerable paperwork involved in filing claims for Medicaid reimbursement. This was Carol's comment about the increase in paperwork:

- It's really time-consuming to add kids for social work services these days. I think some people just don't want to go through the effort. The teachers are supposed to complete the assessment packets, but they don't understand them. And they're so overworked as it is that I feel I need to work with them to do it. It takes a monumental effort to do so. We talk on the phone during the evening and I go in an hour early day after day to complete them. It's just too hard. I've been amazingly stressed doing all of this. But the kids need the services and I have to keep my caseload going or I won't have a job.

District context. Combining the five pilot study participants with the twenty participants in this study, two worked in administrative positions in their districts, and six worked in programs serving specific student populations (i.e., students with severe emotional disturbance or autistic spectrum disorders and alternative school students with behavioral disorders). Twelve participants from both studies worked with both special and general education students because their funding came from several sources. On the other hand, twelve worked solely with special education students because their positions were totally funded by special education. Pia was an exception to these last two statements. She was funded solely by special education but worked in a small alternative school that served special and general education students. Because of her previous management experience in a community agency, she enjoyed organizing events serving *all* students at her school. Pia referred to her school as “a community,” and she expressed pride in contributing to her school’s sense of community by assuming responsibility for organizing these events.

Regarding the nature of the participants’ assignments, some worked in only one school, whereas others covered two or more schools. One participant (Patricia) worked as a mental health consultant in her school district providing consultation for nearly one hundred elementary schools. Her practice was devoted entirely to handling crises. And, earlier in her career, Patricia had worked in a small department that mediated inter-group conflicts among school personnel. By and large, her practice was quite different from that of the other participants in the study. She worked primarily at the macro level in her district, although she stated she never had any desire to become an administrator.

Many school social work educators and researchers believe working at the macro level of practice is a more efficient and effective way to work because the impact of social work service is more widely distributed (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2009; Astor et al., 2005; Clancy, 1995; Corbin, 2005; Costin, 1969; Dupper & Evans, 1996; Franklin, 2000b; Freeman, 1998; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Frey, Lingo, & Nelson, 2008; Frey & Walker, 2006; Hare, 1994; Kelly, 2008; Lindsey, White, & Korr, 2006; Pennekamp, 1992; Raines, 2008; Sobeck, Abbey, & Agius, 2006; Teasley, 2004; Wilson, 2007).

The participants who worked at only one school appeared to be quite involved in macro level activities such as policy-making and program development. In terms of Wenger's (1998) concept of "communities of practice," these participants occupied a more central position at their sites, in contrast to other participants who carried more than one school and remained very much on the periphery of their schools. Teresa served only one school and provided an example of what she was able to do:

- I'm on the safety team at this school. We did a survey not too long ago with the fifth graders and learned they didn't feel safe here at school. So, I took that information, as well as my own observations, to the principal and said, "You know, we really need to look at a bully-prevention program."

Teresa's principal approved of her suggestion, encouraged her to attend trainings on bully prevention and violence prevention programs, and supported her as she implemented school-wide programs.

Teresa's position was also funded by multiple sources. This enabled her to work full-time at her school with both special and regular education students. By contrast, the

participants who were funded by only one source worked either full-time in special programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders or covered more than one school as “itinerant” workers. The participants funded solely by special education tended to remain very much on the periphery (Wenger, 1998) of their school communities. In fact, since special education classes are often housed in barracks behind the main school building, these social workers really did work at the edges of their sites!

The itinerant social workers essentially functioned as “part-time” workers at their sites (Billett, 2001), and their practice tended to be limited, confined mainly to seeing students on their caseloads before moving on to the next site. Thus, their practice remained primarily at the micro level, with only occasional involvement in macro level activities. They had limited opportunity to actively engage with the cultures of their schools in order to expand their learning experiences.

Jill provided a good example of the difference between having to cover several schools versus working at only one school. At the time of the interview, she worked full-time in a program for the most seriously disturbed middle school students in her district. She compared her current assignment with prior assignments when she had covered many schools:

- It’s really a great place to work! Where I think I’ve ended up growing the most is in just learning to read people. You have the opportunity to do it. In other situations in the schools, I don’t think you get that chance. You have to go in really quickly, assess something, do something, and then leave. Whereas here, you have a chance to gather enough information to figure out what is going to be the best thing to do. You also have the opportunity to see if it works or not, so you

can change stuff when necessary. In most places you don't get that opportunity. You're often flying by the seat of your pants and hoping things will work out.

Marilyn had also been assigned to several schools prior to moving into her current assignment at a school that had classes for students with autism:

- There was a time when I carried every school in my cluster. I was housed at an elementary school, but I went into the high school and mid-schools when they needed a female social worker. That was back in the days of different times. One of the things that is most satisfying to me now is being at only one school.

In her current situation, Marilyn has taken the initiative in developing social skills programs for the autistic students and other students in her building.

On an entirely different note, but still addressing the district level context of practice, one participant expressed much disappointment over her district's lack of support for the social workers' learning needs. She had previously worked as a public health administrator and had devoted considerable attention to the professional development of the people she managed. Her distress was so great that she was considering leaving her district at the end of the school year.

- One of my disappointments about my job is that we have to do most everything on our own. There's no leader specifically designated for counselors and social workers. Our boss is in charge of all student services, including special education, and is very absorbed in other things. He doesn't really organize meetings for us, so we're pretty much on our own. I feel like we're just kind of *there*, and the district doesn't really care. I have a lot of resentment about the whole thing, actually. I have a certain amount of anger because I feel we're the low people on

the totem pole and no one thinks about our professional development needs. No one really thinks about how we're organized, how we do things, and what we might need to do our jobs. We're sort of like an afterthought. (Elaine)

Elaine continued by reporting her conversation with another social worker in her district:

- The other day I was talking with another school social worker who works in a middle school. She said as soon as she became a school social worker her learning sort of stopped (chuckle) because she has no one but herself--she's the only social worker at her school. . . . The way I've worked it out is that I do a lot of my own professional development. I read a lot, I get a lot of books, I go to as many workshops as I can--but most of that I pay for on my own. I get very little paid for by the school district.

Billett (2001, 2002, 2004) regards the support for learning at work as “the affordances of the workplace.” He describes them as “the kinds of activities that individuals are able to engage in, and the support and guidance they are able to access” (2001, p. 31). In Elaine's situation, the “affordances” seemed to be lacking.

Work site context. Every school has a personality of its own that is greatly influenced by the administrative style of the principal (Harris et al., 2007). Every school also has its own political processes and varying degrees of support for social work services (Allen-Meares et al., 1996; Dupper, 2003; Lee, 1983).

As mentioned earlier, Teresa's principal paid half her salary so she could work full-time at her school. Not only that, her office was located right next to the school's main office!

- When I first started here, I worked totally in special education. I did much more “pull-out” work at the time. But I built trust with my principal, and as things came up she would ask me to intervene--with regular as well as special education children. She understood the needs of the community and she really understood the value of my being here as a social worker. When crises occurred, she would ask me to sit in on meetings with families, and that’s when I would start working with them. I built that relationship with my principal and now, to the best of my knowledge, I’m the only social worker in the district whose principal pays half my salary so I can work with *all* the students here.

I felt Teresa exhibited the political awareness and pro-active behaviors that Lee (1983) believes are essential for building support for school social work services.

Three other participants found little support for social work services from their site administrators. They dealt with this by working primarily with teachers and students who appreciated their support and by actually avoiding their administrators as much as possible. Two of these participants felt their administrators had very little understanding of the needs of special education students and therefore did not endorse the work of professionals who provided support services for these students.

Without question, the availability of adequate workspace influenced the way the participants practiced and how they developed professionally. A number of researchers have written about space issues in the workplace. Much of the focus of this work is on the relationship between space, productivity, and job satisfaction (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Davenport & Bruce, 2002; O’Neill, 1994). From their research with a large corporation, Meerwarth, Trotter, and Briody (2008) found that four issues must be

addressed when considering workspace: concentration, workability, comfort, and aesthetics. A participant working in three different schools alluded to some of these issues in one of her emails:

- At one school, I have a great space with a phone. It is not big enough for the groups I do and the sand play toys are a distraction. So, I work in classrooms or other spaces for group. I don't mind that so much and it reserves my office space for that personal, intimate setting that comes with therapy. At one of my other schools that I am at one day a week, I do not have office space at all. It works out because the kids I see are divided into two different classrooms, so I do classroom groups. At my third school, I have a space which is shared with the OT [occupational therapist]. I basically have a desk and file cabinets, but the room is filled with OT stuff and is not as organized as I would like. It's also not as clean as I would like and it feels like just a place to set my stuff. I work with kids individually there, but I really don't like the space and can see how it would be passed on to the kids to some degree. I guess it's our creation of space as therapists that is important. At my office that I love, I feel it is contained and it is not used by others, so I know my collection [of sand play objects] is safe and therefore I think it provides an unconscious safety for the children. At least I hope so. So my work is very different school to school definitely depending on the space. (Dana)

Another participant worked primarily with teachers and relied on home visits to see families because there was no private workspace available for him at one of his schools.

Meerwarth et al. (2008) also observed, “When the physical environment lacks features considered essential, those affected either adapt to or change their environment to make it more useable or desirable (or less intolerable)” (p. 438). The participants who were most likely to change or modify their workspace were those assigned to only one school. Two participants who work together full-time at the same high school had spacious offices furnished with upholstered sofas and chairs they had found at thrift shops. These spaces enabled them to use a wide range of experiential activities with their student groups. These two social workers also took the lead in organizing and facilitating mental health and crisis intervention teams that met in their offices on a regular basis.

Tagliaventi and Mattarelli (2006) looked at the sharing of knowledge between individuals from different professional groups. They found that “operational proximity” and shared values were critical elements in the flow of information between different groups of professionals. They defined operational proximity as “an intense sharing of spaces and activities (p. 314).” And since the focus of their study was a hospital unit, the participants’ shared values related to patient-centered care. Accordingly, student learning would represent the shared values of school personnel. Tagliaventi and Mattarelli point out that without these two elements in place, the working relationships of members of different professional groups can often be contentious.

Lynne spoke of having an office in the health center of an alternative school for pregnant teens. She was pleased to be situated there rather than in the counseling department next to the administrative offices. She felt the health center was a more nurturing environment for the girls, and the nurse frequently referred students to her whenever they disclosed personal issues with mental health overtones.

Finally, Solomon, Boud, and Rooney (2006) coined the term “in-between” space. This represents a hybrid between workspace and social space, such as the teachers’ lunchrooms and workrooms, or when co-workers car-pool together. They found considerable learning taking place in these areas whenever people shared ideas about work-related issues. Stolp and Smith (1995) also cited lunchrooms, along with front offices, gymnasiums, and hallways as spaces where the culture of a school plays out. One participant noted that her interactions with others in a large centrally located area in her high school is an important source of learning for her:

- I’m out walking around the building a lot. Actually, it’s out on the concourse where I spend the most time with administrators. I’ve had more conversations standing out there than in anybody’s office. I’ll be following up on different things and checking back with people out there. (Lynne)

Summary. The context of school social work practice is multi-layered. Federal legislation impacts state departments of education that in turn influence school districts and individual school sites. In addition, each educational site has its own unique culture, climate, and power structures (Openshaw, 2008). There are also issues associated with size and location of workspace and the availability of adequate equipment and materials. Altogether, these multiple layers of context greatly influenced the participants’ professional development and practice.

In this analytic category, I have focused solely on how the context of work influenced the participants’ professional development and practice. In the next category, I will address the level of value the participants attached to *all* learning experiences (i.e.,

prior, outside, and contextual experiences that are both personal and professional in nature).

Analytic Category #2: Level of value attached to learning experiences. This category addresses the feelings and attitudes the participants expressed about learning experiences related to their work in the schools. It also highlights the structure and nature of learning experiences the participants found useful. In this category, I looked for descriptors such as “terrific,” “excellent,” “very worthwhile,” “loved it,” or “a waste of time,” “it flopped,” and so forth.

Dewey (1938/1997) speaks of an “experiential continuum” which serves to “discriminate between experiences that are worthwhile educationally and those that are not” (p. 33). In discussing worthwhile learning experiences, Antonacopoulou (1999) asserts, “Meaningful learning can be a powerful personal experience, because it has significant repercussions on individuals’ self-esteem, self-efficacy, and psychological well being” (p. 9). Boverie and Kroth (2001) offer a slightly different perspective regarding the concept of meaningful learning. This comes from their research on transformational learning in the workplace:

Learning . . . was central to finding, keeping, and retaining passion. Learning was the intervention that turned people from becoming the living dead to feeling alive and vital. Whether learning was imposed on someone or arose naturally within the individual, it was the crucial process related to passionate work” (p. 51-52).

In this study, I was interested in identifying the learning experiences the participants considered meaningful—those located on the high end of Dewey’s

“experiential continuum” (1938/1997). I also wanted to learn about the experiences that held little meaning for them and therefore sat on the low end of the continuum.

Trust issues associated with highly valued learning experiences. In talking with the participants, I came to appreciate how interpersonal trust influences the extent to which learning experiences are valued. Rousseau’s (1998) definition of interpersonal trust is “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (p. 395). Luna-Reyes, Cresswell, and Richardson (2004) add the dimension of risk to Rousseau’s definition by noting there is risk involved in allowing oneself to become vulnerable.

More than three decades ago, Brookfield (1986) pointed out that adults “generally learn best in an atmosphere that is non-threatening and supportive of experimentation and in which different learning styles are recognized” (p. 31). Writing about social work clinical supervision, Kadushin (1985) notes:

We learn best when we can devote most of our energies in the learning situation to learning. Energy needed to defend against rejection, anxiety, guilt, shame, fear of failure, attacks on autonomy or uncertain expectations is energy deflected from learning. (p. 149)

Gould and Baldwin (2004) add, “Learning is personal and potentially threatening. It is particularly threatening when it happens publicly, for instance with . . . social workers learning new knowledge or skills within their teams and wider organizations” (p. 43).

Dana shared how she often struggles with her desire to feel comfortable versus her eagerness to learn new skills. Here she was talking about learning to set up and run student groups:

- I *hated* doing the activities in that workshop! But that was what was most helpful for me. It took me out of my comfort zone. I *had* to do it. I didn't want to, but I completely saw the value in it. When he made us go through the activities, I learned how they got set up and were supposed to flow.

From a different perspective, Sal helped arrange training activities for social workers in his district and often sensed their reluctance to participate in these activities. He felt lack of self-trust contributed to their reluctance:

- My colleague and I spend a lot of time talking about trust issues related to learning. We can develop trainings for our school social workers, but sometimes they don't take advantage of them. We think it's sometimes because they don't feel they can trust themselves to feel vulnerable about learning new things. As hard as we work to get people to attend, they'll say on the surface, "Well, I'm too busy. I can't go." But I think it has more to do with their own issues, like, "I don't want to see myself as lacking." Or, "I don't trust myself to be vulnerable and acknowledge that I really don't know something and need help to learn it."

Edmondson (1999, 2002) has looked at how the level of "psychological safety" in groups influences the degree of learning that takes place. She describes psychological safety as "a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. This confidence stems from mutual respect and trust among team members" (1999, p. 354). On a larger scale, Schein (1992) also believes a sense of

psychological safety is essential in order for learning and change to take place in organizations. He asserts:

For change to happen, for motivation to arise to learn something new, people have to feel psychologically safe, by which I mean that they will see a path forward that is manageable, a direction of change that will not be catastrophic, in the sense that the person changing will still feel a sense of identity and wholeness. The learner must feel that new habits are possible, that he or she can learn something new . . . without feeling too anxious. (p. 11)

Feltman (2009) believes people make decisions about trusting others in the workplace based on their assessment of the degree of sincerity, reliability, caring, and competence they possess. One participant (Lisa) referred to these qualities as “a chemistry” that promotes “a natural sort of trust.”

Thus, many scholars have considered how trust is involved in the learning process. The participants in this study either stated directly or alluded to the fact that self-trust and trusting relationships were fundamental to the learning activities they valued most.

Highly valued contextual learning experiences. The contextual learning experiences the participants valued most were primarily intensive activities that took place over extended periods of time. These activities included clinical supervision, mentoring relationships, multi-disciplinary team meetings, peer consultation, learning from clients, meeting with consultants on contract with their school districts, and attending trainings conducted by in-house social workers. For the most part, these

activities involved long-term interpersonal relationships built upon mutual trust and respect.

Supervision. As reported in the previous chapter, fifteen of the twenty participants in this study received clinical supervision from senior school social workers during the early years of their careers. Seventy-five percent is an extraordinarily high percentage compared to school social workers across the country! Kelly (2008) conducted a national survey and found that only twenty-one percent of the more than sixteen hundred school social workers that responded received supervision from a social worker. Kelly's findings are consistent with the results of Garrett and Barretta-Herman's (1995a) survey of eighty-seven school social workers in Minnesota. They found that less than twenty-five percent of the respondents received supervision from a social worker.

Multi-disciplinary team meetings. All but one participant referred to multi-disciplinary team meetings as a rich source of learning. Marilyn was the one exception. She stated, "I think it's really hard to work with a team of people. Each person has their own personality and you have to determine what's their issue and what's yours." A little later she added:

- I'm so tired of these psychologists! We do all the dirty work in the trenches and then these psychologists come in and everybody thinks they're *god*. This particular psychologist doesn't even know what she doesn't know. That's been *very* frustrating for me!

Abramson (2002) lists numerous factors that can interfere with the effective functioning of multi-disciplinary teams. They include:

Unequal status of participants, dual commitment of participants to the team and to their respective affiliations, role competition or “turf” issues, role blurring or lack of role clarity, difficulties resolving conflict, personality difficulties of participants, and emphasis on autonomy rather than training for teamwork in professional education. (p. 45)

It appears that several of these factors accounted for the frustration Marilyn felt regarding the multi-disciplinary team at her school. However, she did point out that her relationships with team members in her previous assignment had been very positive and had been a source of considerable learning for her.

Streeter and Franklin (2002, 2005) differentiate between multi-disciplinary teams and *transdisciplinary* teams. In multi-disciplinary teams, “professionals recognize that other disciplines can . . . make important contributions to the client group,” while in transdisciplinary teams, “professionals commit to teaching-learning-working with other service providers across traditional disciplinary boundaries” (2005, para. 17). They add:

Transdisciplinary teams systematically seek to expand the common core of knowledge and competency of each team member. Transdisciplinary practice is a deliberate attempt to pool and exchange information, knowledge, and skills, with team members crossing and re-crossing traditional disciplinary boundaries. (para. 18)

Lisa spoke very highly of the teams at her schools. They appear to have the characteristics of the transdisciplinary teams Streeter and Franklin (2005) describe:

- There are definitely teaching aspects to these mental health team meetings, especially by the school psychologist. I can remember the community provider at

one school had expertise in certain areas that I didn't have, and so she would share her expertise with me and we would learn from each other.

Most of the participants echoed Lisa's sentiments and indicated that they benefited greatly from their regularly scheduled team meetings.

Learning from clients. In a discussion of knowledge creation in social work, Karvinen-Niinikoski (2004) notes, "In social work much professional practice includes inventing new models and methods of working. The embryos for these innovative practices quite often can be found in the experiences of social workers and their clients in everyday practices" (p. 26). Clark (2006) reported on her findings from a study of how social workers learn to understand the worldviews of their clients. She writes:

Interwoven throughout the reflective narratives were numerous accounts of how practitioners engaged in a continual process of adapting, shifting, creating, testing, and experimenting with ways to enlarge the space for mutual understanding of the worldviews and meaning systems that people use to interpret their experiential reality. (p. 10)

Clark calls this process "creative, adaptive improvising" (p. 10).

The participants shared numerous examples of their clients serving as their teachers. They referred to their interactions with clients as humbling experiences that taught them much about the resiliency of people who struggled with severe challenges. Often these were clients that school personnel regarded as "uncooperative," "not caring," and/or "irresponsible."

The "innovative practices" (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004) spawned by the participants' interactions with clients usually resulted in new and creative intervention

strategies. For example, Gabriel shared a story about the gang-involved youth in one of his student groups:

- There's a lot of staff around here that just *hate* these kids! (Laughing) They see them as these awful kids that they want to suspend and get rid of. So then we have to get the staff see another side of the kids. There's nothing more rewarding to me than when our group of kids that have been labeled as troublemakers or gang-bangers are out there selling food and popcorn in the halls. (Laughing) And we've got them out there doing fund-raisers while these teachers are going, "What? You've got them doing *that?!?*"

Other participants described how they learned about various childhood and adolescent disorders by virtue of working with students with these disorders. These disorders included traumatic brain injury, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, autistic spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, sensory disorders, and developmental disabilities, to name a few.

In summary, the participants consistently rated clinical supervision, mentoring relationships, in-house social work trainers, peer consultation, multi-disciplinary team meetings, and interactions with clients as highly valued contextual learning experiences. I confined my discussion in this section to only three of these learning activities (supervision, team meetings, and clients) because I have either already discussed the other activities or plan to later in this chapter in relation to the third analytic category (impact of learning on practice).

I should add it is not surprising that the participants valued the learning activities listed above because they all involved collaborative relationships characterized by

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of "the zone of proximal development." He defines this as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

Although Vygotsky studied the development of children, his phrase "in collaboration with more capable peers" applies to the participants' favored activities. In some cases the peers with more expertise were school social workers, but at other times they were clients or colleagues from other disciplines.

There were other learning experiences the participants valued outside the context of their practice. These included skills they had acquired prior to working in the schools, as well as personal and professional learning experiences outside the workplace.

Highly valued prior learning experiences. As mentioned in the previous chapter, when the participants talked about the interventions they conducted, I frequently asked, "How did you learn to do that?" Many of them said they had learned to adapt skills acquired in previous jobs to their practice in the schools. In fact, some participants indicated they relied heavily on previously acquired skills.

