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It's About Time: Initial Findings From a Feasibility Study of a Time-Study Tool for School Social Workers in Michigan

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It's About Time: Initial Findings From a Feasibility Study of a Time-Study Tool for School Social Workers in Michigan

Abstract

Starting in late Summer of 2015, the two authors began collaborating on the pilot testing of a school social work (SSW) time-study tool with a sample of SSW in suburban Detroit (n=9). This article details the path towards the development of the time-study tool, drawing from the extant literature on workload and caseload issues in related special education fields, and resulting in the time-study tool that was first piloted with SSW in 2015-2016. Initial data from year one of the two-year 2015-2017 pilot project is shared in this article, along with qualitative data based on interviews with the SSW in the project, as well as reflections by the two authors on the implications of the work in this first pilot year. This article describes in detail the background for this project, the procedures followed, the initial results after year one, and how these findings informed plans for year two.

Keywords

school social work, workload, caseload, evidence-based practice, special education, IEP

Introduction

The field of school social work now has decades of survey research that shows how hard it is for school social workers (SSWs) to balance the many demands on their time (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelly et al., 2015). Like many educators and related service professionals, SSWs report being constantly pressed for time to carry out the myriad of tasks they want (and need) to do to serve the needs of their school communities (Kelly et al., 2016; Phillippo, Kelly, Shayman, & Frey, 2017; Staudt, 1997; Whittlesey-Jerome, 2013).

This concern about time is commonly shared by other school related-service professionals (e.g. occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech/language pathologists), who also report having too little time to carry out their work (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2015; Armstrong, White, Moorer-Cook, & Gill, 2012; Cecere, Crandall, Dixon, Schefkind & Williams, 2015). Other related-service research literatures and policy briefs have started to develop a distinction between “caseload” (how many youth are on a regular schedule to be seen by the school related-services professional in weekly or monthly time increments) and “workload” (what actual time is required to serve those students outside of their regularly scheduled time). Researchers in those professions have argued that a wide disparity can exist between actual workload vs. actual caseload for these professionals, making it challenging to serve youth clients effectively and ethically (Hutchins, Howard, Prelock & Belin, 2010; Woltmann & Camron, 2009; American Occupational Therapy Association, et al., 2014).

Some of the workload considerations that are not considered in a caseload approach include: early identification services, service documentation, billing, travel, meetings, and consultation with staff or parents (American Occupational Therapy Association, et al., 2014). As we will show, these other related-service professionals provided some organizing ideas and templates for our team in developing our SSW time-study tool to address what we hypothesized were workload/caseload disparities to serve those SSW youth clients.

What we know about how SSW spend their time

While there is widespread consensus in the research literature about how little time SSWs have to do all the tasks they have to and would like to perform (Kelly et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2015; Phillippo et al., 2017; Thompson, Frey, & Kelly, 2018), few studies have actually examined what SSWs actually do with their time, day to day. The only two published studies thus far were by Johnson-Reid and colleagues (2004), who examined school caseload data for 911 students in a Midwestern school district to analyze how case characteristics, services provided, and case outcomes were related. Her team found that the average number of cases receiving SSW in a month was 72, and that those cases involved a range of brief contacts and more intensive cases that took more of the SSW time and caused strain for them to do their work effectively (Johnson-Reid et al., 2004). However, this study, which was described as year one of a longitudinal project, appears to not have been completed. No data was made available past this initial year, and no data described about what specific SSW were doing with their time on their caseload.

More recently, Harrison, Harrison, Ward, & Amin (2018) completed a year-long project with SSWs in Kansas (n=25) who worked as special education SSW. The project used an online time-study tool to explore the extent of SSW involvement with activities across the 3-tier MTSS model, as well as advocacy and program development work. Their study found that the SSWs were engaged in direct service with their caseload youth 40% of the time, 25% in consultation

with others related to their caseload, and another 15% of their time completing special education assessments (Harrison et al., 2018).