For example, Lynda said she used every possible opportunity to use the mediation skills she learned as a claims adjuster for a utility company. Alice reminded me that her experience as a teacher enabled her to feel comfortable conducting classrooms groups. And, Teresa pointed out that her earlier work in a juvenile detention center alerted her to signs and behaviors of gang-involved students. In addition, Teresa said the experience of raising a child with Asperger's disorder sensitized her to the needs of families dealing with this disorder. Pia felt her experience as a community organizer enabled her to

organize family nights at her school that were extraordinarily well attended. And, Tiana said the reason she favored conducting student groups was because of her extensive experience co-facilitating patient groups in a psychiatric hospital.

Knowles (1973) notes that accumulated experience is one of the assumptions upon which his theory of andragogy is based:

This assumption is that as an individual matures he accumulates an expanding reservoir of experience that causes him to become an increasingly rich resource for learning, and at the same time provides him with a broadening base to which to relate new learnings. (p. 45)

The participants clearly indicated they relied heavily on their “reservoirs” of previous experience as they developed their practice in the schools.

Highly valued outside professional learning experiences. The participants also described professional learning experiences outside the workplace that they valued. These experiences included assuming leadership roles in professional and non-profit organizations, teaching, consulting, attending and conducting workshops, writing for publication, conducting research on the Internet, and participating in community activities. The participants felt these activities helped broaden their horizons and increase their understanding of the interactions of a variety of systems at many different levels.

Billett (2007), Billett and Pavlova (2005), Field and Malcolm (2006), Gerber (1998), Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004), Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2007, 2008), Senker and Hyman (2004), and Tedder and Biesta (2007) argue for the need to consider how learning from *all* aspects of life influence people’s orientation to learning and practice in the workplace. Wenger (1998) emphasizes we are members of many different

communities and our level of involvement in each community varies. In some communities we are full members, whereas in others we are only peripherally involved.

Several of the participants had served in leadership roles in professional organizations, such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) or state school social work associations. Rusaw (1989) points out that when members of professional organizations move into leadership positions, this enables them to “gain a perspective on management processes and practices” (p. 220). He also notes that this is particularly beneficial to professionals whose career paths have reached a plateau or are blocked, because it provides them with opportunities to continue advancing in different venues.

I think Rusaw (1989) makes an excellent point, because opportunities for school social workers to advance in their school districts are extremely limited. Only two of the total of twenty-five participants in both studies had served in administrative positions in their districts. Yet, eleven of the twenty-five had assumed leadership roles in social work organizations in their states and/or at the national level. In addition, six had taught courses and served as consultants for social work graduate school programs. Also, seven participants had served in leadership positions in their volunteer work with non-social work organizations.

As for the value of attending conferences, workshops, and trainings outside the workplace, the participants’ responses were mixed. Elaine described herself as a “training junkie,” while Patricia referred to herself as an “autodidact” who took advantage of as many learning opportunities that she could. Jill said she would share “bits and pieces” of information from conferences that colleagues at her school site were sometimes able to

incorporate into their practice. Others valued the networking opportunities conferences provide.

On the other hand, several participants described conferences sponsored by social work organizations as “disappointing.” Marilyn’s comment about her state’s annual social work conference was, “They don’t feed me.” These participants therefore found more effective ways of accommodating their learning needs, such as attending multi-disciplinary conferences that provided them with new and different perspectives.

In summary, the participants described many professional learning experiences outside the workplace that they valued. These experiences appeared to broaden their horizons, challenge their assumptions, and reinforce their sense of identity as school social workers.

Highly valued outside personal learning experiences. The personal learning experiences the participants valued included long and successful marriages, parenthood, family challenges, personal growth work, church activities, journaling, hobbies, and creative endeavors such as gardening and painting. The participants generally mentioned these experiences in an off-hand manner while speaking of their practice in the schools. This intertwining of personal and professional experiences reminded me of discussions in the literature regarding a social worker’s “use of self” (England, 1986; Lee, 1983; Rapoport, 1968). Several writers maintain that personal and professional development go hand in hand and should not be viewed as separate processes (Billett, 2007; Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Fuller & Unwin, 2004b; Nystrom, 2009; Wenger, 1998; Wojceki, 2007).

One participant had engaged in personal sand play therapy for four years and indicated she planned to continue. She had long favored sand tray and sand play

interventions with students and felt her own personal therapy had a huge impact on her professional work:

- It's made me a better therapist all the way around--all the way from sand tray to my group work, and just for working with kids. Period! I don't feel I have the blocks I had before. I think maybe before I wasn't as in tune with my kids as I am today. It's really impacted my life dramatically--not just in my personal life, but also in my work. (Dana)

Another participant also described the significance of personal growth work on her practice:

- If someone were to ask me about the single most important thing that has contributed to my social work practice, I would have to say it was the personal growth work. It wasn't necessarily the education or the training as a social worker per se. For me, it was like I could never use any of my social work skills if I was going to be more important than the experience I was in--or more important than the client. . . . If you really want to be somebody who can help somebody else, then you have to set your ego outside the door, so to speak. (Alice)

It was interesting to me that the personal learning experiences the participants valued included not only strong relationships with people, but also relationships with animals and inanimate objects. The latter included personal journals and artistic endeavors. I sensed the pleasure they derived from these activities helped balance their intense and often crisis-oriented practice in the schools.

Highly valued experiences of facilitating the learning of others. As in the previous chapter, I am including the participants' experiences of facilitating the learning

of others in this discussion of highly valued learning experiences. The participants expressed much satisfaction regarding this aspect of their work. They indicated that helping others learn to think and act in different ways validated and strengthened their sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982, 1989, 1995) and professional identity (Billett, 2007; Billett & Somerville, 2004; Nystrom, 2009; Wenger, 2000; Wojecki, 2007).

In a study conducted within a large manufacturing company, Ellinger and Cseh (2007) created a list of 14 behaviors used by people to facilitate the learning of others. These behaviors include: providing feedback, role playing, observing, listening, asking questions, talking things through, walking things through step by step, seeking others for knowledge or additional insights as needed, sharing materials and resources, using examples, removing obstacles, broadening perspectives, serving as role models, and focusing on the big picture (pp. 443-444).

The participants in my study provided examples of all the behaviors Ellinger and Cseh (2007) identified. For example, Teresa facilitated the learning of students when she observed conflicts on the playground and used her “Stop/Think” sign to encourage students to consider more appropriate behaviors. In these incidents, she used five of Ellinger and Cseh’s facilitating behaviors: observing, listening, asking questions, talking things through, and providing feedback. The senior school social workers who conducted trainings for colleagues also employed these five behaviors. In addition, they indicated they shared examples of their own work, used role-plays, walked things through step by step, sought knowledge from others as needed, and shared materials and resources with the participants in their trainings. The senior social workers who served as clinical supervisors also indicated they used the ten behaviors mentioned above. In addition, they

helped remove obstacles, served as role models, and tended to focus on the big picture in their efforts to broaden the perspectives of their supervisees. It appeared that as they grew professionally and increasingly assumed responsibility for facilitating the learning of others, the participants gradually mastered the facilitating behaviors Ellinger and Cseh identified.

Edna Freeman (1994), a social work scholar, recalls one of her high school teachers “who believed in ‘the teachable moment,’ meaning that people learn what they need to know when they need to know it” (para. 1). Educator Fredric Lozo (2005) refers to the teachable moment as “that moment when a unique, high interest situation arises that lends itself to discussion of a particular topic” (para 7). Pia worked in an alternative high school for students with significant learning and behavioral disorders and made this comment about teachable moments:

- I learned from my first principal here that every moment is a teachable moment and I never forget that. Every moment is a teachable moment! It’s always in the back of my head when I talk with students.

Pia proceeded to explain what she meant:

- If I have a kid walk by my office spouting expletives, I walk out the door and say, “Excuse me, what did you say?” And they will invariably say, “Excuse me, Miss, I didn’t know you were standing there.” I don’t have to say anything else. I don’t have to argue with them in a power struggle, or anything except, “What did you learn in that moment?” And they’ll say, “That I’m not supposed to say that.” So, every moment is a teachable moment!

Summary. Analytic category #2 addresses the level of value the participants attached to their learning experiences. Trusting relationships built over time characterized the most highly valued activities. For the most part, these experiences seemed transformative (Mezirow, 2000, 2003; see also Billett & Somerville, 2004; Boverie & Kroth, 2001; Dirkx, 2000; Taylor, 2000). They appeared to generate shifts in the participants' beliefs and perspectives, which through an accumulative process contributed to their professional growth.

Analytic category #3: Impact of learning experiences on professional practice. This analytic category is in many ways related to the previous category. After all, any learning experiences school social workers value will likely impact their practice in some way. However, *action* is fundamental to this analytic category, rather than the *feelings* and *attitudes* that characterized the previous analytic category.

I think it would be safe to say that *all* learning experiences the participants had accumulated over the course of their lives impacted their professional practice. This is because it is the *person* of a school social worker that functions as the deliverer of services (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). The *person* of a school social worker serves as a container of skills specific to school social work practice. Many, but not all, of these skills are basically personal qualities that have been honed by formal training, clinical supervision, and professional learning experiences. In essence, the social worker is the *instrument* of professional service (England, 1986; Lee, 1983; Rapoport, 1968).

A phrase that is commonly found in social work literature is the “worker’s use of self.” Variations of this phrase include “intuitive use of self” and “purposeful use of self” (England, 1986), “disciplined use of self” (Jordan, 1978), and “creative and imaginative

use of self” (Rapoport, 1968). On a similar note, Okitikpi and Aymer (2008) state, “In our view, the art of social work is located in the practitioner’s reflexive and reflective abilities and their forte for forming meaningful and trusting relationships” (p. 3). Alice referred to the social worker’s use of self in one of her comments:

- I firmly believe you’re not a social worker just between nine and five; rather, you’re a social worker 24/7. No matter what you’re doing, if that’s your path in life, then you’ve got to learn to use yourself as a tool.

In the discussion that follows related to this analytical category, I will separate out four sub-categories: contextual (workplace) learning, prior learning, outside learning, and the personal qualities of learners. In discussing the impact of these learning experiences and personal qualities on professional practice, I will cite research supporting these sub-categories and include relevant comments from my participants.

Impact of general contextual learning on professional practice. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I used Ellström’s (2001) theoretical model to analyze and interpret my findings. Ellström differentiates between two forms of workplace learning: *adaptive* and *developmental*. He believes these two forms of learning are complementary, but he nevertheless places them on a continuum with adaptive learning at the low end and developmental learning at the high end of the continuum. Adaptive learning is a simpler form of learning, whereas developmental is more complex. Other theorists also propose different levels of learning, whether they are discussing individual or organizational learning. However, their terminology is different. Examples of different levels of learning include *custodial* and *innovative* (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), *surface* and *deep* (Brown, 2000), *operational* and *conceptual* (Kim, 1993), *lower-level* and *higher-level*

(Fiol & Lyles, 1985), *adaptive* and *generative* (Senge, 1990), *informative* and *transformative* (Mezirow, 2000), and *incremental* and *transformational* (Appelbaum & Goransson, 1997). Many of these writers reference the work of Argyris and Schön (1978) who differentiate between *single-loop* and *double-loop* learning. Single-loop learning represents a more adaptive form of learning in which existing assumptions and strategies remain relatively unchanged, whereas double-loop learning generates entirely new assumptions upon which subsequent strategies of action are based (pp. 2-3).

In line with Ellström's (2001) concepts of adaptive and developmental learning, I regard adaptive learning as essentially a process of "learning the ropes." By this I mean learning about the culture and climate of a school district and worksite, whether the latter is a school, administrative building, or district-sponsored therapeutic program. It is a matter of becoming acculturated into the workplace. In Wenger's (1998) terms, it is a process of gradually moving from the periphery of a "community of practice" to a more central position.

By contrast, I regard developmental learning as "the art of social work practice" (Okitikpi & Aymer, 2008), or in this case, the art of *school* social work practice. It involves assessing "a perhaps unclear and puzzling situation" (Ellström, 2001, p. 424), identifying resources, designing and carrying out interventions, and evaluating the results. The findings from my study show that prior and outside learning experiences and personal qualities all had strong bearing on the participants' developmental learning at their work sites.

In the sections that follow, I will first discuss the impact of adaptive learning on practice, followed by the impact of developmental learning. I will then move on to discuss the impact of prior learning, outside learning, and personal qualities on practice.

Impact of adaptive contextual learning on professional practice. The examples the participants provided of adaptive learning included meetings with supervisors, relationships with mentors, interactions with colleagues, routine activities, and learning from mistakes. The participants indicated that the bulk of this form of learning occurred in the early years of their careers, as well as every time they moved into new assignments or took on new responsibilities. However, it also occurred every time there were personnel changes in their districts and school sites. For example, since administrators have such influence on the culture and climate of school districts and sites, every time there was a change in administration at any level, the participants needed to adapt to these changes.

Supervision. Nearly all the participants referred to administrative and clinical supervisors who were instrumental in helping them learn to navigate the educational system. Administrative supervision was provided by educational administrators, whereas clinical supervision was provided by social workers licensed as either *independent* or *clinical* social workers, depending upon the title used by their state's licensing body. (In either case, it is the highest level of social work licensure granted by a state.)

Minot and Adamski (1989) define clinical supervision as “the process whereby a practitioner reviews with another person his ongoing clinical work and relevant aspects of his own reactions to that work” (p. 23). Spence, Wilson, Kavanagh, Strong, and Worrall (2001) note there are three aspects of clinical supervision: clinical/client-centered

supervision, organizational/administrative or agency-centered supervision, and personal supportive supervision. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) also identify three aspects of clinical supervision, although they use different terminology:

Administrative supervision provides the organizational structure and access to agency resources that facilitate the worker's job; educational supervision provides the knowledge and skills required for doing the job; supportive supervision provides the psychological and interpersonal context that enables the worker to mobilize the emotional energy needed for effective job performance and obtain satisfaction in doing their job. (p. 219)

As the participants described the supervision they received very early in their careers, the agency-centered and supportive aspects of those experiences seemed to predominate. As they became familiar with educational policies and processes and their self-confidence and comfort level increased, the clinical/client centered or educational aspect of supervision appeared to take precedence.

The participants who received clinical social work supervision during their early years spoke very highly of these experiences. However, the availability of supervision varied from district to district. In order to receive Medicaid reimbursement for social work services provided to special education students, the participants licensed at the master's level (LMSW) had to be supervised by social workers licensed at the independent or clinical level (LISW or LCSW). The supervisors' signatures were required on all Medicaid paperwork. However, clinical supervision was not provided for social workers new to school districts who were already licensed at the LISW level. This

latter group reported much difficulty adapting their clinical skills to the school environment. This was Alice's experience as an LISW:

- It was kind of like being back on Capitol Hill, because nobody tells you anything. They just sort of throw you in the water to see if you can swim. It was really just a “flying by the seat of my pants” kind of thing when I took the job in the school district. My best resources were the other social workers in the district.

Another participant (Elaine) was unable to obtain clinical supervision in her district and found an appropriately licensed social worker in her community to supervise her. Elaine said her supervisor helped her learn how to set up student groups and provided her with a binder full of activities she used with her groups. She said she eventually had to discontinue the supervision because it was so expensive, but she really missed the support it provided.

In a study of four disciplines (clinical psychology, social work, occupational therapy, and speech and language therapy), Spence et al. (2001) report, “In reality, many mental health staff currently receive little if any clinical supervision” (p. 137). Other researchers confirm this statement in regard to school social workers (Garrett & Barretta-Herman, 1995a, 1995b; Kelly, 2009; Lewis, 1998; Openshaw, 2008; Shaffer, 2006).

On the other hand, *all* the participants received administrative supervision. Since most school social work positions are funded in part, if not totally, by special education monies, special education administrators usually provide this form of supervision. Most of the participants reported that this form of supervision helped orient them to their school districts, particularly in relation to educational policies, procedures, and resources.

It is important to note there are differences in the frequency and intensity of administrative and clinical supervision. In my experience, administrative supervisors meet with their supervisees in a group, perhaps once a month or so. However, clinical supervisors generally meet with their supervisees individually for an hour each week or for longer sessions every other week. Another difference is that administrative supervisors are generally responsible for evaluating the performance of their supervisees, and this sometimes serves as an inhibitor to authentic discussion. Luisa referred to this phenomenon with the following comment:

- Years ago we invited our PSS [program support specialist, also known as the special education administrator of a cluster of schools] to one of our meetings because we had these assessments to do, but now he comes to every single one. So that's been kind of a new development this year. We're kind of wondering what happened, because now we don't get time for ourselves to bat around social work stuff.

Luisa went on to explain that these meetings were now mainly devoted to administrative issues (adaptive learning), and there was no time for the group to engage in peer consultation (developmental learning).

Mentors. Several of the participants also described mentorship-type relationships. These generally represented relationships with more experienced school social workers that were informally available to them for support and guidance (Leung, 2009). Such a relationship was most likely to develop when a lone social worker in a school helped welcome a second social worker into the school and was invested in helping that person succeed. For example:

- The other social worker and I do quick check-ins a lot. It's especially helpful since she's been here for so long and knows the staff. I'll ask her, "What did I just walk into?" when I realize there's a landmine or underlying issue I didn't know about. And she'll let me know that what I just experienced was a teacher and administrator who can't stand each other (chuckle), or something like that.

(Lynne)

Daloz (1999) make the following point about mentors:

Mentors are especially important at the beginning of people's careers or at crucial turning points in their professional lives. The mentor seems to manifest for protégés someone who has accomplished the goals to which they now aspire, offering encouragement and concrete help. (p. 21)

Thus, Lynne's assignment to a new school represented one of those "crucial turning points" in her career. She was very grateful to receive support and guidance from the social worker who had worked in the school for more than two decades. Her comment reflects her efforts to negotiate the political culture of her new school (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Ellström, 2001, Lee, 1983).

Colleagues. Peroune (2007) notes that although there are similarities between mentoring relationships and peer relationships, "The level of involvement in terms of reciprocity is far greater in peer relationships" (p. 245). All the participants mentioned peers, both school social workers and colleagues from other disciplines, as important sources of adaptive learning.

Kram and Isabella (1985) propose a continuum of peer relationships that includes information peers, collegial peers, and special peers (p. 119). The primary function of the

information peer is confined to information sharing. In this relationship, there are low levels of trust and self-disclosure. The primary functions of the collegial peer are career strategizing, job-related feedback, and friendship. There is a moderate level of trust and self-disclosure in the type of relationship. The special peer is the most intimate relationship on the continuum, with the primary functions being confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship. “Becoming a special peer often involves revealing central ambivalences and personal dilemmas in work and family realms. Pretense and formal roles are replaced by greater self-disclosure and self-expression” (p. 121).

Using Kram and Isabella’s (1985) continuum as a reference, the three levels of peer relationships might be described as follows, beginning with an “information peer”:

- There’s a teacher here, and he and I don’t have real good communication. I feel he’s a little threatened by me sometimes. But that doesn’t mean I haven’t learned things from him. I’ve actually learned a lot from him. But I haven’t learned as much from him because we don’t have a very close relationship. It’s a very business-like professional relationship--and I stay in my lane. (Lisa)

All the participants provided examples of “collegial peer” relationships. This was a humorous one:

- Another social worker and I went to a three-day workshop during the summer expecting to learn about traumatic brain-injured students. But all of a sudden they said, “Okay, you guys are going to be writing a manual.” And I thought, “Writing a manual?! (Laughing) I don’t know a thing!” And I looked at my friend and said, “What?! What are we *doing* here?!” But we just kind of tried to make the best of

it and figure it out. We had to beg, borrow, and steal, but I know I did learn things about traumatic brain injury that I hadn't known before. (Marian)

Finally, Carla described in an email her very close relationship with her supervisor--a "special peer":

- I believe I have had the very best there is to offer as far as supervision goes (not to mention the support and friendship, especially when I was going through my personal loss).

I interviewed Carla with her supervisor, Luisa, and in their exchanges it was very apparent there was a great deal of affection between them. Interestingly, Carla was way past the novice stage in her career, as she had worked for eight years in her district. And, as she described her work, she appeared to be a very competent school social worker. But she laughingly acknowledged she hadn't pursued her LISW because she didn't want to lose supervision from Luisa! Both Carla and Luisa had lost younger siblings in recent years, so they appeared to have developed a special bond as a result of those experiences.

In 2009, Kelly reported findings from a national survey of school social workers. Of more than 1600 respondents, 59 percent said they turned to peers when they needed assistance. It was not clear from the report whether "peers" included colleagues other than school social workers. The participants in my study indicated that the peers they turned to for assistance included other social workers as well as other student support service providers.

Routine activities. Aside from learning from interpersonal relationships, the participants provided examples of routine activities that filled their days but did not require a high level of reflection or problem solving. These activities included observing

students and school personnel in classrooms, hallways, lunchrooms, and playgrounds; locating and learning how to access school, district, and community resources; attending school and district in-services; reading professional literature; retrieving information from the Internet; and learning about educational policies and procedures from documents and files.

For example, Teresa showed me a manual that had been helpful to her:

- We now do a lot of functional behavioral assessments [FBAs] and behavioral intervention plans [BIPs] for students. The district didn't offer us any training on it until this year. So I bought a manual at one of the social work conferences that has a protocol I follow. It's an actual handbook for school social workers and counselors showing how to do FBAs and BIPs step by step.

By engaging in the routine activities listed above, the participants gradually came to understand “educational lingo” (Pound, 1926, p. 311). As McBrien and Brandt (1997) assert, “Education has a language of its own” (p. 1), and acronyms abound (Education Week, 2009). It is essential that new school social workers learn the language very quickly (Gianesin, 2007; Streeter & Franklin, 1993). Openshaw (2008) suggests, “The social worker must find ways to translate social work skills and values and social work problem-solving approaches into educational terms” (pp. 17-18). Lynne provided an example of how she accomplishes this:

- I think it requires incorporating some of their language into yours. I can't say I really enjoy going to trainings or staff meetings that deal specifically with educational initiatives or new curricula--but it does give me exposure to those things. I think if you start out by using their language to describe your work with

a student, it increases your credibility. And then when you begin using more of your own language, they're more apt to listen and trust your knowledge. If nothing else, they feel you have *some* understanding of what they're doing.

In a similar vein, Pia attended teacher meetings in order to stay current with educational concepts, policies, and procedures:

- They have trainings that are teacher-oriented and our principal always says, "You guys don't have to come." But sometimes we go just to hear what the teachers are being told. When we're dealing a family, we can't help them understand the school system and how it works unless *we* know it.

Thus, the routine activities the participants engaged in appeared primarily informational in nature. Teresa turned to a manual to learn about special education procedures; Lynne learned the language of educators in order to strengthen her relationships with them; and Pia attended teacher meetings to stay abreast of changes in policies and procedures that she could share with families. These were forms of adaptive learning that contributed to their acculturation into the schools.

Learning from mistakes. The participants candidly shared examples of mistakes they had made that represented sources of adaptive learning. Participants that had considerable experience in non-educational settings prior to coming into the schools seemed particularly prone to making mistakes initially. They had to learn to adapt their skills to the school environment as they struggled to find their niche. For example, Pia had worked in a community agency for twenty-five years prior to coming into the schools:

- When I came to work for the schools, I had to look at everything in a different way. I had to be redirected and told many times, “You can’t do that. This is what our expectation is.” It wasn’t that easy. Sometimes it was the principal, sometimes the head special ed teacher or the school psychologist that helped me by saying, “Watch those time frames and watch the boundaries here in the school system, because a school system *definitely* has boundaries.” (Pia)

Berman (2006) affirms, “Making mistakes is part of the process of learning” (p. 140). Bauer and Gruber (2007), Cunningham, Dawes, and Bennett (2004), Frese and Altmann (1989), Gambrill (1997), Gerber (1998), Martinez (1998), and Marsick and Watkins (1990) all emphasize that errors are very important sources of learning in the workplace.

There has been some effort to differentiate between errors, slips, lapses, and mistakes, although there does not appear to be consensus on defining these terms (Frese & Altmann, 1989; Norman, 1981; Reason, 1990). However, Norman’s definition of a slip aptly describes the incidents two participants shared. He defines a slip as “the performance of an action that was not what was intended” (p. 1) and both participants talked of having inadvertently blurted out words they very much regretted. For example:

- I remember one day when I had a group of eighth grade boys and they were feeling their oats. I can’t remember now what it was about, but I looked at them and said, “You’re acting like a bunch of little Bin Laden’s! Cut it out!!” And I thought, “Oh, my gosh, where did *that* come from?!” And I sat up and looked at them and said, “Oh my gosh, you guys, I can’t believe I said that!” I immediately

apologized to them, but it's like no matter how tired or stressed you are, you can't let those things happen. (Alice)

I particularly enjoyed interviewing Alice because of her candor and wit. However, she acknowledged that this incident helped her realize she needed to be careful about her outspoken ways and choice of words when interacting with young people. This made sense in view of the fact that she had spent so many years working with adults in business and political arenas before becoming a school social worker. Alice realized her error as soon as the words came out of her mouth, and she immediately took steps to repair her relationship with the students. She later also called their families to apologize.

By contrast, Dana did not appreciate the magnitude of an error she made until the following day (a Friday) when the school secretary alerted her about concerns expressed by the student's family. She spent the weekend agonizing over how to deal with her error, which ultimately resulted in an apology. Dana emailed me an account of the incident and how she subsequently dealt with it:

- About three weeks ago I was having the craziest day--lots of fights, mediations, plus my regular caseload. This boy brought to my attention that another boy (both 5th graders) had been provoking him/teasing him in the cafeteria and then ran after him on the playground, stole his shoe, threw it over the fence and then tackled him. The boy pushed him and the boy who was the aggressor punched him. The boy who was the major aggressor and instigator was very cavalier, stating that he was "just defending himself." I found myself very angry and told this cavalier type boy that I felt he was "acting like a thug" on the playground.

The boy was visibly hurt by this remark--I could tell, but it was a crazy day, I was

in a hurry and I let it go. It never sat right with me though. It happened on a Thursday and I thought about it all Friday. This boy who was typically respectful with me then became very sarcastic and rude with me on Friday when I saw him. His grandmother then came in on Friday and told the secretary that he was very hurt by my comment that he had "acted like a thug." The secretary told me that and at first I felt a little defiant, thinking, "Well, he was acting like a thug!" I thought about it and perseverated about it all weekend. On Monday, I met with him and his teacher and apologized for the remark. We both felt so much better and he has been respectful every since. To make a very long story short, I spent days reflecting on something that just didn't sit right with me and that I needed to correct. I also reflected on that I need to be very careful in these mediations with students not to be so busy that I forget the respectful process of solving the problem. When I got so busy and tried to cram it in, my anxiety levels went up to get the problem solved and I didn't handle it well. I really have to monitor what I say in those times that it is so crazy.

The delayed reflective process Dana engaged in represents Schön's (1983) concept of "reflection-after-action," which is essentially retrospective reflection. As a result of this process, Dana took corrective action to repair her blunder by meeting with the student and his teacher.

Gartmeier, Bauer, Gruber, and Heid (2008) offer another perspective about learning from mistakes by proposing the concept of "negative knowledge." This is essentially "to know what not to do" (p. 90) as a result of reflecting upon ineffective

interventions. They suggest, “Knowledge learned from an error episode facilitates the identification of similar subsequent episodes by paying attention to precursors” (p. 97).

One participant had worked as a supervisor in a medical lab before becoming a school social worker. Having carried leadership responsibilities in her former career, she quickly allied with her first principal and willingly took on tasks he assigned to her. She soon found herself acting more like an administrator than a social worker:

- When I first started, kids would act up and the principal would ask me to speak with them because he didn’t know what to do. I allowed myself to be put in that role a couple of times without even knowing it. But then I’d catch myself and think, “Wait a minute--I’m not being supportive. I’m being a disciplinarian.” I would be grilling the student with questions and coming up with consequences. That happened just a couple of times, and I got wise pretty quickly! (Carol)

I felt Carol described the use of “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983), which essentially involves using reflection during moments of action. She recalled carefully observing her clients’ responses to her actions and noting their resistance. She realized it was inappropriate to act as a “pseudo-administrator” with students and families. As a result of these experiences, Carol became much more discriminating in her responses to her principal’s requests. From the perspective of Gartmeier et al. (2008), these requests represented the “precursors” of errors resulting in the development of “negative knowledge.” Carol also said she subsequently became more assertive about articulating her role as a school social worker and how she felt she could best support her school community.

Another participant provided an example of developing “negative knowledge” vicariously. Recalling a situation where media attention resulted in the deportation of three students who were in the country illegally, he immediately reacted to a counselor’s suggestion that they approach the media to generate support for a student and his family following a car wreck.

- I felt the counselor was coming across as a rescuer--like she thought the family probably needed money and we could contact the media and do fundraisers the way we did for another student last year. So I said, “Slow down. You don’t know what this family wants. They’re great ideas and I don’t mean to knock them, but you need to defer to the family.” I wasn’t clear about the situation myself and didn’t know if they were residents or not. I said, “If they’re not residents here and if you get the media involved, then you’re going to have immigration over there while their kid’s in the hospital.” All this stuff started going through my head, so I said, “Stop!” And it did check her. She was like, “Oh my gosh, you’re right. I hadn’t even thought of that.” So, her intent was good but it seemed very privileged and rescuing. Well, sure enough, the family did have insurance and they had gotten their residency. (Gabriel)

Thus, learning precipitated by mistakes appears to reflect the adaptive learning Ellström (2001) describes. The participants found they needed to modify their behavior when working in an educational setting: Alice learned to curb her language with young people; Dana learned to be cautious about getting involved in crises when she was already feeling stressed; Carol learned to adapt her leadership skills to a school setting;

and Gabriel learned from someone else's mistake to think twice before involving the media in students' situations.

In summary, adaptive learning was a critical aspect of the participants' acculturation into the schools. Essentially, they had to figure out how to tailor their practice so it dovetailed with the goals of education. In many instances this was no easy task. The participants who had completed internships in educational settings definitely had an advantage over those who hadn't. Even so, it was a long, difficult process. The one participant who had taken several courses in graduate school alongside teachers and administrators was an exception. She appeared to have adapted her practice to the school environment quite easily.

The participants' adaptive learning occurred as the result of clinical and administrative supervision, mentoring relationships, peer relationships with social workers and professionals from other disciplines, routine activities, and mistakes. As mentioned earlier, Ellström (2001) believes adaptive and developmental learning in the workplace are complementary processes. I will address developmental learning next.

Impact of developmental contextual learning on practice. The participants also provided many examples of developmental learning. According to Ellström (2001), this represents a more creative form of learning than adaptive learning. Wenger (2000) also notes the creative aspects of learning when he discusses "boundary processes." This is learning that occurs at the boundaries between different communities of practice. He points out that some people thrive on brokering across these boundaries:

They can introduce elements of one practice into another. . . . They love to create connections and engage in ‘import-export,’ and so would rather stay at the boundaries of many practices than move to the core of any one practice (p. 235).

In this statement, Wenger is describing one of the primary functions of school social work practice (Allen-Meares et al., 1996; Lee, 2007). This includes brokering among professionals from other disciplines within educational settings and between those same settings and community service providers. These activities generate considerable learning that results in creative practice. Tiana provided an example:

- Other systems work we’ve done is linking up with community organizations. That’s the creative part of this work. There’s a lady that does an “Angel Treat” for me every year and just hands over a check. We have a family that donates six hundred dollars. You kind of build those things over the years and they become traditions. We go to business places and they give us certificates almost every year. Those are the things they do for us and that’s the reason we build partnerships.

Analysis of the data suggests that some of the most significant developmental learning (Ellström, 2001) occurred through problem-solving activities, trial and error strategies, and practice dilemmas. All of these activities involved reflective processes and carried an emotional component. Critical incidents and turning points resulting in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997, 2000) also appeared to represent developmental learning.

Impact of problem-solving activities on practice. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993), Jonassen (1997), Marsick and Watkins (1990), Palumbo (1990), Schank, Berman,

and Macpherson (1999), Schön (1987), and others have investigated how professionals solve problems. Lohman (2002) asserts, “Professionals rely on their problem-solving skills to handle the increasingly ill-structured nature of their work” (p. 243).

Brockman and Dirkx (2006) contend that the greatest amount of learning occurs when workers are confronted by activities that are new and require action-oriented problem solving. In their study of machine operators, they describe two major dimensions of the problem-solving process: 1) a trigger event or incident that gains the attention of the worker, and 2) responses to the trigger event. These responses represent a combination of strategies that “reflected the relational and dialogical nature of the problem-solving and learning process” (p. 208) their participants experienced. By engaging in such a problem-solving process, “the individual’s existing knowledge is extended and transformed” (p. 210).

In my participants’ practice, the “trigger event” that initiated the problem-solving process occurred in a variety of ways: a referral for social work services, a question posed by a colleague, a team meeting addressing school safety, the need to design an effective intervention, a fight on the playground, a student crisis, conflicts between school personnel, the need to generate community support for a program, etc. The list goes on and on.

A trigger event for Lynne involved a parent who made excuses for her son’s excessive absences. Lynne came up with the idea of using email to engage the parent and eventually get her to seek help for herself and her son:

- We had a student who essentially dropped out of school. The mother worked in a doctor’s office and continued to forge doctor’s excuses for him. She and I had this

little email dance going on for a while. I was trying to get her to acknowledge what was really going on in a way that she could save face. When we met with her at school, she really didn't seem to be listening. I think she was too busy presenting her defense. But with the emails, she's in her own home where she doesn't have all the issues of being in a school building. It was easier for her to ask for help in that way--and she eventually did. What she wanted was outside counseling for her son, but the bigger issue was how she could be a better mom and get her son to listen to her.

Thus, the student's excessive absences triggered a problem-solving process in which Lynne needed to figure out how to engage the student's mother in authentic dialogue. The problem-solving activities Lynne and other participants engaged in reflected considerable creative thinking. Problem solving served as an important vehicle for acquiring developmental learning that impacted their practice.

Impact of trial and error strategies on practice. Martinez (1998) notes the interconnectedness of trial and error strategies and problem solving in the following statement:

By its very nature, problem solving involves error and uncertainty. Even if success is achieved, it will not be found by following an unerring path. The possibilities of failure and of making less-than-optimal moves are inseparable from problem solving. And the loftier the goals, the more obvious will be the imperfection of the path toward a solution. (para. 26)

Hallgren and Wilson (2007) offer the concept of *mini-muddling* in their discussion of the learning that is generated when deviations from intended plans occur.

They describe “a sequence of trials, errors, and revised trials” (p. 95) as part of the process of handling deviations and getting back on track with the original plan or goal. In the previous chapter, I wrote about Mario who attempted to develop a behavior management plan for a student. A major deviation occurred when the student’s teacher refused his request to “just make a check” on a form he provided “every time the kid does something wrong.” As a result, he realized he needed to focus more on the teacher’s needs and help her learn to deal with disruptive behaviors in her classroom, rather than concerning himself so much with the behavior of one student. He therefore revised his approach toward working with this teacher—an example of Hallgren and Wilson’s concept of mini-muddling.

Marian described how she learned to conduct parent groups—an example of implementing trial and error strategies, as well as what Schank calls “learning by doing” (1996):

- Learning how to do parent groups was pretty much through trial and error. At one point we tried to use a parenting book, but of course we always had to adapt stuff from books because the behavior of our kids in the program was *so* dramatic--and also their verbal skills and ability to comprehend what you’re telling them was often severely impaired.

Carol also spoke of “learning by doing,” and provided a good example of learning by trial and error after conducting a student group that turned out to be “awful”:

- I learned to do groups just by doing them--also reading a little bit and talking with other people about what they did in their groups. I also did lots of self-tweaking and was really forgiving with myself. It helps to have supportive teachers. If

something really flops, I'll say to the teacher, "Wow, I'm shocked at how *awful* that was--I guess I'll never do *that* again!"

I mentioned in the previous chapter how Lynne struggled to develop a parent group. She experimented with different formats until she found one that worked. It involved scheduling meetings at noon and serving lunch before moving into the agenda for the day.

Trial and error strategies seemed to characterize much of the participants' work with student groups. The participants in one school district had had access to a group work consultant on a regular basis many years earlier, but that resource was no longer available. They had to resort to experimenting with different formats and different activities in their student groups. Dana described how she conducts her groups:

- I'll say, "Okay, guys, we're going to try this game again this year." And they'll tell me, "Ugh, we don't like that one. That was stupid!" And I go, "Okay, okay!" So then I know what works. The kids are great. They'll just say, "No, we didn't like that one at all!"

Dana went on to provide another example of a trial and error strategy:

- This year I implemented two new activities. One flopped really badly, but they loved the other one. I was really surprised. It's the one that XX and YY do with their high school kids that I saw at their workshop. I used it with my fifth graders. It's a difficult activity, but they loved it! They wanted to do it again and again and again!

Lynne shared an anecdote about one of her classroom groups that made us both chuckle:

- I don't know what I was thinking bringing a balloon into a kindergarten class!!

The idea was that I would only tap the balloon to someone that was looking at me. But of course it didn't work--after all, they're only five years old! You just have to laugh about it and have a Plan B. So we switched to using a ball. At that point, I was just getting to know the teacher, so I remember feeling a little nervous that she was sitting there thinking I'm an idiot and don't know what I'm doing!

Earlier in this chapter, I described the impact of NCLB on the participants' practice and how it limited their access to students on their caseloads. It appeared that many of them were beginning to experiment with classroom groups in order to serve special education students on their caseloads. I appreciated that they were able to chuckle about their clumsy efforts to develop new intervention strategies in order to adapt to new federal and district regulations.

In summary, the participants adopted a great many trial and error strategies to deal with the problems they confronted in their practice. As with problem solving, the trial and error strategies reflected creative experimentation that enhanced the participants' developmental learning. Creative experimentation also often characterized the next topic: the impact of professional dilemmas.

Impact of professional dilemmas on practice. The participants shared countless examples of the dilemmas they faced in their practice. They made clear these were times when they became heavily engaged in reflective processes. In writing about the general practice of social work, Banks (2003) defines a dilemma as:

A choice between two equally unwelcome alternatives--when it seems that 'whatever I do will be wrong.' A dilemma belongs to someone, and is about

making a choice. A situation, event, case or story itself is not a dilemma, but may raise dilemmas for certain people. Any event or situation has practical, technical, political and ethical dimensions. (p. 103)

One participant (Gabriel) provided an excellent example of “equally unwelcome alternatives.” (If the story sounds familiar, it’s because I shared Tiana’s version of this same series of events in the previous chapter when writing about the impact of incidental developmental learning on practice. Tiana and Gabriel worked together at the same high school.) To continue, two of Gabriel’s colleagues were placed on administrative leave following the suicide of a student. An administrator had requested they talk with the student after telling him on the morning of graduation that he could not graduate. The district was investigating whether the proper referral and assessment protocol had been followed. Gabriel said he struggled over the incident throughout his entire summer break, stating, “It could easily have been me.” Gabriel decided he would no longer see students unless they were properly referred. The “unwelcome alternatives” were 1) regret about having to put limits on his practice in order to protect himself, and 2) regret over not being able to respond immediately to students in crisis, whether they were on his caseload or not.

Both Gabriel and Tiana expressed a very strong sense of betrayal regarding the way district administrators handled their colleagues’ situations. Boverie and Kroth (2001) point out, “If employees have little trust for management, they are less likely to take risks, work toward organization goals, apply themselves, and may even work to sabotage the organization” (p. 196). I heard nothing to indicate that Gabriel and Tiana

subsequently attempted to sabotage their administration, but I certainly heard distress that they could no longer count on administrative support for their professional decisions.

In her discussion of professional dilemmas, Banks (2003) points out that a strong value base informs social work practice, thus conflicts with professionals from other disciplines reflect “differences in core purposes, values, and professional training” (p. 116). In their textbook on school social work, Allen-Meares et al. (1996) caution practitioners to “be aware of differences in values and beliefs between education and social work. This an area that often creates barriers in communication” (p. 231).

One participant (Carla) remarked that sometimes in team meetings she feels the need to say, “I want it on record that this is what I feel is in the best interest of the child...” This happens when she disagrees with decisions made by other members of her students’ IEP (Individualized Education Program) teams that include teachers, administrators, counselors, and other student support service providers. The dilemma for her is that she wants to be regarded as a team member, but sometimes she cannot in good conscience agree with the team’s recommendations. She added, “It comes from my professional training and I feel that ethically and philosophically that’s what I can offer.” As in Carla’s situation, I felt many of the dilemmas the participants faced represented rich learning experiences that affirmed their professional identities as school social workers.

One of the dilemmas most frequently cited by the participants was related to pressure from district level special education administrators to give priority to students with IEPs (i.e., special education students). A few participants ignored the “terse memos” (Carol’s phrase) from administration and intervened with students in crisis whether they

had IEPs or not. However, other participants expressed much distress over trying to balance district mandates with their schools' immediate needs. Raelin (2002) addresses these two different forms of responses (i.e., ignoring versus attempting to accommodate) in his research on professionals working in large bureaucratic organizations. He describes these responses as "deviant" versus "adaptive" behaviors. These behaviors result when management (or in this case, administration) exerts "undue pressure to comply with organizational norms" (p. 16).

Although her district administrator stated in memos that prioritizing students with IEPs was necessary in order remain in compliance with federal laws, Carol blatantly stated, "It's just about the *money!*" The reasoning behind her thinking was that social workers generate Medicaid reimbursement for every therapy session they conduct with special education students. On the other hand, no money is generated when they attend to the needs of general education students or become involved in macro level interventions such as facilitating mental health and risk assessment teams serving *all* students in their schools. Other participants from Carol's district echoed her thinking. They pointed out there was great tension between the special education and student support services departments in their district. The latter department had initiated a reorganization of student support services throughout the district that resulted in the creation of mental health, risk assessment, and crisis response teams in every school. Whereas the special education administrators pressed the social workers to serve only special education students, the student support services department felt it was in the best interest of all students that the social workers serve on these teams.

The dilemma the participants faced regarding Medicaid seemed to boil down to a clash of values: the special education administration's interest in generating money for the district versus the participants' desire to respond to the immediate needs of their schools. This included responding to their principals' requests that they respond to students in crisis, whether or not they were on the social workers' caseloads.

Lee (2007) poses a dilemma school social workers often face because of their role as advocates in educational systems. He asks, "Whom does the school social worker represent in his or her advocacy--the student, the parent, or the school?" (p. 60). He answers his own question accordingly:

The student is the primary focus because our responsibility is to prepare him or her for learning. Understanding that the school is our employer may, at times, result in ethical conflicts. School social workers have to balance what is best for the child and what is dictated by the school district. This is where skills in mediation and problem solving are best used. Being able to combine these skills is the art of school social work (p. 60).

The professional dilemmas the participants faced seemed largely related to the fact that they were working in host settings (Tracy and Hokenstad, 2006). Although they wanted to be perceived as team members, they faced many situations that challenged their sense of professional ethics. They dealt with these situations by engaging in reflective thinking or dialogue with other social workers. Nevertheless, these dilemmas appeared to be one of the most challenging aspects of their work.

Impact of reflection on practice. Reports of research on reflective processes in professional practice nearly always credit Donald Schön for his work in this area. As

noted earlier, Schön (1983, 1987) developed the concepts of “reflection-in-practice” and “reflection-on-practice.” The former refers to the reflective thinking that occurs while engaging in an interaction or activity, whereas the latter refers to the reflection that takes place after an interaction or activity has been completed.

The participants shared many examples of when, where, and how they reflected on their practice and how engaging in reflection impacted their practice. Reflection-in-practice occurred during therapy sessions with students and families, consultations with school personnel, and interactions with community service providers. For example, listening to and reflecting upon a student or teacher’s response to a question would determine the social worker’s next remark or question.