With the dearth of literature on time-study tools in school social work, our team turned to the fields of speech-language pathology (SLP), occupational therapy, physical therapy, medicine, and nursing, all of whom have begun developing a literature analyzing the difference between “caseload” and “workload” (Armstrong et al., 2012; Cecere, Crandall, Dixon, Schefkind & Williams, 2015; Nishigori et al., 2015; Storfjell et al., 2015). This literature resonated with us, as we both saw the disconnect between our own stated caseload as SSWs and our actual workload. The difference as we saw it was that the typical way that SSWs had their jobs administratively structured (by “caseload,” specific students, often with Special Education IEPs, who received weekly social work time) in no way captured the actual day-to-day work that went into serving those students (what was referred to in the literature as “workload”). Along the way, we were able to engage with other school-based related service professionals from the IDEA Partnership to modify their time-study tool for use with a sample of SSWs. We determined the need to create a separate SSW time study tool due to the difference in SSW duties from the traditional roles of other therapists (ie. crisis intervention, general education intervention, etc.)

We formed a year-long pilot (called a Community of Practice or CoP) that could test the school social work-specific time-study tool with SSWs in the field, and use that pilot time-study data to both assess the feasibility of the tool itself as well as what it told us about practice in the early part of the 21st century. We sought to answer these questions with this initial pilot project:

- 1) How feasible was the pilot time-study tool in becoming a useful and practical tool for SSWs to integrate into their busy workday, based on SSW feedback?
- 2) What key findings might emerge from this first year of pilot data to inform our understanding of practice, given the lack of time-study literature in the field?
- 3) How would the participants themselves view the experience of the CoP and the time-study process in enhancing their sense of self-efficacy in their daily practice?
- 4) As a key component of self-efficacy, how did the time-study data impact SSWs relationships with their school administration and other key school stakeholders?

Step 1: Time Study Tool Development Via a Working Group of SSW

Williams & Cecere (2013) created an Excel spreadsheet time study tool for use with physical (PT) and occupational therapists (OT). OT’s/PT’s recorded their activity in 15 minutes blocks by having participants place an X in a code category column that corresponded with a day and time row. They had a total of 10 time categories: Direct, Indirect, Meetings, Program Documentation, Travel, Professional Development, Supervision/Mentoring, IEP Documentation, Preintervening Services, and Other. All the categories were for their caseload assigned students except for Pre-intervening Services and Other.

In June, 2015, the second author met four times virtually and in-person with 20 SSWs from the Tri-County Detroit, Michigan area, and the country to present the work, modify the Williams-Cerene tool, and gather feedback. After testing and some further iterative, the group settled on these final 12 Time-Study Codes and a further resulted in a similar set of codes (see table 1):

Table 1 *Final SSW Time-Study Codes*

| | | |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| D* | Direct | Face to face contact: Services where the student is the primary recipient of services. |
| I* | Indirect | Consultation services: Educators or other entities are the recipients of interaction/activity on behalf of supporting the student. For this code, SSW also indicate the type of service in the Indirect Codes Box (listed here in Table 3 below). |
| C* | Crisis | Crisis intervention: Unexpected behavior intervention with student(s). This would include debriefing time. |
| CD* | Compliance Documentation/ Assessment | Compliance documentation: Required (legal and/or district) documentation and assessment activities required for SSW caseload. |
| CM* | Compliance Meetings | Compliance meetings: Legally required or necessary meetings for students that are on SSW caseload. These include: REED, METs, IEPs, 504 Planning, FBAs, MDRs, etc. |
| CrNC* | Crisis | Crisis intervention non-caseload: Behavior intervention with student(s) or situations that are not on SSW caseload. This would include debriefing time. |
| P* | Pre-Intervention Services | Pre-intervention services: Services provided to students who are not on your caseload.. For this code, SSW also indicate the type of service in the Indirect Codes Box. |
| SWP | School Wide Prevention Services | School-wide prevention services: Services that are provided to the entire school to improve the culture and climate of the school. |
| Prof/d | Professional Development | Professional development: This is time spent on professional learning to improve practice. It includes: professional reading, Internet research, SSW-SSW consultation, SSW-Supervisor discussion, etc. |
| Sup/Men | Supervision & Mentoring | Supervision & mentoring: Mentoring of field placement students, or new SSWs working towards full approval/licensure. |
| T | Travel | Travel: Travel time. |
| O | Other | Other: All tasks/activities not covered by the above categories. This would include staff meetings, duties, committee work not connected with a specific student, etc. SSW may track certain tasks by making notations in the NOTES Section. |