Reflection-on-practice appeared to be an ongoing, never ending process that was experienced privately, as well as dialogically, by the participants. Several of them referred to reflecting on interactions and interventions as they were driving to and from work or traveling between school sites. Others talked about using summer breaks to reflect upon what they felt they had accomplished over the year and what they might do differently the following year. For example:

- Another good learning experience for me is every year reflecting on my groups. At the end of every school year I think, “Okay, how did my groups go this year?” For example, I might think, “I need to do a little more processing with the kids.” So, there’s a lot of self-reflection about what will make it easier and what I need to implement the following year. (Dana)

The close proximity of other school social workers, such as being housed together in the same office or building, supported the reflection-on-action process that results in

new awareness and understanding. Dewey (1910/1997) points out that reflection involves “a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt” (p. 9). Boud (1999) notes, “Reflection is intrinsic to learning. . . . It is associated with questioning, uncertainties, discrepancies and dissatisfactions. . . . It is about learners constructing their own meanings within a community of professional discourse” (p. 123).

In a study of three different professions (social workers, nurses, and lawyers), Daley (2002) found that social workers characteristically take information from continuing professional development activities back to their agencies and “often talk with colleagues about new ideas or just run things by them before trying something they have just learned” (p. 81). My participants often talked of “brainstorming” with other school social workers. These conversations occurred regularly when two social workers were assigned to the same school, but infrequently among the itinerant social workers. The latter group appeared to rely primarily upon self-reflection.

Fook (2002) and Baldwin (2004) argue that reflection in social work practice must be critical in nature. Baldwin asserts, “Reflection needs to be critical so that it deconstructs and reconstructs the knowledge that informs practice in order to evaluate its effectiveness and to ensure that it does not replicate ineffective or discriminatory practices” (p. 43). All participants provided examples of critical reflection, but the following example seems particularly noteworthy:

- I self-tweak all the time. I feel I can’t be a good practitioner unless I am *constantly* self-tweaking. Just about every day I’ll sit at my desk after everybody has gone. I’ll start thinking about the beginning of the day and everything that went on. I replay it and observe myself, thinking about what I said and what I did.

It's a matter of being real aware of my own emotional state at the time. It's looking at the things I said, my tone of voice, my actions and interventions--and how the other person responded. I've learned that if I'm feeling stressed about something and haven't adequately taken care of myself, then I might be a little more brusque with someone. That tells me the next time I feel stressed, I've got to take care of it and watch my tone of voice. (Carol)

Without question, reflection was fundamental to the participants' practice. It was reflexive in nature and, using Carol's term, it enabled them to "self-tweak" in order to improve their practice. Carol also noted that she paid attention to emotions during her reflections about her day's work. This is the next topic under consideration.

Impact of the emotional component of learning on practice. Ingleton (1999), Domagalski (1999), and Sutton and Wheatley (2003) note that the cognitive aspects of learning have dominated research studies until only recently. Oatley and Jenkins (1996) point out, "There is suspicion in Western culture that there is something wrong with emotions" (p. 38).

Recently, however, Antonacopoulou and Gabriel (2001), Beckett and Hager (2000), Brown (2000), Cherniss (1998), Craig, Graesser, Sullins, and Gholson (2004), Dirkx (2001), Gabriel and Griffiths (2002), Ingleton (1999), Jarvis (2006), Jordan (2005), Reio, 2002, Salovey and Sluyter (1997), and Vince (2001) have written about the emotional aspects of learning. Earlier, Goleman (1995) put forth the concept of "emotional intelligence" and identified four domains that fall under this form of intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. He has continued to elaborate on this concept (e.g., 2001, 2004), however

he places greater emphasis on valuing and developing emotional intelligence than on the emotional aspect of learning.

Dirkx (2001) notes that most scholars focus on the way emotion either enhances or impedes learning in adulthood. Ingleton (1999), for example, writes about the relationship of shame and pride to learning:

Shame and pride are powerful emotions in learning because they are part of social bonding, and the basis of self-identity and self-esteem. Because they are part of identity building, they are essential to the protection of self-esteem. In learning, one works hard at minimising risk, or avoiding risk, to avoid shame and the lowering of self-esteem. (p. 9)

Marian provided a compelling example of how shame and pride influenced her learning processes:

- You know, there are times when I go to a workshop and they want you to do something. Well, I *hate* that hands-on stuff! If I'm feeling really uncomfortable with my skill level, I don't want to be put out there and have to do some hands-on thing. I just don't want to be put in a position where I'm going to look like a *jerk*, even though it might be a good way to learn. I'd be so worried about *being* the jerk that I wouldn't learn anything. I remember we did do hands-on stuff with our group work consultant, but we worked with her over a long period of time and developed relationships and trust, so it wasn't as anxiety provoking when we had to do something in front of the group.

Other participants expressed similar self-consciousness when asked to do role-plays at workshops and risk exposing lack of knowledge and skills. Nevertheless, they recognized it was a very effective way to learn new skills to incorporate into their practice.

Dirkx (2001) offers a somewhat different perspective regarding the relationship between emotions and learning. He does not focus solely on how emotions enhance or inhibit learning, as most scholars do, but instead interjects the element of imagination: “Emotions and imagination are integral to the process of adult learning” (p. 63). He argues, “Personally significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded in and is derived from the adult’s emotional, imaginative connection with the self and with the broader social world” (p. 64). Thus, Dirkx believes it is important to consider the images associated with strong emotions in order to understand what is behind them. By scrutinizing part of Carol’s comment in the previous section, it is possible to appreciate Dirkx’s argument. I am repeating her comment here, italicizing the words I regard as significant:

- I’ll start thinking about the beginning of the day and everything that went on. I *replay* it and *observe* myself, thinking about what I said and what I did. It’s a matter of being real aware of my own *emotional state* at the time. It’s *looking* at the things I said, my tone of voice, my actions and interventions--and how the other person responded.

Thus, Carol will “replay” and “observe” herself in conjunction with her “emotional state” during an interaction. In the process, she is “looking” at what she said and did and how the other person responded. It seemed her process of visualizing incidents that occurred during her workday helped her make better sense of them. Carol’s

explanation of this process certainly appears to dovetail with Dirkx's thoughts about the interrelationship of emotion, imagination, and adult learning.

In a similar manner, I suspect Dana carried many images in her mind as she tried to understand the frustration and guilt she felt about her student's persistent efforts to obtain a small toy from her:

- I definitely spend a lot of time reflecting when I have a major emotional response--such as feeling frustrated with a student or even feeling I need to fix something. An example is a student I was seeing individually. He liked playing with a Hulk I had in the sand tray. He tried for weeks to get me to give him that Hulk. I held the line but felt bad for him. He started refusing to come with me and I found out he was angry because I wouldn't give him the Hulk. One day he decided to come, and he said the Hulk was something he really wanted for Christmas, but his parents didn't have the money to buy him one. I felt so guilty and horrible for not giving him my Hulk that I was trying to think how I could get him one for Christmas. My mind was just racing. Then suddenly I realized, "Wait a minute--this is exactly what he does to wear his mother down and get her to give him what he wants." I did not buy the Hulk for him and instead worked on the process he was going through--not being able to get what he wants all the time.

Although Dana did not describe her reflective process in detail as Carol did, I suspect she replayed in her mind images of the student pouting and whining and refusing to come with her for therapy sessions. Perhaps she also visualized a toy store where she could purchase a Hulk as her "mind was just racing." Perhaps an image of the boy's mother wearing down and finally giving in to him flashed through her mind when she

suddenly realized what was behind his persistence. By attending to her strong emotions related to the boy's behavior, Dana experienced a sudden breakthrough in her understanding of the dynamics underlying his interactions with her.

Putting learning aside, when I asked one participant how emotion factored into her practice in the schools, she laughed and retorted, "Your question is like asking if I eat to live!" I acknowledged it was a silly question to ask a social worker, but added that it has only been in the last decade or so that the emotional aspects of learning and professional practice have received much attention from researchers.

In summary, the participants' accounts of their learning experiences were filled with references to emotions associated with these experiences. Marion and Dana's comments above are good examples. Between the two of them, they either named or expressed a range of emotions that included dislike, discomfort, self-consciousness, embarrassment, trust, appreciation, anxiety, frustration, guilt, and feeling bad or puzzled about something.

Impact of critical events and significant turning points on practice. All of the participants described critical events in their careers that represented important sources of learning. Ten of the combined participants from this study and the pilot study said that one of the most significant turning points in their careers occurred when they became supervisors. For most, it meant becoming a clinical supervisor of school social workers licensed at the master's level (LMSW). For a few, it entailed supervising students from social work graduate school programs. The significance of this work appeared to be that it forced the participants to articulate tacit knowledge embedded in their practice. They had to find ways to express their values and beliefs and also share the rationale behind

their decisions and actions. As Kadushin and Harkness (2002) state, “Becoming a supervisor forces one to explicitly examine one’s practice to conceptualize it for teaching” (p. 282).

The participants who became supervisors also spoke of how the experience broadened their worldviews. They needed to become much more knowledgeable about district policies and procedures so they could share this information with their supervisees. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) note:

The change in position and the responsibilities that go along with becoming a supervisor in and of itself force a change in the worker’s perception of agency rules, policies, and procedures. But this change is reinforced by information about agency operation from a broader perspective than had been available earlier.

(p. 286)

Wenger (2000) refers to this “broader perspective” as an expansion of identity:

In the generational encounter between newcomers and established members, the identities of both get expanded. Newcomers gain a sense of history. And old-timers gain perspective as they revisit their own ways and open future possibilities for others. (p. 241)

A major turning point for Teresa occurred when her principal decided to pay half her salary so she could work full-time at her school and implement school-wide violence and bully-prevention programs for the entire school year. Prior to that time, Teresa’s practice had consisted primarily of working with individual students and small groups of students. Her principal’s support for her position enabled Teresa to shift her entire practice to predominately macro-level work. Frey and Walker (2006) note, “School social

work at the organization level provides an important vehicle to address a wide range of school safety and socioeconomic and cultural issues” (p. 82).

Other professional turning points the participants cited included affiliating with university social work programs as instructors or consultants, assuming leadership roles in professional social work organizations, and achieving public recognition for their work by writing about it and/or conducting workshops at conferences. These experiences also broadened their worldviews, increased their professional networks, and added depth to their practice. It appeared these activities helped solidify their sense of professional identity and enhanced their pride in being a member of the social work community in general, and the school social work community in particular.

Thus, critical events and turning points in the participants’ careers were important sources of learning for them. I have only included events in this section that were professional in nature. Personal critical events and turning points are reported elsewhere in this document (see pp. 139 – 142 regarding the impact of personal outside learning experiences on practice). Both professional and personal critical events generally resulted in transformative learning for the participants. This is the topic of the next section.

Impact of transformative learning on practice. As noted earlier, Mezirow is recognized as the creator and major developer of the theory of transformative learning (Brookfield, 1986; Cranton, 1996; Cranton & King, 2003; Grabove, 1997; Jarvis, 2004; Marsick, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Taylor, 2001; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Mezirow (2003) defines transformative learning as,

Learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)--

to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 58-59)

Cranton's (2002) description of transformative learning includes examples that expand upon Mezirow's (2003) statement:

At its core, transformative learning theory is elegantly simple. Through some event, which could be as traumatic as losing a job or as ordinary as an unexpected question, an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world. (p. 64)

On a personal note, I was laid off twice as a school social worker because of funding cutbacks. Although I was somewhat prepared for the first layoff, the second one shocked me into the realization that I could no longer assume social work positions in the schools are secure. In the language of transformative learning, this "triggered" a shift in my perspective about job security. It propelled me into macro level practice targeting district, state, and national policy issues regarding the practice of school social work and the funding of school social work positions. This was work I had never done before. It broadened my horizon immensely. In the process, I learned much about the politics of policy-making and developed many new skills. As a result of my own experiences, I felt it was important to ask my participants about critical events or turning points in their lives that they believed had contributed to their personal and professional growth.

I felt the participants' accounts of critical events and turning points in the previous section reflected transformative learning. Often these experiences occurred when the participants took on new professional responsibilities that expanded their horizons and forced them to challenge previously held assumptions. For example, the participants who became clinical supervisors or instructors in a university program fielded comments and questions from supervisees and graduate students that pushed them into examining assumptions they held, particularly in regard to the way they conducted their practice.

There were many examples of personal transformative learning as well. For example, Marilyn grew up thinking she was "stupid" until she realized she had a learning disability. And, Carla became involved in brain-injury programs as the result of her cousin's husband's accident that totally changed the way he functioned. In addition, Lynn's experiences as a new mother challenged all assumptions she had previously held about motherhood and sensitized her to the needs of other young mothers.

Thus, transformative learning experiences appeared to be an extremely important source of learning for the participants. These experiences were both professional and personal in nature. They challenged the participants' assumptions and prompted them to develop alternative solutions to problematic situations.

Summary. To summarize this discussion about the participants' developmental learning experiences (Ellström, 2001), my findings suggest that problem-solving activities, trial and error strategies, practice dilemmas, and reflection upon emotions associated with these activities had great impact on the participants' practice. Critical

incidents and turning points characterized by transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) also represented developmental learning that impacted the participants' practice.

Summary of adaptive and developmental learning. Altogether, adaptive and developmental learning activities (Ellström, 2001) in the workplace seemed to have significantly impacted the participants' practice, whether at their school sites or in larger arenas. Both forms of learning were contextually based and were driven by the complexity of the problems the participants faced. It seemed essential that they master adaptive learning and move into developmental learning before they could succeed in facilitating the learning of others in their educational communities. However, there were other factors that helped shape the participants' practice: prior learning, outside learning, and personal qualities. I will address these factors in the following sections.

Impact of prior learning experiences on practice. The impact of prior learning experiences was clearly evident in the participants' accounts of their practice. These experiences helped shape the professional orientation that guided their work and supported their interventions in the schools.

Increased attention has been paid to prior experiences by researchers in the adult learning field in recent decades. In 1986, Brookfield asserted, "Every adult's stock of prior learning and experience coheres into a unique, idiosyncratic mediatory mechanism through which new experiences and knowledge are filtered" (p. 2). In 1994, David Boud expanded upon Brookfield's notion when he presented a model highlighting the influence of past experiences on the present. The basic assumption underlying his model is as follows:

Learners bring with them to any event their *personal foundation of experience*.

This is a way of describing the influence of all their previous experiences on them now. We all bring our embodied life history with us on every occasion and this will profoundly affect our perceptions of what does and does not count as important; it acts to sensitise us to some features of our world and blind us to others and it shapes the *intent* we have which guides our priorities. (p. 50)

I think Boud's (1994) point that past experiences guide our priorities is important. I heard this repeatedly from my participants. For example, prior to obtaining their social work degrees, two participants had worked as psychology technicians in psychiatric hospitals. There they learned the importance of interdisciplinary teamwork and the value of patient groups. One of these participants subsequently organized and facilitated mental health and crisis intervention teams in her school. She also adapted her group work skills to the schools and continues to conduct several student groups throughout the year. The other participant had worked with adolescents in a psychiatric hospital and found that the "angry teenagers" on her caseload were her favorite students. Two participants had worked in juvenile justice facilities prior to coming into the schools, and they were both very knowledgeable about gang signs and behaviors displayed by students. Both of them devoted a considerable amount of time to developing programs in their schools for gang-involved youth. Providing support for these students ranked high on their list of priorities.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) specifically address how prior experiences affect learning in the workplace:

Adults entering stimulating and expansive working environments (Fuller and Unwin, in press) experience their work as a continuous engagement in acquiring

new skills and deploying their prior skills in new circumstances. Workers can then use their past knowledge and skills to succeed at work, and to build up new knowledge and acquire new skills. (para. 15)

Lynda made a direct link between prior learning and current practice in this statement:

- I think my work at the utility company has influenced everything I do as a social worker. It was a very professional environment that helped me become well organized and learn to work with others. I took a class in mediation there and afterwards became a claims adjuster. Those skills really helped me in my work in the schools. When I do mediations here, it's not about who's wrong and who's right. It's about where we go from here.

In summary, the learning experiences the participants engaged in prior to working in the schools appeared to have a profound impact on their practice. These experiences helped determine how they approached problems in their schools, which treatment modalities they favored, and what skills they chose to acquire.

Impact of outside learning experiences on practice. Larsson (2000) uses the term “life-broad” to describe learning that covers “life to its full extent, not one narrow sector” (p. 195). Clark (2005), Edwards, Ranson, and Strain (2002), and Jarvis (2006) use the term “life-wide” to describe learning that occurs in many different settings and in all aspects of life. Gouthro (2005) proposes that “homeplace” is a source of important learning. She describes homeplace as follows:

Its meaning is different for each person, depending upon his/her unique life circumstances. A person defines her homeplace based upon personal lived

experience and her family and cultural background. The homeplace may fit into a larger socio-cultural context than an individual residence, inclusive of community, neighbours, and larger cultural setting. The homeplace is located in both tangible and non-tangible realms, and may be linked with a specific geographic location. (p. 9)

For the purpose of this study, I am defining “outside learning” as any learning that occurs outside the workplace. It includes professional activities, voluntary work, hobbies, personal interests, and family activities. For example, as illustrated in the previous chapter, Marian talked about attending a community workshop where she learned to use therapeutic games that resulted in changing her entire attitude about conducting student groups. Lynne recognized her need to develop a network of new mothers when she stayed home for a few years to raise her children. Upon returning to work, she established a group for the parents of developmentally delayed students at her school. Also, Lisa adopted a miniature dachshund and found him to be so people-friendly that she began using him in her therapy sessions with students who had difficulty relating to people.

In addition, four participants described how their spiritual beliefs impacted their practice. For example:

- I have a deep spiritual foundation and use it when I work with people. I go to a metaphysical church that has very wide beliefs. I don't discuss these beliefs with clients, but I use the teachings and they're very effective. For example, so many people believe that life just happens and they have no control, so they give away their personal power. But we are what we think. I believe we are responsible and can control our thoughts and actions. To me, it really is social work theory. It's

also about living in the now and not allowing ourselves to dwell on the past.

(Carol)

There has been increasing interest in exploring the relationship between spirituality and social work in the last two decades, as evidenced by the formation of the Society for Spirituality and Social Work in 1990 (Canda, 1998). However, in searching the indices of the major school social work texts (Allen-Meares et al., 1996; Allen-Meares, 2007; Bye & Alvarez, 2007; Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 2002; Dupper, 2003; Franklin, Harris, & Allen-Meares, 2006; Freeman, 1998; Massat, Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 2009; Openshaw, 2008), I found no listing under any form of the word “spirituality.”

However, four of the texts have some form of the word “religion” in their indices. But the brief sections in these texts devoted to religion do not address the topic in relation to the religious or spiritual perspectives of school social work practitioners. Instead, the focus is on issues related to students and families. For example, Allen-Meares (2007) addresses religious freedom in the schools and cites numerous court decisions related to this issue. Allen-Meares et al. (1996) also address religious freedom in the schools, as well as student exemptions from compulsory education based on religious grounds. Cole (2006) devotes a chapter in the “School Services Sourcebook,” edited by Franklin et al., to the challenges of working with religious fundamentalist families. And, Openshaw (2008) devotes two paragraphs in her book to the need for school social workers to attend to the cultural attitudes and religious beliefs of students exposed to violence.

Thus, the spiritual beliefs that school social workers carry and which very likely impact their work represent a topic that is grossly overlooked in the profession’s

literature. And yet, four of the participants clearly stated there was a spiritual element that was fundamental to their work. Carol's comment above is representative of the other three participants' statements. In addition, elsewhere in this document I have described Anna's practice of splashing water on her face in the school restroom to wash away sadness, thus replicating her clan's healing ritual of going to the river to wash away sad feelings.

In summary, outside learning experiences seemed to have considerable impact on the participants' practice, just as prior learning experiences did. They became part of the framework upon which the participants built their practice. These experiences became intertwined with their workplace learning experiences. The participants' personal attributes also heavily impacted their learning experiences and professional practice. I will discuss this topic next.

Personal qualities associated with the impact of learning on practice. Many researchers emphasize how personal qualities factor into the way people make use of learning opportunities. These include, but are not limited to, motivation, willingness, energy, and personal commitment to learn (Antonacopoulou, 1999; Trevithick, 2008; Wilson, McCormack, & Ives, 2006), self-determination (Bauer & Mulder, 2006), commitment and passion for work (Boverie & Kroth, 2001; Daley, 2002; McCloy & Wise, 2002; Naquin & Holton, 2002), professional integrity (Banks, 2006, 2008), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995, 2001), assertiveness (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996; Gouthro, 2005), flexibility (Fuller & Unwin, 2005), learning style (Kolb et al., 1999), cognitive abilities (Bandura, 1989), emotionality (Dirkx, 2001, Eraut, 2004), self-authorship (Kegan, 1994), social competence (Goleman, 1995, 2001, 2004; Kram & Isabella, 1985;

Wilson et al., 2006), charisma (Bourdieu, 1984; Monkman, 2009; Raelin, 2006), spirituality (Canda, 2002; Nash & Stewart, 2005), creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; England, 1986; Lindeman, 1961/1989), a passion for learning (Solomon, 2003), and, quite simply, personal preference (Healy, 2005; Kelly, 2008).

Many researchers refer to personal qualities as “dispositions” (Billett & Somerville, 2004; Bryson, Pajo, Ward, & Mallon, 2006; Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005; Fuller & Unwin, 2004a; Goodson & Adair, 2007; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004; Lindeman, 2006; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Tedder & Biesta, 2007; Wojecki, 2007). The literature is somewhat confusing about the use of the term “dispositions.” Sometimes this term refers to personal qualities people bring to the workplace, while at other times it refers to motivation to make use of learning opportunities. In this study, my concept of personal qualities relates to the former: the unique personal attributes the participants brought to their practice.