Table 2 provides the definitions of each of these categories that were established with the help of the initial 20 SSW and the eventual CoP that was formed to pilot test the tool further.

Table 2. Complete list of Time-Study Categories

| CASELOAD | NON-CASELOAD | PROFESSIONAL DUTIES |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Direct Service | Pre-intervention Services | School-Wide Intervention |
| Indirect Service | Crisis | Professional Development |
| Compliance Meetings | | Supervision/Mentoring |
| Compliance Documentation | | Travel |
| Crisis | | Other |

Indirect and Preintervention Services were further divided into 6 categories: consultation with staff, consultation with parents, consultation with community, materials preparation, service planning and other. These are described in more detail here in Table 3:

Table 3. Indirect categories used when selecting indirect or pre-intervention categories

| | | |
|------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Ia. | Consult with staff | Consultation with staff: This is for those times that SSW speak with or communicate electronically with a staff member (eg. Teacher, administrator, colleague, etc.) about a student or group of students. |
| Ib. | Consult with parents | Consultation with parents: This is for those times that SSW speak with or communicate electronically with parents, guardians or family members of students. |
| Ic. | Consult with community | Consultation with community: This is for those times that SSW speak with or communicate electronically with someone who is not a staff member nor family member of a student. |
| Id. | Materials Creation | Materials creation: Preparation of supplementary aides or services for a classroom or other part of the school environment to make the student successful in their environment. |
| Ie. | Service Planning | Service planning: Time spent in preparation for an activity that SSW will directly implement. Group preparation would fit here. |
| If. | Other | Other: All tasks/activities not covered by the above categories. For Pre-Intervention services, this would include classroom observation or briefly speaking with a student, a group of students, or a classroom. |

Since the initial reason for this time study tool was to discuss workload versus caseload, the group felt it necessary to distinguish between services for those that were assigned via an IEP or a formal commitment to the student (eg. RtI, student assistance, 504 plan, etc .) and those services that were not. The professional duties grouping was those activities that really were not

student connected, but necessary for the SSW to carry out their duties. Additionally, the SSW group (n=20) determined that it was important to know if students were assigned to the SSW caseload due to an IEP or special education eligibility. Most SSWs in Michigan are partially funded by IDEA funds, so the distinction of which student services were IEP related was important.

Step 2: Forming the Community of Practice (CoP) for the Pilot Study

Through advertising within the county of the second author, we formed an initial CoP for our pilot study year. Our CoP sample included nine school social worker volunteers who were from the Metro-Detroit area of Oakland, Macomb and Wayne Counties. All were female. One was Latino and two were African American. The remaining were Caucasian. School experience ranged from 4-16 years. They had a wide variety of backgrounds prior to their current SSW positions: adult mental health outpatient, psychiatric inpatient, juvenile court, department of social services, and programs for youth. People had a variety of work assignments:

Self-contained Program Emotionally Impaired program/building.
 General Education Social Work at a Charter School that focused on truancy reduction.
 Early Childhood Program plus three elementary schools.
 Elementary that housed several Autism Categorical Rooms.
 Two elementary buildings with several programs. Some general ed responsibilities.
 One elementary with special education and general education responsibilities.
 One high school, two parochial schools and two elementary schools.
 One elementary building with multiple programs.
 Charter school with K-8 general and special education duties.