Part way through the data analysis process, I began to appreciate the extent to which the participants’ personal qualities influenced their learning experiences and the way they conducted their practice. I therefore began reading some of Bourdieu’s work regarding his concept of *habitus* (1984, 1989, 2005). His words on this topic resonated with what my participants were saying about their practice inclinations. Bourdieu (2005) defines habitus as “a system of *dispositions*, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of *long-lasting* (rather than permanent) . . . schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception, and action” (p. 43). He continues by stating that habitus is “a set of acquired characteristics which are the product of social conditions” (p. 45). Elsewhere, he equates habitus with “dispositions” and

“taste” (1989, p. 19). Bourdieu (2005) elaborates on his concept of habitus with the following statement:

[It is] a product of history, that is of social experience and education, [and] it may be *changed by history*, that is by new experiences, education or training (which implies that aspects of what remains unconscious in habitus be made at least partially conscious and explicit). Dispositions are long-lasting: they tend to perpetuate, to reproduce themselves, but they are not eternal. They may be changed by historical action oriented by intention and consciousness and using pedagogic devices.” (p. 45)

Thus, Bourdieu addresses personal dispositions shaped by developmental experiences, but he also emphasizes the potential for change through “new experiences, education or training” (2005, p. 45). After coming across Bourdieu’s statement above, I immediately recalled a statement one of the participants in my pilot study made. We were both hired about the same time in our district: “I don’t know if you remember me, but I was pretty introverted. And I didn’t like that about myself. I just wanted to be more assertive.” She (Bea) eventually worked with a dying student and his family that generated many ethical dilemmas for her (e.g., the family’s refusal to seek medical care). She felt so strongly about the issues her work with this family raised that she ended up presenting a workshop at a national conference specifically addressing these issues. Bea said it was a turning point for her because the audience’s responses were so affirming of her work with this family. She said the entire experience helped her shed her introverted ways and become a more assertive person. I felt Bea’s story highlighted Bourdieu’s writings about the potential for personal dispositions to change.

In the mental health literature, Skovholt and his associates (i.e., with Jennings, 1999, 2004; with Rønnestad, 2001, 2003; and alone, 2001) have written extensively about the personal qualities of psychotherapists and counselors. However, I have not been able to determine how many of the participants in their studies were social workers (much less school social workers). But I found Jennings and Skovholt's (1999) comments about the personal qualities of "master therapists" very interesting. They found their major attributes represented cognitive, emotional, and relational domains. Characteristics from the emotional domain included acceptance of self, genuine humility, self-awareness, a passion for life, an appreciation for life in the moment, quiet strength, and a willingness to grow and gain competence. Jennings and Skovholt highlight the commitment of these therapists to personal and professional growth throughout their careers with the following statement:

These master therapists appear to be voracious learners who are open to experience and nondefensive when receiving feedback from clients, colleagues, and others. . . . In addition, they appear to be quite reflective and self-aware and use these attributes to continue to learn and grow personally and professionally.

These master therapists seem to possess emotional maturity and strength of character that come from years of active learning and living. (p. 9)

Sal appeared to reflect these qualities, particularly emotional maturity, in his comments about his learning experiences throughout his long career in the schools:

- I've learned a lot from my clients. One of the things I appreciate about school social work is that our families are so diverse. I feel fortunate that I work in a cluster where I've had some very needy families. They struggle and persevere--

and that is very humbling. I listen to their stories and hear about their strengths and resiliencies. We can't assume *anything* about our clients.

Sal was the participant I mentioned earlier who did not have an office at one of his schools. He did not seem concerned, however, because rather than working directly with students, he spent most of his time making home visits and ultimately helping school personnel appreciate the struggles and strengths of the students' families at that school.

In the previous chapter, I stated that I felt the participants' personal qualities greatly influenced their practice behaviors. For example, participants who exhibited a strong sense of self-efficacy appeared to emphasize pro-active behaviors in their practice. They were strong advocates for their students and families and led efforts to develop programs supporting them. They frequently engaged in macro level activities. These participants also spoke of welcoming opportunities to grow personally and professionally. Bandura (1982) asserts, "Persons who have a strong sense of efficacy deploy their attention and effort to the demands of the situation and are spurred to greater effort by obstacles" (p. 123).

By contrast, other participants appeared to conduct a more reactive practice. Although they appeared self-confident and shared many stories of success in their practice, they seemed somewhat less inclined to stretch out of their comfort zones and take on new roles and responsibilities. These participants appeared to favor micro level interventions. Bandura (1982) might describe these participants as people who "avoid activities that they believe exceed their coping capabilities, but they undertake and perform assuredly those that they judge themselves capable of managing" (p. 123). In all

fairness, several among this latter group of participants appeared to either be dealing with personal crises or were heavily involved with family responsibilities.

Karvinen-Niinikoski (2004) alludes to the personal aspect of social work practice in the following statement:

Each social worker carries some kind of theoretical model about being a social worker in the context of the wider society in his or her mind. This model, which could be called ‘the theory or self-understanding of social work,’ is developing or ‘living’ and [is] continuously reconstructed and de-constructed in and through professional and organizational practices. (p. 31)

Although one could argue that a “self-understanding of social work” is primarily related to education, training, and professional experience, I tend to believe an individual’s personal orientation to his or her world and desire to engage in a helping profession are also strong factors.

In conclusion, I felt the participants’ personal qualities greatly impacted the way they conducted their practice and the extent to which they sought new challenges and learning experiences. These qualities were uniquely individual. They appeared to fundamentally shape the participants’ learning experiences and practice and also have an impact on others in their work environment.

Summary. Analytic Category #3 addressed the impact of the participants’ learning experiences on their practice. These experiences included contextual learning, prior learning, and outside learning. Contextual learning consisted of adaptive learning and developmental learning. Adaptive learning was supported by administrative and clinical supervision, relationships with peers, conducting routine tasks, and learning from

mistakes. Developmental learning was supported by problem-solving and trial and error activities, dealing with professional dilemmas, reflecting on interactions with others, attending to personal emotions, critically examining fixed assumptions, and transforming problematic frames of reference into new ways of making sense of situations. Prior and outside learning activities that impacted the participants' practice were both personal and professional in nature. The unique personal qualities of the participants also had an impact on their learning experiences, practice, and the context in which they worked.

Summary of analytical categories. The three analytical categories roughly approximate my three research questions and also incorporate my initial findings. The first analytic category emphasizes how school social workers acquire knowledge and skills in the workplace, but does not take into account other learning experiences (i.e., prior and outside professional and personal learning). The second analytic category addresses the value school social workers attach to *all* learning experiences and is therefore consistent with the second research question. The third analytical category is consistent with the third research question, as it addresses the impact of all learning experiences on professional practice.

Two Additional Findings

During the process of interpreting and synthesizing my findings, two additional findings emerged that I believe are fairly significant:

1. Participants assigned to only one school were able to engage in more macro level interventions than those assigned to two or more schools.
2. Participants funded by more than one source were also able to implement more macro level interventions than those funded by only one source.

As noted earlier, macro level interventions are important because they benefit more students, staff, and others in the school community. They also tend to be preventative in nature. For example, Teresa worked full-time in an elementary school and was therefore able to implement a social skills program every week in every classroom throughout the entire school year. Marilyn also worked in only one school and was able to develop two programs (Peer Buddies and Lunch Bunch) in which general education students were trained to help special education students develop social skills. Other participants who worked in only one school were able to help set up mental health teams, crisis intervention teams, and risk assessment teams that served all students, not just those in special education. By contrast, the participants who were assigned to two or more schools were less likely to be involved in developing these critical structures in their schools. Using Lave and Wenger's (1991) language, they tended to remain on the periphery of their schools working primarily with individual students in counseling or therapy sessions.

A similar phenomenon occurred when the participants were funded by more than one source. A single source of funding (usually special education) limited them to serving specific populations. But, if their positions were supported by a combination of funding streams, such as special education and Medicaid, county mental health or federal grants, they were able to serve both general and special education students and were more likely to be involved in systems-oriented work benefiting both populations. This was the case with Teresa and Marilyn mentioned above. Teresa's position was funded by a combination of special education and school discretionary funds, and Marilyn's position

was supported by special education funds and a federal grant. The other participants who were dually funded were generally supported by both special education and Medicaid.

In the section in the previous chapter devoted to the impact of professional dilemmas on practice, I quoted Carol regarding the pressure she felt from her district level special education administrator. She spoke of receiving “terse memos” from the administrator that the school social workers must give priority to special education students even though they were dually funded. Carol stated she was on a “braided contract,” which is the term her district used for dually funded positions. In her district, therapy sessions with individual special education students and small groups of special education students were the only school social work services eligible for Medicaid reimbursement. Family therapy sessions were reimbursable *only* when the student was present. Classroom groups and other forms of macro level service were eligible for only a very small percentage of Medicaid reimbursement.

Dana also worked in Carol’s district on a braided contract. Special education paid ninety-two percent of her salary and Medicaid paid the remaining eight percent. Nevertheless, regular education students made up more than half of her total caseload. Dana explained, “Even though that braided piece is so small, it just opens the door for me to work with those [regular education] kids.” She added, “And I love it--I love the general ed piece! I love it, and I think it would be such a bummer if it goes away.” She also stated:

- If a child needs social work, they need social work! . . . I’ll take them on until I can’t take them on anymore. I mean, if a kid needs help, that’s what’s going to

happen. It doesn't matter if I have sixty kids, because here's one more kid in crisis that needs some help!

So, Dana also ignored those "terse memos" from her district special education administrator. Of course, she couldn't bill Medicaid for her work with regular education students, but she made it very clear that she felt ethical school social work practice involved responding to the needs of her school rather than folding to pressure from district administrators. Dana's caseload of sixty students was very large compared to the other participants' caseloads, but she was able to manage that number because she enjoyed facilitating therapeutic games with large groups of students (ten to twelve students per group). She also often conducted classroom groups, which Kelly and Stone (2009) classify as macro level practice.

Kelly and Stone (2009) observe that special education and Medicaid policies "appear to privilege individual or small group treatment" (p. 166), and I found this to be true in my study. However--and this is the critical point: *When the money generated by Medicaid reimbursement was used to fund portions of the participants' salaries, this enabled them to implement more macro level interventions than would otherwise be possible.*

This was the case with Carol and Dana, who were on braided contracts. I learned that clusters of schools in their district were awarded annual grants comprised of money generated by Medicaid. Every year the principals and mental health practitioners in each cluster decided how to use the grant money. Very often they elected to fund a portion of the social workers' salaries in their clusters. This enabled the social workers to add general education students to their caseloads, which had previously been limited to

special education students. It also enabled them to conduct macro level interventions that had previously not been possible.

Forty-eight percent of the combined 25 participants from this study and my pilot study were dually funded and therefore involved in varying degrees of macro level service. Fifty-two percent of the total 25 participants covered only one school, and they were also more involved in macro level practice than those who carried two or more schools. I believe these two findings help answer the question that is invariably raised by school social work researchers: What prevents school social workers from expanding their practice to macro levels of intervention?

Frey and Dupper (2005) do address this question in their presentation of a “clinical quadrant” of school social work practice. The first quadrant includes interventions involving individuals, small groups, or families that target environmental change. The second quadrant includes interventions directed toward large groups or entire systems that also target environmental or systemic change. The third quadrant includes interventions directed toward individuals, small groups, or families that target student change. And, the fourth quadrant includes interventions involving large groups or entire systems that also target student change.

Frey and Dupper (2005) note that their description of third quadrant activities characterizes most school social work practice—that is, micro level practice. Others confirm this is generally true across the country (Clancy, 1995; Dupper & Evans, 1996; Franklin, 2002; Franklin & Kelly, 2009; Kelly, 2008; Shaffer, 2006; Wilson, 2007). In their article, Frey and Dupper identify barriers to macro level practice: 1) personal preference, particularly of social workers who previously worked in mental health

agencies or in private practice, 2) special education policies and procedures privileging micro level practice, 3) the school social work tradition of responding to students' immediate, sometimes crisis, mental health needs, and 4) the recent trend for school districts to seek Medicaid reimbursement for mental health services, which also privileges micro level practice.

Frey and Dupper (2005) point out that the way states interpret federal Medicaid guidelines for mental health services in schools varies considerably. However, they believe state and federal mandates regarding these services are gradually shifting in the direction of supporting more empirically grounded macro level practice. Frey and Dupper's article was one of only a handful I found in the school social work literature that specifically addresses the link between funding and the micro/macro level continuum.

I did not find anything in the literature regarding my other finding that school social workers assigned to only one school were also able to engage in more macro level practice. Nor do I recall having read anything prior to beginning this study that addresses this issue. Perhaps this is because it has only been in recent years that the social work profession in general, and school social work in particular, have begun emphasizing the need for practitioners to implement evidence-based or evidence-informed strategies. These strategies are predominately macro level strategies. They emphasize prevention and early intervention rather than time intensive micro level work (Kelly, Raines, Stone, & Frey, 2010).

In summary, I regard these two additional findings to be an important outcome of this study. I would like to believe they build on recent studies on school social work

practice (Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kelly, 2008; Kelly & Stone 2009), because they identify factors that have not yet been considered to be determinants of practice strategies. Specifically, these additional findings reveal that the number of schools social workers serve and the manner in which their positions are funded influence the way they practice. Because these two findings are related to the context of practice, they would most appropriately be incorporated into my first analytical category (the significance of context of work in relation to professional development and practice).

Altogether, the findings related to the three analytical categories provided the building blocks for creating a theoretical model. This model bears similarities to other theoretical constructs in the adult learning literature (e.g., Billett & Somerville, 2004; Fuller & Unwin, 2004a; Hodkinson et al., 2004; Illeris, 2004). However, this model is specific to school social work and is grounded in the professional growth experiences of the school social work participants in my study.

PART 2

A Theoretical Model for the Professional Development of School Social Workers

A simple explanation of the model is that it contains three basic components: 1) context of practice, 2) contextual learning, and 3) practice behaviors. In addition, each component has the same three attributes: 1) prior learning, 2) outside learning, and 3) personal qualities. The model is illustrated in Figure 1.

I feel this model represents the two phases in heuristic inquiry in which “a *composite depiction* of the experience is constructed” and a “creative synthesis” is conducted (Moustakas, 1990, p. 170). The “experience” in this study involved the sources of learning the participants drew upon as they carried out their practice in the schools.

I will briefly outline the model's components and attributes in the following section. The remainder of the chapter will be devoted to a discussion of how the components and attributes interrelate as reflected in the participants' accounts of their experiences in the schools.

Components of the model. *Context of practice* represents the site or sites where school social workers conduct their practice. This might be a single school or multiple schools, an administrative office, a psycho-educational day-treatment program, or another specialized program serving a specific population of students.

Contextual learning represents what school social workers learn as they practice at their site(s). This could be of a formal nature (e.g., in-services, clinical supervision, consultation with experts, etc.), informal nature (e.g., interactions with clients, colleagues, and community providers, etc.) or incidental nature (e.g., learning from mistakes, trial and error efforts, reflective moments, etc.).

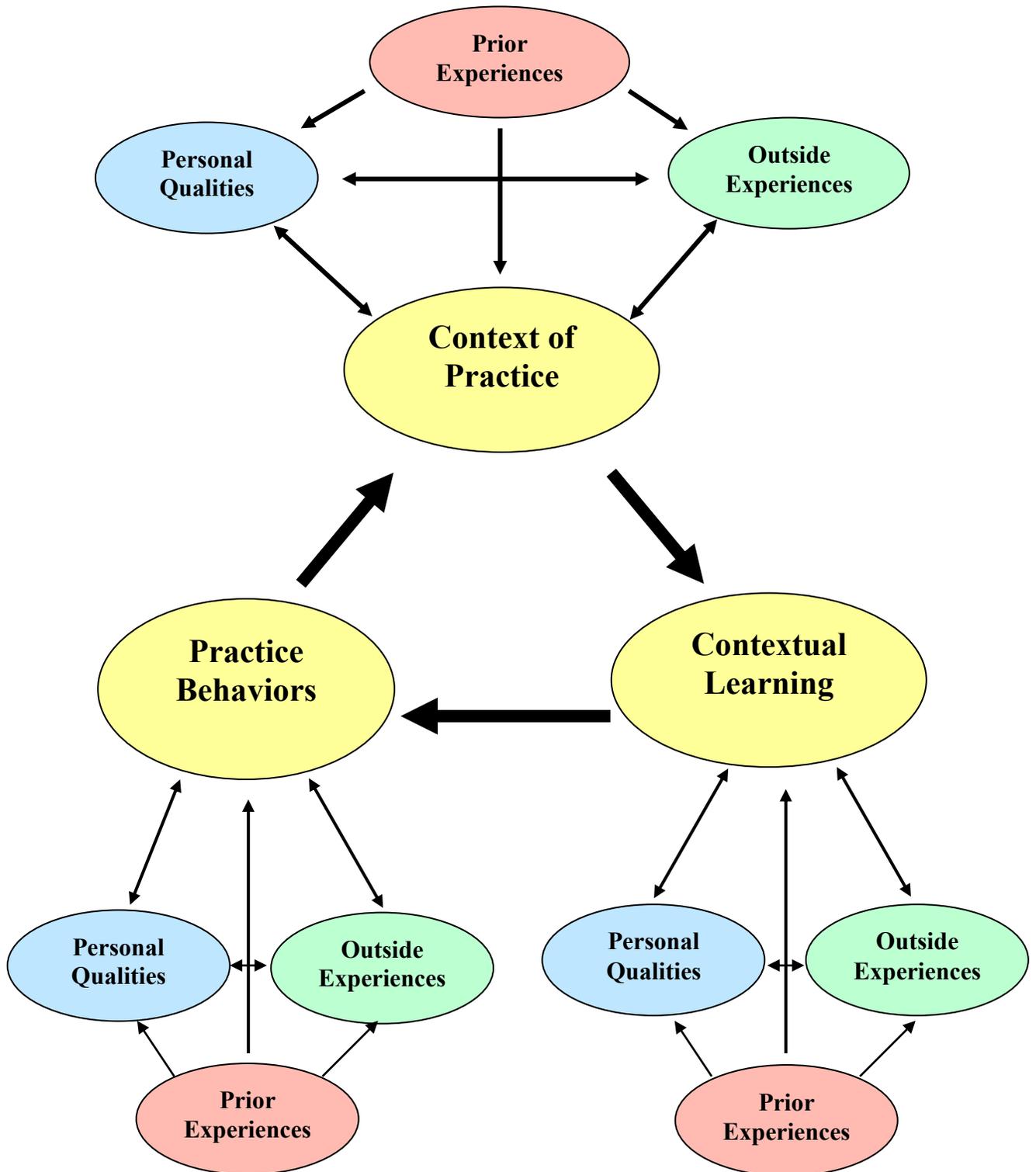


Figure 1. Professional Development of School Social Workers

Practice behaviors refer to the assessments, intervention strategies, and other activities school social workers engage in as they carry out their practice. Many of these behaviors are typically called “responsibilities” on school social workers’ job descriptions.

Attributes of the model. *Prior learning* experiences include personal and professional experiences social workers have accumulated prior to working in the schools. Prior learning experiences influence all three components of the model, as well as the other two attributes, but do not mutually interact with any of them.

Outside learning experiences include professional activities such as conferences, workshops, volunteer work, and leadership roles in professional organizations, as well as personal learning experiences such as family and social relationships, hobbies, travel, and other personal interests that contribute to the practice of school social work. Outside learning experiences are mutually interactive with each component of the model, as well as with the attribute of personal qualities.

Personal qualities include the uniquely individual personal attributes of school social workers. These include learning styles, motivation to learn, assertiveness, enthusiasm, trustworthiness, and sense of self-efficacy, etc. Personal qualities are also mutually interactive with each component of the model, as well as with the attribute of outside experiences.

The iterative nature of the model. The continual cycling of the components and attributes in the model is an iterative process. Context of practice determines what school social workers learn, which in turn determines how they practice. How they practice subsequently influences the context in which they practice, which provides them with

additional learning that in turn influences their practice behaviors. The end result of this continuing recursive process is professional growth.

Lynne alluded to her own professional growth process in the following comment:

- I feel the longer I'm at it, the more I learn. I won't say it becomes easier, because it doesn't. But all that experience behind you is really beneficial when you can say, "Oh, I've seen this kid before." Not this *same* kid, of course, but one very similar.

Lynne's comment reminded me of the literature on professional expertise.

Research in this area indicates that the ability to recognize patterns in behavior and other phenomena is characteristic of individuals considered to be experts in their field (Benner, 1984; Daley, 1998; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Fook et al., 1997; Mott, 2000; Pillay & McCrindle, 2005; Skovholt & Jennings, 2004).

Schank and Abelson (1995) suggest that "scripts" from past learning experiences inform responses to current and future events:

[Scripts] serve to tell us how to act without our being aware that we are using them. They serve to store knowledge that we have about certain situations. They serve as a kind of storehouse of old experiences of a certain type in terms of which new experiences of the same type are encoded. (para. 27)

It would seem that Lynne's statement, "I've seen this kid before," is one such script.

Interrelationships between the components and attributes of the model. The attributes of personal qualities, prior learning, and outside learning influence all three components of the model, i.e., the context of practice, contextual learning, and practice behaviors. I found five models proposed by others that bear similarities to my model in

many ways. Most of the authors of these models also address the interrelationships among the different aspects of their models.

For example, in her research on the development of professional identity, Nystrom (2009) looked at the relationships between the professional, private, and personal aspects of life. She refers to these aspects of life as “spheres.” The professional sphere is, of course, related to work. The private sphere includes family, friendships, and leisure activities, and the personal sphere represents the internal self. These spheres roughly correspond to the descriptors I use in my model. For example, context of practice, contextual learning, and prior and outside professional experiences comprise the professional sphere; prior and outside personal experiences fall into the private sphere; and personal qualities represent the personal sphere. Also, Nystrom’s focus on the development of professional identity is similar to the professional growth and development that results from the recursive nature of my model.

Hodkinson et al. (2004) discuss four overlapping dimensions of workplace learning: 1) the prior knowledge, understanding, and skills people bring to the workplace; 2) their motivation to learn; 3) their disposition to contribute to the reconstruction of the workplace; and 4) the personal and professional development that occurs by virtue of belonging to a work community. I feel my model addresses these dimensions. For example, the model’s attributes of prior learning and personal qualities are represented in their first three dimensions. And, the recursive nature of my model reflects their fourth dimension in which individuals learn, grow, and impact workplace culture.