CoP OS Time-Study Tool Activities and Measures. For the pilot year, our nine social workers committed to complete the OS Time Study Tool for the first full week of the month and to meet virtually monthly (as a Community of Practice) in an Adobe Connect chat room with the two authors to discuss the tool ease of use, the findings, and ways to increase efficiency in time management. They were to log in all activity in 15 minute blocks from Monday- Sunday. On average, we had 69% of our participants complete the tool each month. The completion average each month was 6.2 people. Range of the number of completed tools for the year per participant ranged from 1 to 10. The average contractual work time 25.46 hours for a week and the average overtime was 8.57 hours per week. Additionally, in our monthly online meetings we asked participants to rate the usability of the time-study tool on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating. Participants consistently rated the tool at an 8 or 9 out of 10 from the outset, indicating that this pilot sample of SSWs found the tool immediately adaptable to their practice.

Twice a month, both authors met separately from the CoP to discuss trends in the data and consult on building the content for each month's CoP. By February 2016, there was sufficient monthly data to show trends for each individual SSW and the entire CoP. Those trends were discussed during the monthly CoP meetings that we facilitated. Those trends (and how they continued through June 2016) helped inform the findings in the next section.

As part of the CoP, the first author presented additional information about evidence-based practice (EBP), and incorporated findings from national survey data showing that many school social workers struggle with defining their role and prioritizing their work tasks (Kelly, et al., 2015). Out of that material, the group brainstormed a list of topics that the SSWs in the CoP wanted to learn more about: SSW improving their documentation skills; Time-management skills for SSW; Evidence-based strategies for students on the Autistic Spectrum; Consultation models for SSW working with new teachers; Effective tools to use for progress monitoring for student IEP goals.

These topics became the basis of each CoP from January-June 2016. Four of the CoP members volunteered to co-lead sessions on these topics with the first author and to share their own expertise and practice wisdom. These sessions were well-received by their colleagues, and led the SSWs involved to present their ideas at other locations, including professional development in their districts and traveling to Chicago to present their work at the first author’s yearly summer institute. One final part of the CoP activities involved our encouraging each of the SSWs involved to take the longitudinal data from their time study and to “tell their story” to school stakeholders in their context (e.g. peers, special education directors, principals). The final three CoP sessions also included discussions of how the SSWs in the group were faring with this aspect of the work.