Billett and Somerville (2004) discuss the relationships between workplace practices, individuals’ agentic actions (i.e., intentional and energetic actions stemming

from workplace learning), and transformation of workplace practices. Their description of workplace practices seems similar to my concept of context of practice, while their discussion about agentic actions appears to join together my two components of contextual learning and practice behaviors. Furthermore, their discussion of the impact of individuals' agentic actions on the transformation of workplace practices appears similar to my notion that contextual learning results in new practice behaviors that in turn impact the context of practice.

There are also some similarities in my model and one proposed by Illeris (2004). The components of his model include the employees' learning processes, the learning environment, and working practice. Each of his components also has attributes. But unlike my model in which the attributes for each component are the same (prior and outside learning and personal qualities), the attributes Illeris describes for each of his components are different.

Finally, Kelly and Stone (2009) recently published the results of a secondary analysis of data obtained from a survey of Illinois school social workers. They were interested in identifying factors that determined the intervention strategies their respondents used. Specifically, they looked at the characteristics of these practitioners, the characteristics of their work settings, and the larger socio-cultural setting in which their practice was embedded.

Kelly and Stone's (2009) definition of practitioner characteristics was limited to age, gender, ethnicity or race, and years of experience. Their definition of work setting characteristics included caseload size, the reasons students were referred, practice setting dynamics and demographics (i.e., extent of collaboration with teachers, general support

from staff and administrators, support to implement evidence-based interventions, and organizational features such as grade levels, school and district size, socio-economic status of students, school climate, and school norms). In the Kelly and Stone analysis, socio-cultural context refers to the “larger legislative, institutional, and community forces that shape practice strategies” (p. 165).

I found the Kelly and Stone (2009) report very interesting because they were looking at factors that shape school social workers’ practice decisions, just as I was examining factors that contributed to my participants’ practice behaviors. However, unlike my study, they did not address their participants’ learning processes. They were primarily interested in determining why their respondents favored individual and small group interventions rather than implementing more systemic strategies. They referred to these systemic strategies as “small systems practice.” They specifically named classroom groups, family therapy, and joint sessions with students and teachers as systemic strategies.

In their study, Kelly and Stone (2009) concluded, “Given the relatively few workers frequently engaging in forms of intervention other than individual and group counseling, factors that shape the use of systemic practice remain poorly understood” (p. 172). Interestingly, they found that the characteristics of the work setting were more significant in shaping practice interventions than either practitioner characteristics or the larger socio-cultural setting.

Thus, Kelly and Stone’s (2009) findings support my finding that the context of practice heavily influenced my participants’ practice behaviors. In addition, I found that the context of practice very much influenced my participants learning experiences. I think

Kelly and Stone's finding that practitioner characteristics had little significance in relation to selection of practice strategies was because their definition of practitioner characteristics was so limited (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity or race, and years of experience). By contrast, I conceptualized the personal characteristics of my participants in much broader terms. I used the term "personal qualities" because I felt it captured aspects of the participants' personalities, or the "personal style" that was unique to each participant.

By conceptualizing personal qualities in this manner, I found these qualities very much affected the way my participants practiced. For example, some of them appeared very comfortable implementing macro level interventions, such as conducting classroom groups and participating in program development and policy-making activities. These participants appeared to possess a strong sense of self-efficacy, a pro-active nature, and a passionate desire to stretch themselves and tackle new challenges. As Tiana said, "I *crave* change and I *love* to learn new things!" Other participants seemed to adopt a more reactive stance. They carried out their responsibilities in a highly competent manner, but confined their practice primarily to micro level interventions.

Regarding the influence of the larger socio-cultural setting on school social workers' selection of practice strategies, Kelly and Stone (2009) point out that prior research (Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kelly, 2008) suggests that special education mandates and Medicaid reimbursement policies privilege individual counseling and small group interventions. In the analysis of their data, they found these mandates and policies might be a factor, but they acknowledge their measure of "time spent doing IEP-related work"

(p. 167). . . . “was a weak proxy of special education service provision” (p. 173). They conclude by stating that more research is needed in this area.

Application of the model. I believe the next two examples illustrate the interactions between the attributes and components of the model as well as its iterative nature. I think these examples also represent the *exemplary portraits* that Moustakas (2002) proposes when using a heuristic inquiry approach. He defines these portraits as “profiles that are unique yet still embrace and characterize the group as a whole” (p. 270).

Example #1: Joan shared what it was like for her to take a position in a private alternative school:

- The place was foreign to me in the beginning because it was so anti-mental health. They were very confrontive with students as opposed to trying to de-escalate them or prevent them from escalating. In the beginning, I felt they antagonized students and then ended up doing restraints. After watching this for two months, I said I wouldn't be able to stay if the number of restraints continued, especially on the teenagers. They ended up appreciating my input on issues like this, especially because the liability climate was changing in education and special education.

I feel this example represents the three components of my model (context of practice, contextual learning, and practice behaviors), as well as the three attributes (prior experience, outside experience, and personal qualities) associated with each component. Joan's context of practice was a private alternative school; her contextual learning was based on her observations of the way staff handled students; and, the practice behavior that resulted from this learning experience took the form of telling staff she could no

longer work at the school if they continued to restrain students. As for the attributes associated with each component, Joan had previously worked in a school located in a mental health facility in which interventions other than restraints were used. This represented prior learning. Joan was also an officer of her state school social work association, so she was exposed to learning about other social workers' experiences dealing with students with behavioral issues. This represented outside learning. And, I feel her ability to take a pro-active stance regarding abolishing student restraints reflected a personal quality that other people might not possess.

Example #2: Tiana spoke of her work in a high school with a group of gang-involved youth:

- If I don't change certain systems when I'm working with gang-involved youth, then it isn't going to make a bit of difference. If I can't help them resolve a larger gang problem from a systems perspective, then I can't really help some of my kids. That's where my mediation and experiential education background comes in --and all the other things I'm able to put together. If I'm working with kids individually and they have this huge gang conflict in which they might *die*, then I really can't get much done. You have to help the kids deal with the larger issues. Maybe you do a big mediation or work with their families. And maybe you have to change how the school system reacts; how the juvenile justice system reacts; and how to build rapport with the police officers involved with them. It involves building bridges at the macro level. You realize that if you don't change those larger systems, you really can't have an impact on an individual system. So, when

I'm working with the kids and the community, the school, and their families, then change in an individual becomes meaningful. It can be something that's lasting.

In Tiana's situation, her context of practice was a large urban high school in which there was a sizeable population of gang-involved students. Her contextual learning occurred when she realized she needed to work at both micro and macro levels in order to be effective. The practice behaviors that resulted from this realization consisted of her conducting a big mediation with the students and working with their families, the police, and the juvenile justice system. As for the attributes of the model, Tiana's internship in the schools setting up peer mediation programs served as a prior learning experience; her volunteer work with a community mediation center represented outside learning; and her proactive behavior on behalf of her students reflected a personal quality she possessed.

These accounts of Joan's and Tiana's work are uniquely different, but the processes they engaged in characterized the work of *all* the participants in the study. I think both accounts are examples of what Moustakas calls "exemplary portraits." They are both "profiles that are unique yet still embrace and characterize the group as a whole" (p. 270).

Three-dimensional models. If this were a three-dimensional model, the continual cycling would build upon itself and move upward to represent professional growth. As my participants matured professionally, many adopted macro level practice behaviors. When they did, their knowledge base and repertoire of skills increased considerably.

There does not appear to be consensus in the school social work literature about what exactly constitutes macro level service. In general, it appears to be any form of service over and above individual counseling or therapy sessions with students and small

student groups. As mentioned before, some authors insert a meso level of practice between micro and macro level practice.

In my three-dimensional models, I conceptualize macro level service as *all* forms of professional activity with the exception of individual counseling or therapy and small student groups. It therefore includes supervising social work interns and school social work practitioners, setting up and facilitating student support teams, developing partnerships with community agencies, conducting family therapy sessions, serving in administrative positions, presenting workshops and trainings, writing for publication, serving on community and state level advisory boards and in elected or voluntary positions in social work organizations, and teaching school social work courses in graduate school social work programs, etc.

A three-dimensional image of the growth experienced by the participants who gradually engaged in more and more macro level practice resembles an inverted megaphone. The small opening at the bottom of an inverted megaphone represents micro level practice, whereas the much larger circular opening at the top of the diagram represents an expansion of interests resulting in a greater degree of macro level practice (see *C* in Figure 2). The majority of participants followed this trajectory, gradually expanding their bank of knowledge and repertoire of skills.

A in Figure 2 represents the career trajectory of participants who worked primarily at the micro level of practice throughout most of their careers. There was certainly professional growth in these participants, but the expansion of roles and responsibilities related to professional practice was relatively limited. These participants occasionally ventured into macro level practice, but they indicated they actually preferred working

with individual students and small student groups. For example, Elaine works primarily at the micro level, and that is her preference. She left a long career in public health administration because she “wanted to help people more directly.” As a result, she works

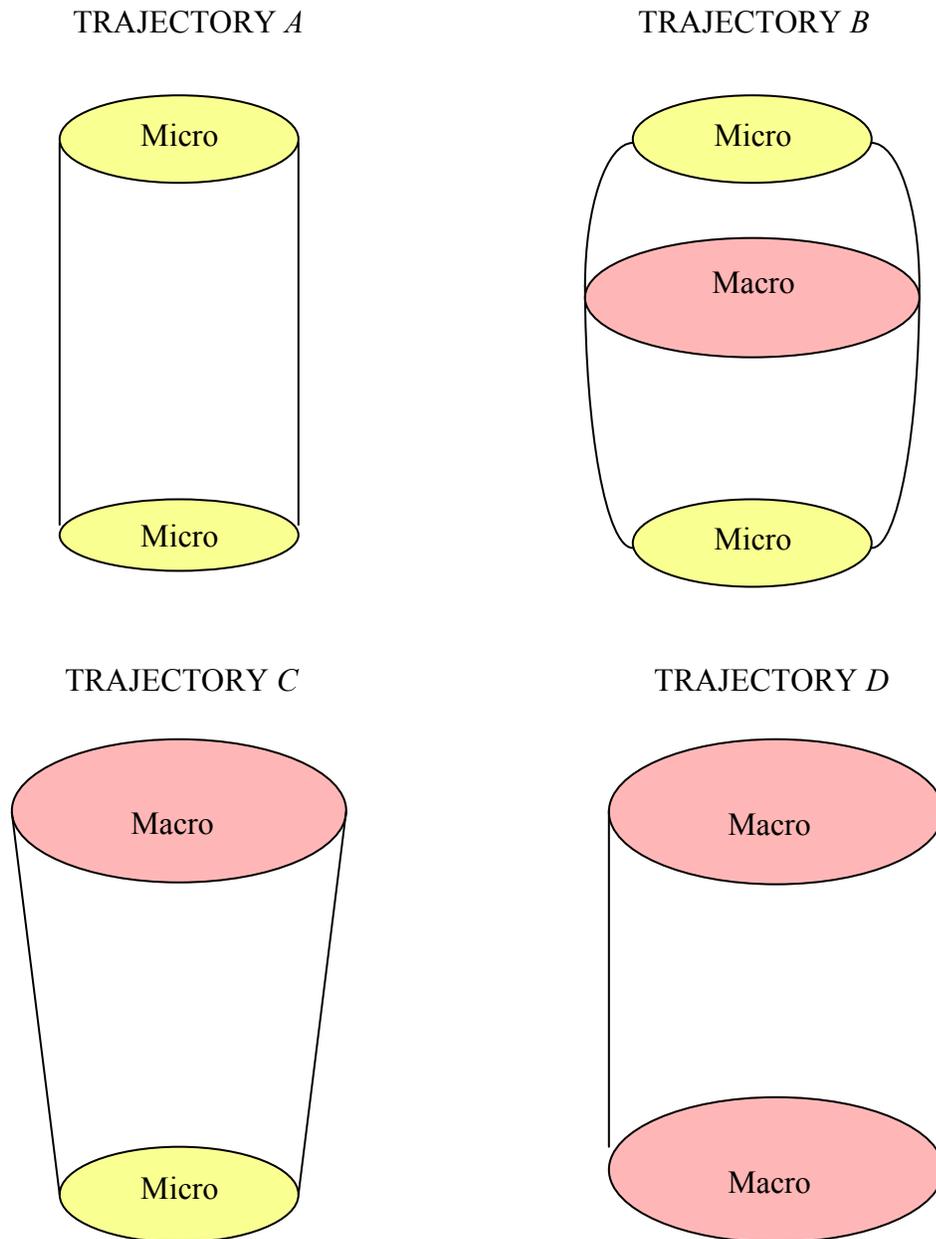


Figure 2: Learning Trajectories of Research Participants

extensively with students. She maintains contact with her students' families, but does not engage them in counseling or therapy. Her contacts with community agencies are also limited. Elaine said she conducts as many as fifteen student groups a week even though she works only three days! She recently accepted an assignment requiring her to conduct two classroom groups every week, but that has been her only experience with macro level school social work practice.

Trajectory *B* in Figure 2 represents the participants who at one time expanded their professional interests and worked at the macro level, but for various reasons chose to emphasize micro level practice in the later stages of their careers. Luisa illustrated this trajectory very nicely in her email:

- I have had lots of training, taken on leadership roles with other social workers and at my schools, and have had extensive interaction with community providers.

However, as I move along in my career I have noticed that I have wanted to enjoy the relationships I build with my students more. In some respects, I have moved to a smaller world than was the case when I was a younger social worker, even though I believe working with the wider system benefits more than one client at a time. The professional role I have taken in recent years, however, has led to greater clarity about my strengths and limitations.

A fourth trajectory (*D* in Figure 2) begins at the macro level of practice and remains at that level. Joan remarked she had never heard of clinical social work until she attended graduate school. She had always thought social workers were community organizers, since that's what her grandmother became after obtaining her social work degree.

In summary, I observed four different patterns in the participants' professional growth experiences over the course of their careers: *A*) a pattern of working almost exclusively at the micro level of practice, *B*) an expansion from micro to macro level practice followed by a return to working primarily at the micro level, *C*) a gradual movement from micro to macro level practice, and *D*) a pattern of working fairly consistently at the macro level of practice. Of the combined 25 participants (5 from the pilot study and 20 from this study), the career trajectories of six participants exhibited the first pattern (*A*), two followed the second pattern (*B*), thirteen exhibited the third pattern (*C*), and four followed the fourth pattern (*D*).

Summary of theoretical model. In summary, a theoretical model emerged from my research findings. This model is specific to school social work learning and practice. It features the components of context of practice, contextual learning, and practice behaviors, all of which have attributes of prior and outside learning and personal qualities. The model is recursive in nature and over a period of time represents the professional development of school social workers.

The participants in this study exhibited four different professional development trajectories that are framed by the concepts of micro and macro forms of practice. The emphasis in trajectory *A* is developing skills related to micro level practice. Trajectory *B* begins with micro level practice, moves into some degree of macro level practice, but ultimately returns to practice primarily at the micro level. Trajectory *C* begins with micro level practice, but steadily moves in the direction of macro level practice. This trajectory involves many diverse learning experiences resulting in an on-going expansion of

professional competencies. Trajectory *D* begins with macro level practice and remains at that level.

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, the two parts of this chapter present an interpretation and synthesis of my findings from this study. This chapter is an extension of the previous chapter in which I simply reported the findings that emerged from my analysis of the data.

I organized this chapter around three analytical categories that incorporated my findings: 1) the significance of the context of practice, 2) the level of value attached to various learning experiences, and 3) the impact of learning on professional practice. During the process of interpreting my findings, two additional findings emerged. These additional findings identified factors that enabled the participants to conduct more macro level interventions than would otherwise have been possible: 1) practitioners assigned to only one site, and 2) positions funded by more than one source.

The first part of this chapter highlighted literature supporting my findings. The second part presented a theoretical model that incorporated my findings regarding the professional development of school social workers. This model is supported by adult learning research highlighting the interrelationships among context of work, workplace learning, personal life histories, learning dispositions, membership in multiple communities of practice, and impact of transformed practice behaviors on workplace culture (Billett and Somerville, 2004; Fuller and Unwin, 2003; Hodkinson et al., 2004; Illeris, 2004; Nystrom, 2009; Wenger, 1998). I also presented the accounts of two participants that illustrate the application of the model. Lastly, I identified four different career trajectories the participants followed. These trajectories were framed by the

concepts of micro and macro level school social work practice (Allen-Meares, 2007; Chavkin, 1993; Clancy, 1995; Dupper & Evans, 1996; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kelly, 2008; Kelly et al., 2010).

Chapter VI: Conclusions, Recommendations, and Commentary on Research Topic

Chapter Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify sources of learning for school social work practitioners that enhance professional growth and development. My conclusions from this research are based on findings related to my three research questions.

To review, my research questions are:

RQ#1: How do school social workers acquire knowledge and skills that inform their practice over time?

RQ#2: What professional and personal growth experiences do school social workers value most?

RQ#3: How do professional and personal growth experiences impact the practice of school social workers?

This was a qualitative study framed by the methodological tradition of heuristic inquiry. Twenty school social workers participated in semi-structured interviews averaging two hours in length. I maintained follow-up contacts with the participants by phone and email. I was glad I had built the follow-up contacts into the study because they enabled me to pursue issues that emerged as the interviews progressed.

My major findings were:

1. Each participant's practice was totally unique.
2. The context of practice (work environment) was also unique for each participant and largely determined what he or she learned and subsequently needed to learn.

3. The participants' learning experiences within the context of their practice influenced the way they practiced (i.e., practice behaviors).
4. Prior and outside learning experiences and the participants' personal qualities also influenced their contextual learning experiences and practice behaviors.
5. The participants placed high value on prior, outside, and workplace learning experiences that occurred over an extended period of time.
6. Learning that occurred over an extended period of time generally had greater impact on the participants' practice than learning activities that were time-limited.
7. Participants assigned to only one school were able to engage in more macro level interventions than those assigned to two or more schools.
8. Participants funded by more than one source were also able to implement more macro level interventions than those funded by only one source.

I believe these findings speak for themselves, but I will briefly present my conclusions regarding these findings in the first section of this chapter. I will then offer recommendations based on the findings and conclusions of this study. I will conclude the chapter with a commentary on my research topic.

Conclusions

My conclusions fall into two categories. The first relates to the rationale for conducting this study; the second addresses the micro/macro continuum of school social work practice.

Rationale for conducting this study. In the first chapter of this document, I expressed concern about the cost of continuing professional education (CPE) and

professional development (PD) activities. Cost involves time and money. My concern was whether the investment school districts and practitioners make in CPE and PD activities is time and money well spent. The analysis of my data leads me to conclude the answer is mixed: sometimes yes, and sometimes no. Let me explain.

Regarding *formal* CPE and PD activities, the participants indicated they highly valued clinical supervision and sessions with consultants, and they also felt these activities greatly impacted their practice. These activities required a substantial investment of time because they generally extended over an entire school year. These activities also represented an expense for the participants' school districts. The consultants had financial contracts with school districts, and the clinical supervisors were provided with "extended contracts" if they also carried a full caseload. Extended contracts essentially amounted to overtime pay for providing clinical supervision to practitioners at a lower level of licensure. Sessions with clinical supervisors did not offer continuing education units (CEUs), but they provided supervisory hours that were needed to advance to a higher level of licensure (i.e., from LMSW to LISW or LCSW licensure). In some instances, the sessions with the consultants offered CEUs that met license renewal requirements.

By contrast, the participants had mixed reactions to other kinds of formal learning activities. Many felt their annual social work conferences were "a waste of time" other than to network with colleagues. Yet, a handful of participants reported obtaining "bits and pieces" of useful information or being able to purchase books and materials they eventually incorporated into their practice. In addition, several participants noted that

some of the two- or three-day experiential workshops they had attended provided them with useful information and the opportunity to develop new skills.

On the other hand, *informal* and *incidental* job-embedded learning activities did not raise issues of cost, but the participants indicated that these activities were very rich sources of learning. These activities included participating in multidisciplinary team meetings, co-facilitating student groups with others, dealing with dilemmas, learning from mistakes, and interacting with students, families, and community providers, to name but a few. I was impressed that the participants recognized their workplace activities were as great if not greater learning opportunities than many formal learning activities. By contrast, there are accounts in the adult learning research literature where workers had difficulty considering that workplace activities could also be learning opportunities. The workers in those studies associated “learning” with formal educational institutions and did not consider that mastering tasks in the workplace was a learning process (Anzai & Simon, 1979; Pillay, Boulton-Lewis, Wilss, & Rhodes, 2003; Schank, 1996).

In summary, this study revealed that multiple sources of learning inform the practice of school social workers. Costly CPE activities providing CEUs were not necessarily favored by the participants in this study. Yet, other formal activities, especially clinical supervision and consultation with experts, and informal on-the-job activities generated considerable learning that impacted the participants’ practice. As discussed extensively in earlier chapters, prior and outside learning activities also played an important role in shaping the participants’ practice.

The micro-macro continuum of practice. Kelly (2008) observes, “The field of school social work has struggled for years to adequately define its professional identity

and capture the complexity of the many different roles school social workers play in their schools” (p. 4). Other scholars in the profession concur (Allen-Meaures, 1993; Franklin, 2000a, 2000b; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Frey et al., 2008; Ganesin, 2007; Shaffer, 2006; Wilson, 2007).

I believe the findings from this study help explain why the struggle to define our profession exists. The uniqueness of each individual participant, the uniqueness of each participant’s context of practice and the learning that took place in that context, along with the uniqueness of each participant’s prior and outside learning experiences and personal qualities altogether contributed to the development of professional practice that differed greatly from one participant to the next. Based on my research findings, it would not surprise me if the struggle to adequately define school social work practice never gets resolved.

I think much of the struggle is related to where practitioners fall on the micro to macro level continuum of practice. In his study of the practice of school social workers in Illinois, Kelly (2008) found that the majority of practitioners worked primarily at the micro end of the continuum. Other school social work scholars note this is typical of practice across the country (Clancy, 1995; Dupper & Evans, 1996; Franklin & Kelly, 2009; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Shaffer, 2006; Wilson, 2007).