Findings: Time-Study Data Trends

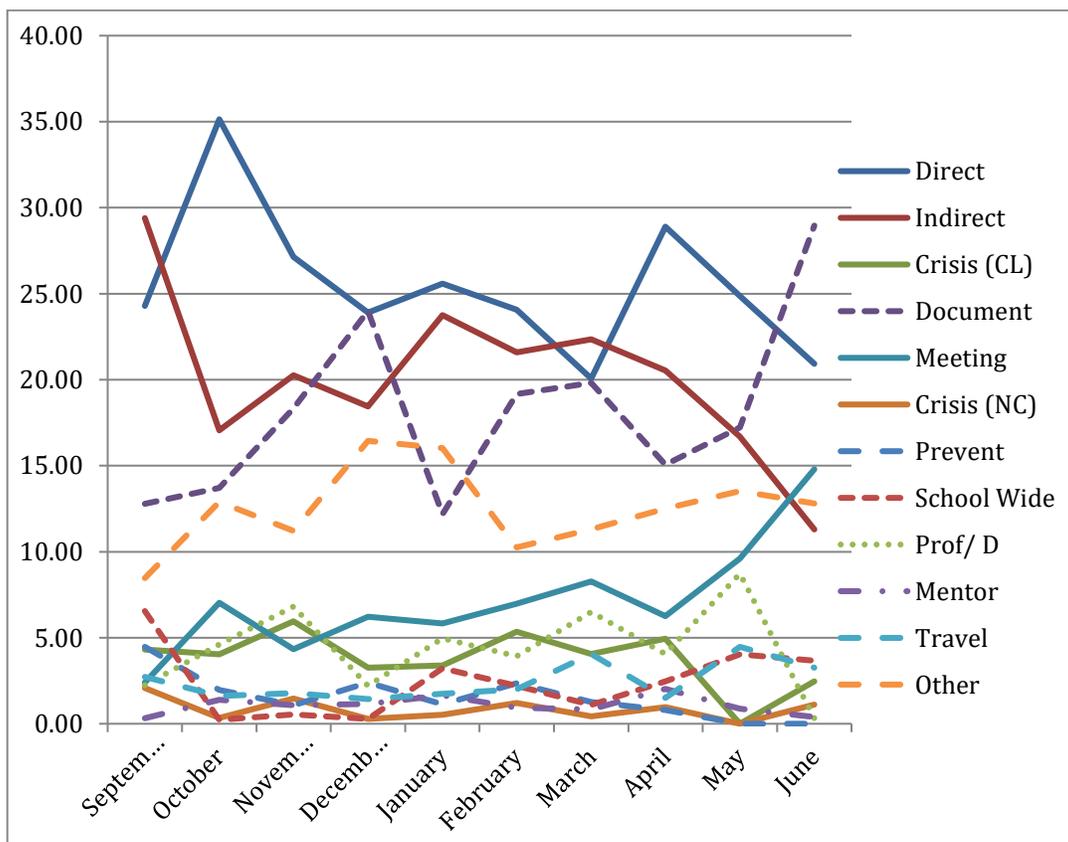
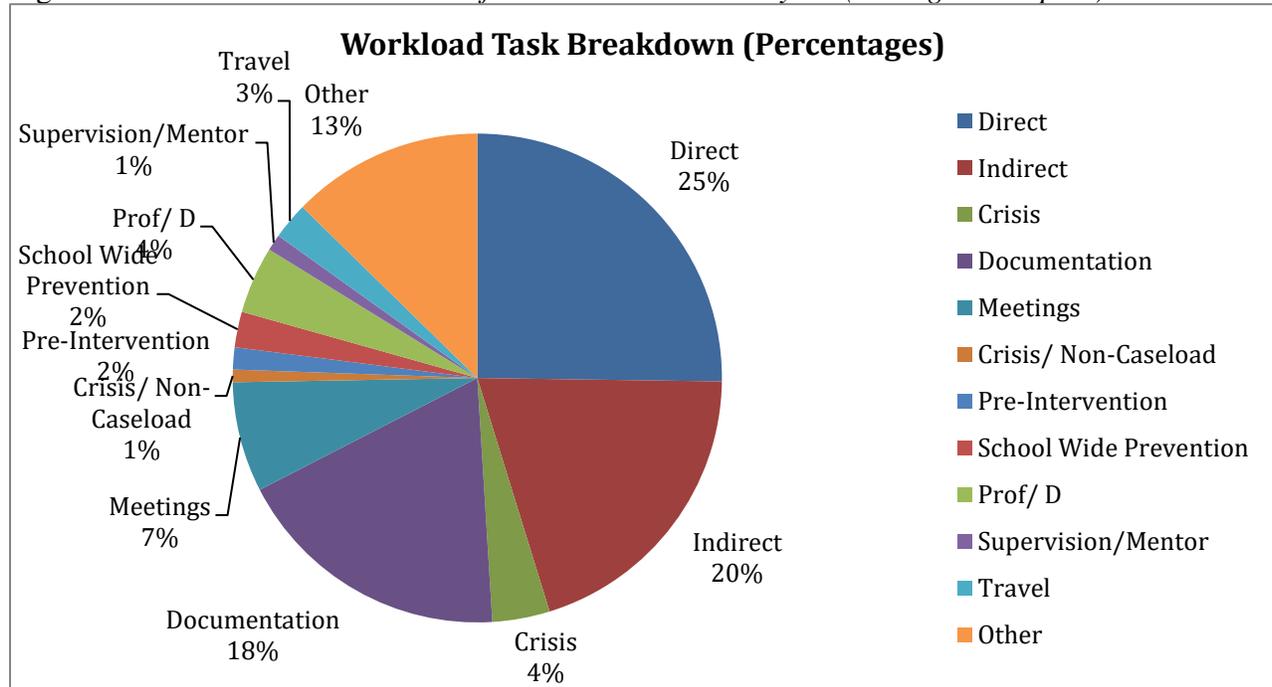


Figure 1: Time-study categories (percentage of time by month, September-June 2015-16)

Each month's data was collected and displayed in different visual ways to examine month to month comparisons of the task categories. Figure 1 shows the 12 main categories and the average percentage of time that they took. As can be seen in Figure 1, Direct Service was the largest category in seven months, with documentation being the largest category in two months. Two months featured the indirect categories as a whole to be the most performed ones.

Next, we wanted to look at the time-study data across the entire school year to create an average category time for our group (Figure 2):

Figure 2. Workload task breakdown for the 2015-16 school year (average time spent)



Based on these averages, we found 25% of our group's time was spent on direct service, 20% was indirect services (consultation, service planning & materials preparation) and 18% was documentation. For every one hour of direct service time, there were 2 hours of caseload activity (indirect, crisis, documentation, and meetings- we called this non-direct time) that occurred. Additionally, 25% of a participant's time was spent on work not-associated with a person's caseload (non-caseload crisis, pre-interventions, school-wide prevention, professional development, supervision/mentoring, travel, and other). Direct services could further be broken down to those students with IEP's/in special education (78% of the time on direct), those without special education services (15%) and activities that were mixed populations (7%). The largest indirect category was 58% which was consultation with staff.

Findings: In-depth Interviews with CoP Members, Summer 2016

To better understand the impact of the CoP and the time-study tool on the practice of the SSWs involved in the pilot project, each CoP member was invited to participate in a telephone interview with the first author. Interview questions focused on understanding how participants got involved in the project, their use of the time-study tool in their school practice, their overall experience of the CoP, and how they viewed their sense of self-efficacy in light of the CoP

project. Four members of the CoP were interviewed, and their answers revealed some common themes that supported the importance and value of the Oakland Schools Time-Study Project to these SSWs. The key themes are outlined as follows:

Key Theme #1: CoP members chose this project to improve their practice, and to advocate for the value of their role. One participant said, “I volunteered because I knew I struggled with my time management skills and staying on top of my paperwork.” Another one said, “it gave me something to do to focus my energy on, and to show my district the importance of what I do.” Another group member had been doing some data collection and time-study work of her own and hadn’t found her administrative team to be interested in it, so she hoped that joining this group would “give me a group to network with and collect data with.” None of the interviewees were required to do the CoP or complete the tool, and the fact that they could freely choose the program and do so in service of their own professional development goals was important to all of them.

Key Theme #2: CoP members quickly integrated the tool into their day-to-day practice, and saw it as a valuable ongoing tool for them. Given that the CoP only required that the SSWs complete the time-study tool one week a month, it was striking that all of the SSWs interviewed said they quickly built the tool into a daily feature of their practice. They reported keeping the tool open on their computer during the day, completing it when they had a moment, and one said, “having it (always) available made it effective for me, and I was able to toggle between my daily schedule and the excel spreadsheet (of the tool)...(this) was helpful.” Another described “making it a priority” and “getting better” at it the more she did it. None of the respondents described the tool as cumbersome or frustrating, no small thing given the well-documented difficulties new tools can have in becoming fully adopted in mental health and educational settings. These interviews were just deeper extensions on this point of information that we had been hearing each month during our CoP time: by the middle of the year, every CoP member was rating the tool at an 8 or 9/10 in terms of its ease of use and also its relevance.

Key Theme #3: CoP members saw the indirect service data as a revelation, and a validation of their work. The 2 to 1 ratio of non-direct service hours for every hour of direct service came up repeatedly in the interviews (a quick note on terms: the SSWs I interviewed used the term “indirect” to describe the whole category of “non-direct” work). One respondent said it this way, and we thought her words merited a longer excerpt:

It allowed me to give myself permission to not go cram students in to see another student, but to do more background work, and to say that this is part of my job, and that this work matters and can’t just be done after kids have gone home...it helped as well that it wasn’t just my data, but it was everywhere through the group.