In summary, I repeatedly heard my participants struggle with finding their spot on the micro/macro continuum of school social work practice. Many of these struggles were captured in the previous chapter in the section devoted to professional dilemmas, such as responding systemically to the needs of schools, as opposed to prioritizing special education directives to work with individual students or small groups of students. Thus,

the predominant thread in the recommendations that follow is related to this micro/macro continuum and the dilemmas associated with it.

Recommendations

Based on my findings and conclusions, I would like to propose recommendations for (a) school social work practitioners, (b) educational administrators, (c) school social work educators, and (d) further research.

Recommendations for school social work practitioners. Given the finding that social workers assigned to only one school and funded by more than one source were able to conduct more systemic interventions and reach more students, school social work practitioners should:

1. Advocate for single school assignments by emphasizing to educational administrators the benefits for students of implementing macro level preventative interventions.
2. Participate regularly on school restructuring committees, and mental health, student support, risk assessment, and crisis intervention teams in order to support both general and special education students.
3. Advocate for and engage in training to obtain the skills required to implement macro level systems-oriented interventions.
4. Acquire grant-writing skills in order to increase sources of funding for school social work positions.

Recommendations for educational administrators. In order to maximize school social work services, educational administrators should:

1. Work to increase the number of funding sources for school social work positions so more students might be served through multi-level systems-oriented interventions.
2. Identify issues such as student safety and parent involvement that can be addressed by school social workers using systems-oriented approaches.
3. Support the provision of training for systems-oriented interventions that school social workers can implement.
4. Work with state Medicaid officials to adopt flexible funding policies that do not privilege micro level service provision.

Recommendations for school social work educators. In order for school social workers to engage in systems level practice, school social work educators need to:

1. Provide pre-service instruction regarding macro level school social work practice.
2. Recruit students who express interest in acquiring both micro and macro level skills.
3. Offer multi-disciplinary coursework that includes social work, educational, and educational administrative students.
4. Offer post-graduate programs emphasizing macro level work. A few such programs have recently been created and could serve as models for additional programs.

Recommendations for further research. Further research needs to be conducted in order to learn more about sources of learning that best support and maximize the practice of school social workers. Such research should:

1. Be conducted in different parts of the country in order to address the limitations of this study and correct for researcher and participant bias.
2. Include a more diverse group of practitioners, rather than focusing primarily on highly experienced school social workers.
3. Use methodological traditions other than heuristic inquiry.
4. Use a variety of data gathering methods, such as focus groups and large-scale surveys that rely less heavily on the retrospective accounts of participants.
5. Focus upon the relationship between the funding of social work positions and the nature of school social work practice.
6. Focus upon the relationship between the number of schools school social workers serve and the nature of their practice.
7. Identify additional factors that support or hinder macro level school social work practice, thus building upon the work of Frey and Dupper (2005), Kelly (2008), Kelly and Stone (2009), and this research study.
8. Explore the learning experiences of social workers in other specializations and compare them with those of school social workers.

In summary, my recommendations are directed to (a) social work practitioners, (b) educational administrators, (c) school social work educators, and (d) further research. Since this was an exploratory study, the possibilities for future research are immense.

Commentary on Research Topic

I have attempted in this study to link adult learning theory with the professional development of school social workers. My interest in doing so stems from my experience managing the professional development activities of more than 100 master's level social

workers in a large urban school district. In this final section, I will reference the scant amount of literature that links adult learning theory with the professional development of school social workers.

First of all, I was interested to learn that Eduard Lindeman either identified himself or was regarded by others as a social worker. I became curious about him after seeing so many references to his work in the adult education literature. Long (1989) notes that Lindeman's book, *The Meaning of Adult Education*, first published in 1926 and re-published in 1961 and 1989, "is one of the more enduring publications released during the formative years of adult education in the United States" (p. xiii). Although it appears Lindeman did not have a formal degree in social work, he worked in the field for many years and eventually became a professor of social philosophy at the New York School of Social Work. According to Long, about one quarter of Lindeman's writings addressed adult education; the rest covered social work, social philosophy, religion, social ethics, and politics.

Secondly, Lewin's (1951/1997) writings about field theory are strikingly similar to discussions in school social work literature highlighting the relationship of people with their environments (Allen-Meares et al., 1996; Caple & Salcido, 2009; Constable, 2009; Dupper, 2003; Karls & Wandrei, 1992; Monkman, 2009; Openshaw, 2008). A common expression in social work is "person-in-environment" (Kemp et al., 1997). Virtually every social work publication I have ever read addresses the concept, although other terms are sometimes used. A few examples include "the client and others in the ecosystem" (Caple & Salcido, 2009, p. 350), "individuals as they interact with their physical and social environments" (Raines & Van Acker, 2009, p. 431), "holistic practice

perspective” (Mather & Hull, 2002, p. 477), “person-environment fit” and “ecological framework” (Garrett, 2007, p. 42), and “an ecological-developmental framework” (Openshaw, 2008, p. 29). As with Lindeman (1989), Lewin’s writings are often referenced in the adult education literature as fundamental to the development of adult learning theory.

Thirdly, in the previous chapter I wrote about how Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the “zone of proximal development” underscored much of the learning the participants in my study valued. They particularly valued working “in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86), such as consultants, clinical and administrative supervisors, and mentors who guided and supported them.

I also found a few adult education researchers who included social workers in their studies. Most of these studies compared social workers with other professional groups. For example, Kolb (1981) looked at the experiential learning experiences of social workers and engineers; Schön (1983) compared the reflective processes of architects, psychotherapists (including social workers), engineers, town planners, and managers; Moon (1999) looked at how teachers, nurses, and social workers use reflection in their practice; and Daley (2001a, 2001b) compared the learning processes of social workers, nurses, lawyers, and adult educators. Several others writing about their adult education research mentioned social workers here and there, but really did not provide anything that was substantive.

Turning now to the social work profession, much has been written in recent years by social work educators and researchers about reflective learning and practice (e.g., Beddoe, 2004; Fook, 2002; Gould & Baldwin, 2004; Ixer, 1999; Jones, 2009; Morrison,

1996; Napier & Fook, 2000; Patni, 2008; Redmond, 2004; Ruch, 2002; Yelloly & Henkel, 1995). Supervision is deeply embedded in the social work profession and is regarded as the optimal forum for critically reflecting on practice (Baldwin, 2004; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004; Pare & Le Maistre, 2006). I reported in previous chapters that the participants who were able to access clinical supervision regarded it as one of their most important sources of learning.

However, much less is written about the importance of incorporating adult learning principles into professional development activities, and most of this literature is directed to social work educators and internship supervisors (Cartney, 2000; Coulshed, 1993; Gould & Baldwin, 2004; Jones, 2009; Northen & Kurland, 2001). For example, Cartney specifically urges supervisors of social work interns to be cognizant of their students' preferred learning styles. And, Jones urges social work educators to incorporate transformative learning theory into their approach to teaching. He argues, "Despite clear congruence between many of the features of transformative learning theory and the nature and aims of social work education, this theoretical perspective has yet to be incorporated into thinking around critical approaches to the education of future social work practitioners" (p. 8).

I did find an article describing a research study in Great Britain that identified "processes which supported or obstructed organizational learning" in a social service agency (Gould, 2000, p. 587). Gould found that the research participants regarded teamwork as an important source of learning. Team activities included "presentations within team meetings, sharing learning from external events, co-working with team colleagues as well as inter-team learning" (p. 590). Gould notes, "Participants were also

frank in their judgment that just because a team met did not mean that learning was taking place,” such as when needing “to deal with pressing business” (p. 590). Gould asserts, “The concept of the ‘learning organisation’ is unexplored within social work research” (p. 585), and he believes his study was the first to do so.

I need to point out that the above references regarding reflective learning and practice, the value of incorporating adult learning principles into professional development activities, and consideration of social agencies as learning organizations are geared to the social work profession in general and are not specific to school social work. However, in 1993, Chavkin conducted research on the nature of organizational structures that influence the practice of school social workers. Specifically, she was interested in identifying structures that either support or inhibit practitioners’ ability to conduct macro level interventions. She found that school districts bound by rules regarding the implementation of social work services and districts in which central administration exerted much power over social work activities were least likely to support macro level interventions. Chavkin’s study was a follow-up to research conducted in 1969 by Costin regarding school social work tasks. Costin asked her participants to rate a long set of school social tasks in terms of the importance of attaining social work goals in their school districts. The respondents rated micro level interventions as most important and macro level work as least important.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kelly and Stone (2008) also considered how organizational and institutional factors influence school social workers’ practice decisions. In a secondary analysis of survey responses from Illinois school social

workers, they acknowledge their measure of these factors was so narrowly defined that they could not come to any substantive conclusions.

On a somewhat different note, Bowen, Ware, Rose, and Powers (2007) make reference to adult education concepts in an article in the major school social work journal (*Children and Schools*, formerly *Social Work in Education*). Specifically, they address the concept of schools as learning organizations. In addition, Sabah and Orthner (2007) outline a strategy for implementing organizational learning in schools in this same journal. In their discussion, Sabah and Orthner refer to the work of Senge et al. (2000) on the characteristics of learning organizations.

After finding the articles by Bowen et al. (2007) and Sabah and Orthner (2007), I proceeded to review the tables of contents of every issue of *Children and Schools* that has been published in the last ten years. As far as I could determine just by looking at the table of contents in each issue, the articles by Bowen and Sabah and Orthner were the *only* articles in that journal devoted to the principles of adult learning and the concept of organizational learning.

It is important to note that school social work literature since the early days of the profession has always highlighted the fact that the organizational aspects of schools have considerable impact on student development and performance (e.g., Allen-Meares et al., 1996; Bowen, 2007; Costin, 1969; Franklin, 1998; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Gambrill, 1997; Shaffer, 2006; Streeter & Franklin, 2005). This is in line with the fundamental social work concept of “person-in-environment.” However, this large body of literature addresses only the organizational aspects of schools that affect the school community

(students, staff, families, etc.), not the learning processes of the adults in the school community or the potential for schools to become learning organizations.

Thus, it has only been very recently, i.e., 2007, that school social work researchers have written about the principles of adult education and schools as potential learning organizations, whereas back in 1981, Kolb, an adult education researcher, investigated the learning processes of social workers. And, as noted earlier, a few other adult educators subsequently included social workers in their studies. So, the overlap between the social work and adult education professions is limited, at least as reflected in the literature of both disciplines. And, aside from Bowen's (2007) and Sabah and Orther's (2007) articles, the overlap between the adult education and *school* social work literature appears to be non-existent.

I did find a few articles that address the professional development of school social workers. However, they simply outline activities school social workers can access in order to grow professionally (Franklin, 2005; Garrett & Barretta-Herman, 1995a, 1995b; Lindsey et al., 2006; Tracy & Hokenstad, 2006). In addition, in reviewing the indices of the major textbooks on school social work (Allen-Meares et al., 1996; Allen-Meares, 2007; Bye & Alvarez, 2007; Constable et al., 2002; Dupper, 2003; Franklin et al., 2006; Freeman, 1998; Massat et al., 2009; Openshaw, 2008), I found no listing of "continuing education" or "professional development."

Thus, I hope this study represents a first step in filling the huge gap in the literature between adult education theory and the learning processes of school social workers. I am certain there is considerable overlap between the two--much more than I

have discussed in this section. However, aside from Bowen's (2007) and Sabah and Orthner's (2007) articles, this overlap has not yet been made explicit.

List of Appendices

Appendix A	SAMPLE COVER LETTER.....	279
Appendix B	CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH.....	281
Appendix C	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONNAIRE	283
Appendix D	INTERVIEW GUIDE (original and revised):.....	284
Appendix E	SAMPLES OF INTERVIEW THEMES AND SUPPORTING STATEMENTS	286
Appendix F	THEMES AND SUB-THEMES FROM DATA ANALYSIS.....	297
Appendix G	PARTICIPANT PROFILES	298

Appendix A

SAMPLE COVER LETTER

March 31, 2008

Dear XX,

It was so wonderful seeing you at the Alliance meeting several weeks ago! I thought it was a very productive meeting, and I'm thrilled that the folks from XXX offered to host an Alliance meeting in the fall.

Again, I would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation research. As you know, I am interested in learning about professional growth experiences school social workers value most. Knowing you have taken on numerous challenges in your school district, I would like to know something about what prepared you to meet these challenges.

The enclosed consent form provides an overview of my research. It also outlines what I will be asking of you. Essentially, I need to interview you and have a follow-up contact several weeks later, perhaps after school ends this semester. Between the interview and follow-up contact, I would like to stay in touch with you periodically by email about issues we discuss in the interview. Knowing the end of the school year is incredibly busy, I expect these interim communications will be very brief, maybe just a few lines or so.

I am offering my participants an Amazon.com gift certificate for thirty-five dollars. Another option is a contribution in the same amount to the School Social Work Alliance.

If you are interested in participating in my study, please sign the two consent forms and return one to me along with the completed questionnaire. Once I hear from you, I will call or email you to set up an interview. If we decide upon a phone interview, we can certainly break it down into two or three sessions. I have found many people prefer this because it limits the strain of holding a phone receiver to the ear.

Last spring I conducted a pilot study with a group of retired school social workers and learned a great deal about the types of professional development activities that had

the greatest impact on their practice. In the current phase of my research, I will be interviewing school social workers with varying degrees of experience, primarily to determine if preferences for professional growth activities change over time.

I am looking forward to moving on with my research and hope you agree to participate. The feedback I've received thus far is that participants have enjoyed the opportunity to reflect upon activities that have contributed to their practice in the schools.

Appreciatively,

Appendix B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a dissertation research study conducted by Ann List, a doctoral candidate in the department of Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology at the University of New Mexico.

You are being invited to participate in this study because of your experience with a wide range of professional development activities in your career as a school social worker.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study is designed to explore school social workers' experiences with professional development activities of both a formal and informal nature. It will examine how the structure, content, and format of these activities enhance the professional growth and development of school social workers.

PROCEDURES

The study activities include questionnaires, interviews, email and telephone communications, and focus groups.

If you consent to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a one-page questionnaire requesting demographic information. You will also be asked to participate in an interview followed either by a second shorter interview, participation in a focus group, or email communications with the researcher.

The questionnaire should take no longer than 5 minutes to complete. The interview will last between 45 minutes and an hour. The time required for follow-up activities will vary according to participant interest and convenience.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The only foreseeable risks for you in this study are minimal, such as the inconvenience and possible fatigue resulting from completing the questionnaire, participating in the interview, and engaging in follow-up activities. However, if for any reason you wish to withdraw from the study, your request will be honored immediately.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR SOCIETY

No direct personal benefit is promised to you as the result of participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the examination of professional development activities school social workers engage in on a regular basis. It will also help determine how

the content, structure, and format of these activities influence the value social workers attach to them.

CONFIDENTIALITY

A pseudo name will be used to identify you in all publications resulting from this study. In addition, any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. You have the right to review the audiotapes and transcripts of your interview and all follow-up activities. These materials will be destroyed within three years following the conclusion of the study.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may also withdraw you from this study if circumstances arise that warrant such action.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS AND REVIEW BOARD

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, please feel free to contact Ann List, principal investigator, at (505) 856-7170, or by email to annlist@comcast.net, or Patricia Boverie, Ph.D., responsible faculty member, at (505) 277-2408, or by email to pboverie@unm.edu. If you have other concerns or complaints, please contact Research Compliance Services, 1717 Roma NE, Room 205, MSC053180, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001; or telephone at (505) 277-2257, or toll free at 1-866-844-9018.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

Name of participant (please print)	Signature of participant	Date
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SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of Investigator	Date
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Appendix C

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1) Gender:
- 2) Age range: Twenties ___ Thirties ___ Forties ___ Fifties ___ Sixties ___
- 3) Number of years in practice as a social worker:
- 4) Number of years in practice as a school social worker:
- 5) Number of schools you serve:
- 4) Average number of students on your caseload at any given time:
- 5) How is your position funded (operational money, Special Education, Medicaid, grant, etc.)?
- 6) Number of leave days your district allows each year for professional development:
- 7) Does your school or district pay for workshops and/or conferences you attend?
- 8) Does your district provide support or training that is specific to school social work (e.g., clinical supervision or training in specific treatment modalities, such as group work, family counseling, play therapy, sand tray, etc.)?

Appendix D

INTERVIEW GUIDE (original and revised):

1. What prompted you to become a school social worker?
2. What have been the critical events and turning points in your career?
3. How did these events trigger new learning opportunities and professional growth?
4. What have been your most valuable learning experiences? What made them valuable?
5. What do you regard as your strongest professional skills? How did you acquire these skills?
6. What are some of the ways you use these skills in your practice?
7. What enables you to use these skills in your practice? What hinders their use?
8. Have there been times when you've been expected to provide a particular service, but the necessary knowledge and training were not available to you? If so, what did you do about it?
9. In what ways are the CEU activities required for licensure useful to you?
10. How have the types of professional growth activities you value most changed over the years?
11. If you could design the ideal professional development activity for your colleagues, what would it look like?
12. What is the one thing you are most proud of in your career? What enabled you to do this?

INTERVIEW GUIDE (revised, 4/02/09):

- What prompted you to become a school social worker?
- How did you learn to adapt your basic social work skills to working in the schools?
- What have been the highlights of your career as a school social worker?
- What have been your most valuable learning experiences?
- What made these learning experiences valuable?
- What interventions or treatment modalities do you use the most – and how did you acquire the skills to use these interventions effectively?
- What are specific ways you've used these interventions in your practice?
- How do you see yourself facilitating the learning of others?
- What are some of the dilemmas you face in your practice in the schools?
- What opportunities do you have to reflect upon your practice?
- How does trust influence your learning experiences?
- How do emotions influence your learning experiences?
- How have prior and outside personal and professional experiences influenced your practice in the schools?

Appendix E

SAMPLES OF INTERVIEW THEMES AND SUPPORTING STATEMENTS

THEMES from interview with participant #13, 4/28/08

Turning points/critical events:

- Leaving the school district to work in other settings to strengthen clinical skills (child and family agency, private school, and family service agency)
- Maintaining a part-time private practice for several years
- Returning to the school district because of the appeal of working with multiple systems
- Meeting No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Medicaid mandates
- Co-presenting a workshop at a regional school social work conference with a student and his parent
- Rallying client families to meet with a renowned family therapist during state conference plenary sessions
- Assuming leadership positions in the district and with state and national social work organizations
- Representing an assigned school at district union meetings
- Representing social workers at union meetings
- Filing a grievance with the union on behalf of staff members in an assigned school
- Developing a forum for social workers based on a district's instructional council model
- Coordinating a district's social work internship program
- Providing clinical supervision to LMSWs

Learning associated with turning points/critical events:

- Revision of assumptions regarding the work of community agencies
- Revision of assumptions regarding the practice of school social work
- Acquisition of knowledge regarding the challenges facing immigrant families, pueblo schools, and private school students
- Acquisition of new skills from working directly with a renowned family therapist
- Acquisition of new skills required to deal with the constraints of IEP and NCLB mandates
- Recognition of the benefits of including students and their families in conference presentations
- Increased awareness of school social work programs around the state and across the country
- Appreciation of a union's role in developing policies in a school district
- Recognition of the high stakes involved in filing a union grievance
- Recognition of the influence of social work instructional council decisions on district school social work policies

- Appreciation for the contributions of social work interns to a school district
- Recognition of the growth and development that clinical supervision promotes
- Appreciation of the unique skills other social workers bring to their practice in an educational setting

Content of significant trainings/learning experiences:

- Exchange of support among social work colleagues
- Case presentations
- Community resources
- Orientation to school district
- School social work issues across the district
- School social work issues in a geographical cluster of schools
- Diversity of services provided by school social workers
- Diversity of students and families served by school social workers
- Family therapy
- Clinical supervision
- Autism spectrum disorders
- Other mental health disorders among children and adolescents
- IEP policies and processes
- Medicaid documentation
- Administrative responsibilities
- Classroom group work
- Experiential education
- State, regional, and national social work and school social work organizations
- School social work programs in other districts and states
- Mediation
- Providing students with medical diagnoses
- Revision of district school social work handbook
- Graduate social work programs
- Clients' stories
- Social work colleagues' stories
- Annual state social work conferences

Context and nature of significant trainings/learning experiences:

- Facilitating weekly meetings with cluster social workers
- Learning by doing
- Working on multi-disciplinary teams
- Working with many different systems in the district and community on behalf of students and families
- Video tapes of family therapy sessions at a community agency coupled with commentary from an accomplished family therapist
- Presenting cases to a family therapist consultant
- Conducting weekly sessions with clinical supervisees

- Serving as an acting principal for a day in an assigned school
- Conducting classroom groups
- Borrowing ideas from various social skills curricula to incorporate into classroom group work
- Supervising an intern who possessed strong skills in experiential education
- Co-conducting experiential education activities for students with a social work intern
- Serving on a national school social work task force
- Serving as chair of the state school social work task force
- Co-hosting a school social work conference with a regional school social work organization
- Strengthening mediation skills through consultations with a supervisee highly skilled in this area
- Reading books and articles on various topics
- Engaging in on-going discussions with colleague who shares leadership responsibilities for district social workers
- Accessing information through the Internet
- Finding mentors
- Partnering with graduate social work programs to provide courses in school social work and internships for graduate students
- Developing working relationships with students' families
- Respecting clients' stories and recognizing their strengths and resilient qualities
- Helping organize annual state social work conferences

Perceived value of trainings/learning experiences:

- Appreciation of the diversity of tasks involved in providing social work services in educational settings
- Appreciation for the diversity among students and families at assigned schools
- Appreciation for the support and encouragement of mentors, including professionals from other disciplines
- Recognition of the family therapy consultant's approach to families as systems
- Appreciation for the family therapy consultant's emphasis on respecting families as contributing members of teams working to promote students' academic, social, and emotional success
- Appreciation for the family therapy consultant's assistance in identifying systemic barriers to involving families in their children's educational programs
- Association with school social work practitioners, administrators, consultants, and faculty through membership on national school social work task force
- Increased knowledge of the needs of school social workers in different parts of the state and country
- Increased knowledge of the learning needs of other social workers around the state
- Appreciation of a master family therapist's perspectives on family dynamics and demonstrations of working effectively with families

- Usefulness of materials on the Internet that might be incorporated into a district school social work handbook
- Increased knowledge of political issues and sources of power in school district
- Appreciation of clients' willingness to engage in therapeutic relationships, discuss difficult issues,
- Appreciation of clients' willingness to share cultural values and traditions
- Validation of quality of relationship-building skills with clients
- Increased knowledge of mental health disorders among schoolchildren

Impact of trainings/learning experiences:

- Have learned to be adaptable and flexible
- Brought a national school social work leader to the state to consult with social workers in the district and also meet with people in the state department of education regarding the role of school social workers in educational settings.
- Developed an instructional council for school social workers in the district based on the union's model of school-based instructional councils
- Succeeded in recruiting fifty percent of social workers in the district to become union members
- Needed to leave a school after representing staff in a grievance filed with the union regarding administrative policies
- Feels pride that former interns are have been hired by the district and are doing good work
- Feels humbled by the resilience and perseverance of families struggling to survive
- Developed much respect for a Native American family's efforts to preserve their language and culture
- Continually reminds school personnel to include parents in problem-solving discussions
- Puts much effort into developing positive relationships with students and families
- Helps families access concrete services as a way of establishing constructive relationships with them
- Invited students and families to participate in conference presentations to other social workers
- Played a strong role in helping one of the district's most challenging students move through the grades and receive a high school diploma

Support from district for learning:

- Sometimes requires social workers to participate in district-wide in-services tailored primarily for teachers
- Decreased support for all social workers in district to come together for training sessions
- Pressure from district for social workers to provide medical diagnoses for students without providing adequate training
- Questions from district about the amount and quality of clinical supervision LMSWs need in order to file Medicaid claims for services

- Conflicts between two departments in district that employ social workers
- Pressure from district administrators to carry high numbers of students on caseloads
- Related Services Coordinator supportive of training for school social workers, but funding is an issue

Financial issues associated with learning experiences:

- Limited funding from district to support district-wide trainings for social workers
- Limited funding from district to support specialized skill development activities for social workers

Trust issues associated with learning experiences:

- Concern regarding social work colleagues who are reluctant to ask for assistance and who do not participate in learning activities because of risk of exposing limitations of knowledge and skills
- Awareness of people making excuses to avoid feeling vulnerable when engaging in learning activities (e.g., “too busy,” “not enough time,” etc.)