Her experience of “seeing” her practice more fully through her indirect/direct service data was a profound revelation for another respondent, who described the data as showing her that she could now see that “indirect service is more of a meso-level approach to school social work practice. I am a systems worker rather than a clinical social worker, and I like that.” Another participant

described herself as “maturing” over the course of this year’s CoP to see the value of indirect practice, and to begin to advocate for the value of that work within her school setting.

Key Theme #4: All the CoP members loved the group experience, and planned to spread the word about it in their district. With the caveat that they were being interviewed by one of the CoP leaders, it was striking how effusive each of the CoP members were about their experience, and how many different ways they planned to build on this work in the coming year. Respondents liked the CoP online format, the chance to hear from the leaders as well as other CoP members who shared their practice wisdom through short presentations. One described it unprompted as “the highlight of my work each month,” and another said that she “wished that this is something I had found to do a long time ago” because she said she saw it addressing issues in her practice that she had long wondered about and struggled with. All of the respondents told us that they planned to tell their colleagues about the CoP for 2016-17, and all had scheduled time with their immediate supervisor and/or administrator to share the first year-data with them. Again and again, in the interview data it became clear that this experience had deepened their commitment to their practice and increased their interest in advocating for their role within their school districts. One put it this way: “(One of my principals) doesn't understand Special Education, she just sees me in my office at my computer, but doesn't understand that I'm often doing my indirect service then...I now have hard data to advocate.”

Discussion

Some preliminary impressions based on this data emerged and were discussed in detail with the project participants, both in the consultation calls between the two authors, and the larger CoP. We discuss several of these impressions now and relate them to their implications for future SSW research and practice:

Different months=Different Time Priorities. Despite a caseload expectation that was typically static and unchanging for direct service, our CoP SSWs showed in their time-study data that different months influenced the time they felt they could spend on direct service vs. documentation, or direct service vs. indirect service. Our group expressed an intuitive sense that this was happening in their work, but appreciated seeing some data to support it, and to see that this wasn't just something that was happening to them alone, but was reflected in other CoP members' data.

Direct Service Was Just the Start of SSW Service, not the End Point. A clear finding emerged from the pilot data: for every hour of direct service, usually delivered to a student with an IEP for social work services, there appeared to be another two hours of non-direct service (defined as indirect service, crisis intervention, documentation/assessment, & meetings), in service of IEP caseload students. This finding was both surprising and provocative to our group. These two hours of non-direct service per hour of direct service was absolutely essential to the provision of the all-important direct service to students on SSWs caseload, but went unaccounted for in their job description and the ways their supervisors evaluated their workload. This was also true of the nearly 25% of non-caseload other activity that was part of their average day. A significant percentage of SSW's time wasn't factored into the way their jobs were structured and designed.

School-wide Prevention Work Barely Registered Day-to-Day. Despite the growing emphasis on primary prevention in school-based mental health via multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS)

three-tiered work, and despite the group's interest in doing prevention work for their schools, the CoP was unable to build prevention work time into their daily workload. This finding appeared to be unaffected by different months or phases of the year, raising questions about whether this important work is feasible for SSWs in contexts like these to add to their workload expectations. *Documentation time continued to increase, and encroached on SSWs time away from school.* Our data indicated that roughly 20% of the week (the equivalent of one school day) was spent on documentation work, often taking SSWs into the pre-school morning or afterschool evening hours. In our conversations with the group, it became clear that SSWs felt that this time was problematic both because it seemed to be increasing, and because it was forcing them to make tough decisions with their time (writing reports at home or getting documentation done at school and cutting corners on their required IEP time).