Changes in significant learning experiences over time:

- Initially favored opportunities to develop specific skills in working with students
- Initially tended to take on assignments indiscriminately and sometimes prematurely
- Gradually developed insight into personal and professional strengths and limitations
- Gradually shifted from micro to macro level social work service delivery
- Currently favors learning about systems issues in the district that impact school social work practice

Personal attributes:

- Had undergraduate degree in social work; internship at the VA
- MSW from University of Chicago; internships in a settlement house day treatment program for ED kids and adults in jail. After MSW, worked briefly with United Charities of Chicago but missed NM, so returned and took job with school district
- Takes advantage of opportunities to showcase school social work practice
- Takes advantage of invitations to present cases to family therapist consultant
- Eager to learn new things and take on new challenges
- Actively involved in facilitating learning of others (e.g., weekly cluster meetings, supervising LMSWs, coordinating internship program, supervising interns and facilitating intern group meetings, orienting new social workers, conducting conference workshops and plenary sessions, orienting community providers to school social work, facilitating social work instructional council, serving as consultant in part-time related services liaison position, representing social workers with union, mentoring others to assume leadership roles, etc.)

STATEMENTS from interview with participant #13, 4/28/08

Learning associated with turning points/critical events:

- I left the district for several years and worked at a child guidance agency, a private school, and a family services agency. I learned some things in all those places, but the main thing was that I really missed school social work. School social work is systems work and I missed working with all the systems. In the child and family agency, we would often see kids in isolation without having that much contact with their parents.
- One of the reasons I left the district was because I felt I needed more training in a clinical model. But when I came back, I realized much of what we do in the schools is very clinical. It's not described that way, but we do build clinical relationships with families and kids and staff people.
- I think our work is not well known, nor is it appreciated. After I left the child guidance agency and returned to the school district, they would invite me back to talk to their staff about what we do in the schools. I always felt it was an opportunity to talk about the extent of the work we do in the schools. I think people at that agency were surprised about the multi-level work we do and how we have to have very good skills. School social work is very specialized. What I appreciate about working in the schools is being able to develop skills in many different areas. You have to be a good clinician; you have to be a good systems person; and you have to be willing to respond to what a family needs. I think it fits with what we learned in graduate school – that you meet the client where they're at. If it means you need to take care of helping them get basic services, then you *do* that. In fact, it helps establish relationships with families when you can give them a concrete service or help hook them up with an agency. You can say to them, "Well, let me go talk to so-and-so about this, and I'll get back to you." It's like being a liaison or bridge between the school, family, and community. I think that's one of the things families like about what we do.
- [Re impact of No Child Left Behind]: I'm finding I have less and less time for individual work with kids because of the academic requirements of the law. Reading and math are sacred times in the schools and pullouts are not allowed. It's very difficult to work around that. In addition, I have no space in one of my schools, so most of my work there is outreach to families. Sometimes when I really do need to see a kid directly, they'll try to find a space for me at the last minute. Also, another way I've tried to fulfill IEP requirements for social work service is to do classroom groups. The groups are usually about social skills, even though it's very challenging to do classroom groups with BD kids. There are just too many different things going on in the groups and too many levels of issues to deal with.

- Back in the late '70s, I was appointed to a national committee – a task force on school social work – and it was a really dynamic group. There were practicing school social workers, administrators, faculty members, and consultants at the state level. That group was the precursor to the School Social Work Section that NASW has now. When I was on that committee, we were beginning to have a discussion about the need to develop school social work standards.

Context and nature of significant trainings/learning experiences:

- The social workers in our cluster say our weekly meetings are important to them because it's an opportunity to be with peers and get support. Sometimes they present cases and get feedback on difficult cases they're dealing with. We also use it as a forum for outside speakers. For example, if we hear about a new community resource, we invite people to come talk with us about what they do and how we can make referrals to them. I guess the biggest benefit, especially for people who may not have another SW at their school, is to come together with other professional social workers and talk about issues. It's especially helpful for new people, because it's a way to help orient them to the system, answer their questions, and support their efforts.
- I borrow things from different curricula or use some stuff from experiential education when I do the classroom groups. Activity with these kids is always important, so I do that with them. I didn't have any really extensive training in experiential education. I just picked up bits and pieces here and there. I had an intern one year who was very knowledgeable about it, and she and I did groups together at one school. She was very good at doing experiential stuff with the kids. So when she left, she left behind a bag of tricks and information for me to use.
- I really appreciate that people that have sort of pushed me and said, "Go ahead, you can do this." So I've been willing to take that step, because I know I have people I can consult that will support me. They've not only been social workers, but also professionals in other disciplines – like the psychiatrist who would make home visits with me for very challenging cases, and also a couple of psychologists who taught me a lot. Both were very skilled family therapists, and in fact one would often join me to work with families together.
- I've learned a lot from my clients. One of the things I appreciate about school social work is that our families are so diverse. I've been fortunate to work in a cluster where I've had some very needy families. They struggle and persevere - and that is very humbling. I listen to their stories and hear about their strengths and resiliencies. We can't assume anything about our clients. I began making home visits with a family whose kids were often truant. They were Native American (and I'm not), so I took it really slowly with them wanting to learn about their culture. I didn't push anything; I just wanted to establish a relationship with them, especially with the father who was big man that intimidated school

people. Well, he finally trusted me enough to say, “The reason I don’t trust schools is because they put me in special ed, but later they found out I had a hearing loss. They never even took the time to give me a hearing test! They just took it for granted that I was mentally retarded and they put me in special ed.” Well, guess what? This man is now a world famous artist! It was very important to him to try to preserve the beauty and values of his family’s culture.

- Then there was an Arabic family I had at another school. I would make home visits and I knew there was something going on because the man wouldn’t talk to me. But I took it slowly and sort of asked them to help me understand their culture. They were using their adolescent daughter to interpret for me. One day I made a home visit and the man spoke pretty good English. It appeared he was testing me to see if I was going to demand certain things from him. But once he learned I wasn’t going to do that and he could trust me, he started speaking to me in English and we were able to get his handicapped daughter some services she needed. Actually, I wasn’t surprised it happened that way. He had been in this country long enough that I was sure he spoke some English. But the whole thing acknowledged for me that I was approaching him in the right way by taking it slowly. I didn’t go in there saying the school insisted he do things in certain ways.

Value of trainings/learning experiences:

- What I learned from the family therapy consultant was to look at families as a system – and to look at the dynamics of family interactions. He reinforced the fact that families need to be respected by school people so they can learn what parents want for their kids. Families should also be part of the team that’s working towards helping children achieve academically, socially, and emotionally. He was familiar enough with the schools that he could point out some of the systems barriers that we needed to be aware of in our work with families. His ideas had a big influence on my work.
- When my wife and I were the union reps for a school we worked at, we went through one of the more extensive grievances possible. We had to testify in front of a committee about an issue at our school. I learned a lot from that about all the grievance procedures and how conflicting it can become. We paid a heavy price for doing that. That’s why I left the school. Eventually the principal did her thing to drive everybody out that was involved in supporting the grievance. But ironically, she left after everybody else left.

Impact of trainings/learning experiences:

- I know we need to look at some of these issues, but I’ve been in the district for so long that I know things can shift really quickly. I try to remind people of that. I’ve learned to be flexible and go with what happens – and be able to go on and sort of fit into what is needed, just as long as we can continue to provide services for kids and families.

- There was the student and mother I worked with for years. Gosh, I learned so much from them! It remember the time we did a presentation together at a school social work conference, and the student was a real hit. Everybody loved him. It was so unique! People were saying, “We’ve never had an actual client at a workshop before.” So that led to doing something when XX [renowned family therapist] asked if I could bring a live family for him to work with at our state social work conference. I said, “Yah, I’ve had some experience with that – I can do that. Let’s have you interview one of my families.”
- Yes, I felt good about my work with that student and his mother. I’d have weekly sessions with the student. It was a real struggle for the school with everything that was going on with his medication and other outside factors. There wasn’t a whole lot I did with him that made a difference, but at least the fact that I would go once a week and he knew I was always going to be there. It was very useful because I was his sounding board. He was bi-polar and was very challenging for his teachers. So, I used to do a lot of bridging between the student, his teacher, and the mother, too. And, we were able to get him to graduate – that was a real achievement! But the greatest thing about that experience was after he got involved with drama at his high school, they did a production in which he played a part. He had people in tears because he was so good. So that was sort of a culmination of all the work we had done together over the years.

Support from district for learning:

- There’s conflict between the mental health and special education departments – and unfortunately we sometimes get caught in the middle. We’re sort of in a no win situation, because we have one department telling us we should do something, but the other department says they won’t support it. It’s difficult for us to know what to do when the departments don’t even talk to each other. We’re not getting any direction from the administrators on the issue of providing mental health diagnoses for kids in an educational setting - and on top of that, we have some social workers who feel it’s unethical to do so in this kind of setting.
- We were the first related service providers to develop our own instructional council, and it’s real active. We meet once a month and we have a representative from each cluster that comes and then takes the word back to get feedback. It’s a way for us to communicate with each other. We also have sub-committees, such as a committee that’s revising the handbook, and a committee to deal with trainings, and another committee to deal with the Medicaid stuff. What’s nice about this is that we’re using the same model they’re using in the schools. We have our district coordinator and a cluster administrator on the council, and it’s a good mechanism for discussing important issues. We often end up making recommendations, but that’s about all we can do. Our district coordinator reminds keeps reminding us we can influence people, but we can’t do much beyond that. We try to educate non-social workers about what we need and we try to influence them and the district leadership, but they always have the final say.

- My wife (who's a teacher) and I were the union reps from one of my elementary school for many years. I was willing to do work around that and started educating others about school social work. And that was the way to do it. I mean, I couldn't go in there and say this is what we need and demand that they do it. And, of course they appreciated the fact that I was working for teachers, too, so they were more open to hearing about our needs. And that's how we got the IC; and that's where we got to develop this career ladder to advance related service people, because they were more willing to help us and support us with that. So, I've been very involved, and still am. I've been the union rep for the social workers for many years and go to the union meetings. Over fifty percent of the social workers are union members.

Trust issues associated with learning experiences:

- My colleague and I spend a lot of time talking about trust issues related to learning. We can develop trainings for our school social workers, but sometimes they don't take advantage of them. We think it's sometimes because they don't feel they can trust themselves to feel vulnerable about learning new things. As hard as we work to get people to attend, they'll say on the surface, "Well, I'm too busy. I can't go." But I think it has more to do with their own issues, like, "I don't want to see myself as lacking." Or, "I don't trust myself to be vulnerable and acknowledge that I really don't know something and need help to learn it."
- We've been fortunate in our cluster. We don't always get everyone there, but we get a good group. We've developed a nice sense of trust and people really feel they can contribute. They'll talk with the group about their cases and say, "This is very helpful feedback. I don't feel threatened by it." But I've heard that in some of the other clusters it's been an issue.

Changes in significant learning experiences over time:

- When I first came into the district, I wanted to develop specific skills for working with students, like play therapy or whatever. But now, it's more systems issues that interest me – for example, how to deal with errors in the system, or how to fit a Medicaid diagnosis into an educational document like an IEP when there's conflict between two different systems, or how to develop skills in helping schools understand how important it is for families to be involved. These are big systems issues. My colleague and I have on-going discussions about these issues all the time, because we're at that level where we have to come up with *some* direction for other social workers.

Personal attributes:

- We were trying to get this master family therapist to do a keynote for our state conference, and when he said he likes to do live family interviews, I took that as an opportunity to showcase school social workers. I told him I'd find a family – and all three times he's come here to do plenary sessions for our conferences, it's

been school social workers' families that he's interviewed. The first family was one of mine; the second was a family that two of my supervisees worked with; and the last time he came it was again one of my families.

- I think it's a combination of the two things that account for my involvement in so many different activities here and at the state and national levels. One is that I'm always wanting to learn new things and I'm willing to take on things--sometimes too much. Early in my career, I took on some things that I shouldn't have because I wasn't really ready. It was all that idealistic thinking when I got out of graduate school that I could do just about anything. But then, as I grew in the profession, I realized, "No, I'm not especially good with this kind of situation, so I'd better be careful with that – and maybe I need to think about it bit more before I decide to take it on."

Appendix F

THEMES AND SUB-THEMES FROM DATA ANALYSIS

Context of practice

- Impact of school reform
- Administrative support (district and site)
- Space issues
- Funding issues
- Number of assigned schools
- Opportunities for reflection

Contextual learning

- Learning from clients
- Learning from colleagues
- Learning from supervisors and consultants
- Learning by doing
- Learning through trial and error
- Learning from mistakes
- Workplace dilemmas

Practice behaviors

- Professional orientation
- Favored intervention strategies and treatment modalities
- Facilitating the learning of others
- Changes over time

Prior learning experiences

- Personal
- Professional

Outside learning experiences

- Personal
- Professional

Personal qualities

- Commitment to profession
- Sense of self-efficacy
- Motivation for learning
- Spiritual orientation

Highly valued learning experiences

- Contextual, prior, and outside learning
- Trust issues associated with learning
- Emotional aspects of learning
- Changes over time

Appendix G

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

PARTICIPANT PROFILES (from both pilot study and dissertation research)

Alice: In her fifties, Anglo, former teacher and Washington, DC, lobbyist, chairperson of state school social work organization, provides clinical supervision for a social worker in another school district via Webcam, covers one school, and her funding is braided.

Anna: In her fifties, Native American, lives in her Pueblo community and has a one-hour commute each way, has been a school social worker for 11 years, supervises social work interns, covers three schools, and is on a braided contract that enables her to respond to major crises in her district.

Bea: In her fifties, Hispanic, bi-lingual, retired participant in pilot study, covered one school, was a clinical supervisor, taught a school social work course at a local university, and was on a braided contract.

Carla: In her forties, Hispanic, has been a school social worker for seven years, covers two schools, and is funded by special education.

Carol: In her forties, Anglo, 12 years as a school social worker, but 15 years overall as a social worker, serves one elementary school, works three days a week, carries a small private practice, and is on a braided contract.

Dana: In her forties, Anglo, has been a school social worker for eight years, currently serves one elementary school, but in prior years have covered two or three, specializes in sand play with individual students and experiential learning activities with large groups of students. Her contract is braided.

Donna: In her fifties, Anglo, five years as a school social worker, previously carried a full-time private practice, was in an itinerant position in her school district before leaving the profession, often covered as many as 15 schools, specialized in working with “angry” acting out adolescents, and had a braided contract.

Elaine: In her fifties, Anglo, earned a Master’s degree in health care administration, worked as a public health administrator for 25 years before going back to school to obtain a Master’s degree in social work, has worked for four years as a school social worker, works three days a week and is a public health consultant the other two days, serves two elementary schools, and her position is funded by a county public health grant. Calls herself a “training junkie.”

Gabriel: In his thirties, Hispanic, bilingual, ten years as a school social worker, works full-time in a high school, specializes in work with gang-involved youth and serves as a consultant to other school districts in his state regarding this population, has taught courses in school social work at a local university and serves as a field advisor for social work students at that university, also serves in a leadership position with a state organization advocating for boys and young men, has co-written a book chapter regarding gang-involved youth, and is on a braided contract in his school district.

Jill: In her sixties, Anglo, retired pilot study participant, worked full-time in a middle school behavior intervention program and hosted a weekly pizza luncheon for the teachers in that program. Funded by special education.

Joan: In her fifties, Anglo, associated with schools for most of her career in psychiatric facilities and public/private school sites, has been the treasurer of her

state school social work organization for many years. Her current managerial position is supported by a contract between a community mental health agency and her school district.

Kathy: In her sixties, Anglo, retired pilot study participant, was a clinical supervisor, served as a family therapist in her cluster of schools, and was a field advisor for university social work students. Her contract was braided.

Lea: In her sixties, Hispanic, retired pilot study participant, first school social worker in her district who “grew” a large social work unit and ultimately became a mental health administrator, first president of state National Association of Social Workers (NASW) chapter, chair of NASW task force charged with revising national school social work standards. Over the years, her position was supported either by district operational or special education funds.

Lisa: In her fifties, Anglo lesbian, professional artist, lived in an underdeveloped country and more recently in Europe, has been a school social worker for eleven years, works full-time in an elementary school behavior intervention program, conducts pet therapy with severely socially impaired students, and is funded by special education.

Luisa: In her fifties, Hispanic/Anglo heritage, 25 years as a school social worker, currently covering two middle schools, clinical supervisor, and helped establish a school social work organization in her state. Braided funding supports her work in her district.

Lynda: In her fifties, Hispanic, eight years as a school social worker, currently working full-time in a high school, sees most of her students in groups, and favors

mediation as an intervention strategy because of prior experience as a claims adjuster. Her position is funded by special education.

Lynne: In her forties, Anglo, 11 years as a school social worker, currently covers a high school and an elementary school although previously worked full-time in an alternative program for pregnant teens. Her position is funded by special education.

Marian: In her fifties, Anglo, 25 years as a school social worker (previously five years in child protection services), works full time in an elementary school behavior intervention program, and is funded by special education. Has a great sense of humor!

Marilyn: In her fifties, Anglo, thirteen years as a school social worker (previously a social worker with the military), works part-time three days a week at a middle school that has two classrooms for autistic students, favors social skills groups, believes psychotherapy is inappropriate in a school setting, funded by special education, but a National Institute of Health grant helps support her work. Has been trained to train other school personnel in her state regarding working with autistic students.

Mario: In his sixties, Hispanic, bi-lingual, retired participant in pilot study, specialized in family therapy, strong mental health background from working in psychiatric facilities, clinical supervisor, taught a course in school social work at a local university, and was on a braided contract. Built his own house in the mountains and frequently hosted school social work parties there.

Patricia: In her fifties, Hispanic, 22 years as a school social worker, currently functions as a mental health consultant in a very large urban school district, previously conducted mediations among school personnel, serves as a clinical supervisor for interns and practitioners, very active with state school social work organization, served on NASW school social work committee at national level. Current position funded by Medicaid, although previous positions funded by other sources. Calls herself an “autodidact.”

Pia: In her sixties, Hispanic, 12 years as a school social worker after managing programs in a community youth agency for 25 years, spends most of her week at an alternative school for students with behavioral disorders and at risk for dropping out of school, but is also on call for two smaller alternative schools, and has been an officer of her state NASW chapter. Her position is funded by special education, although she works with both special and regular education students to support her school’s effort to provide “inclusive education.”

Sal: In his sixties, Hispanic, bi-lingual, serves two schools, also works part-time as a consultant to special education administrators in his district, strong advocate for family involvement, clinical supervisor and school social work representative in his district’s teachers union, taught school social work course at local university, served as president of state NASW organization and member of NASW committee on school social work at national level, also served as chairman of his state’s NASW school social work organization. His contract is braided.

Teresa: In her fifties, Hispanic, has been a school social worker for nine years, covers one elementary school and conducts a violence/bully prevention program throughout

the year in every classroom in her school. Uses puppets extensively in her work with students. Was a department manager at a large corporation, but after earning her degree in social work, worked at a juvenile detention center and women's prison before coming into the schools. Is on a braided contract.

Tiana: In her forties, Hispanic, bi-lingual, covers one high school full-time, specializes in work with gang-involved youth, serves as a consultant to other school districts in her state regarding this population of students, co-wrote a book chapter regarding gang-involved youth, teaches a course in social work at a local university and serves as a field advisor to social work students in that program. Her contract is braided.

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