A stable workload profile emerged from the data, but also led to larger discussions about the changing role of SSWs. During one of the CoP sessions, the group considered some unexpected questions that they saw emerging from the data: what if direct service isn't the most valuable service a school social worker can provide? What does the research literature say about the effectiveness of indirect service (consultation, behavior planning, teacher/parent coaching) compared to direct social work services? What would it look like if schools and administrators understood the value and potential impacts of the indirect services that SSW provided? When CoP members heard from the first author that there was a strong body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of indirect SSW services (Kelly, Raines, Stone, & Frey, 2010), they began to view their work differently, and some of those changes began to manifest in some of the follow-up interview data we've discussed here.

These findings, while necessarily limited, are interesting as they represent one of the few times in the research literature that SSW have been asked to collect data on their time in a systematic fashion. These findings indicate that the time SSW spend on the most needy students (in the MI case, students with IEP caseload minutes) remains relatively constant over the course of a school year. It also appears that the non-direct time that SSW spent month-to-month over the course of the school year serving these youth on their caseload remained relatively stable. What was also important about the relative stability of direct and non-direct service was the universal agreement amongst the CoP participants that none of their school administrators factored in the non-direct time or non-caseload time that they spent when making decisions about SSW assignment allocations, or in assessing how well the SSW were managing the caseloads they had.

For time spent in documentation and crisis, some interesting patterns emerged. For crisis, there was again a stable time profile for our sample, as they seemed to have a typical portion of their average 8-hour day devoted to crisis response, even with the obvious understanding that some days had more crisis events than others. The relative small size of time allocated to crisis also seems to indicate that for these SSWs, their time was actually more predictable and scheduled than they anticipated it being. Documentation time differed across the calendar year, with early and later months having more time spent in meetings and writing reports, something that we (and our CoP participants) were not surprised by.

The very small time allotments for prevention, supervision, and professional development were striking in that they are indicators of a few persistent themes in the SSW literature. First, the lack of time spent in doing Tier 1/Tier 2-style prevention activities is reflected in the practice survey literature (Kelly et al., 2015 and 2016), though the scant time spent per day was even

more minimal than the stated wishes for time from previous survey data (Kelly et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2015). It is a longstanding truism that most SSW do not have an assigned supervisor who is themselves a SSW, creating the reality that most SSW experience their work role as autonomous but also without clear guidelines and support to help them structure their time. Finally, though numerous SSW scholars recognize the need for SSW to stay current with practice, research, and policy trends (Kelly, Frey, & Anderson-Butcher, 2011; Sosa, Alvarez, & Cox, 2016) there was very little direct involvement in regular PD activities.

Beyond those somewhat expected findings, what is also clear from the data from our pilot year is how much of SSW time is simply not accounted for in their assumed workload. Seeing that 6 hours per day are being spent on necessary and important non-direct service to caseload kids seems to be a clear indication that there needs to be recognition that SSW caseload time alone can't account for how their time is spent, and in fact underestimates the importance of non-direct and non-caseload service to the successful delivery of services to youth on a typical SSW IEP caseload.

Limitations

This study has several limitations which bear mentioning. The sample for the study was a convenience sample of SSW who volunteered to be part of the project. The SSW participating were all from the same state, and the same general region of that state (counties in the Metro Detroit area) limiting the ability to generalize to other SSW contexts. For example, states that have a very different view of the SSW role (e.g. focusing more on general education students or on more prevention/macro-practice work) might have shown different responses to the time-study tool; we welcome the chance to continue testing and refining the tool as we move forward. Further, while every effort was made in the initial orientation to the time-study tool to explain and define the codes for the time-study tool (and subsequent CoP meetings reinforced those definitions and allowed time for questions and problem-solving), it's possible that different SSW interpreted the codes differently. And as with all time-study projects like this one, the data was entirely based on self-report, giving the researchers no absolute sense of what SSW were doing with their time each day. Future studies using time-study tools like ours would ideally be paired with observational data collection methods where SSW are "seen" doing the work they code in their time-study, and possibly even having those observations subject to inter-rater reliability to ensure the fidelity of the observations themselves. Despite these limitations, the initial pilot study data here offers a chance for SSW researchers and practitioners to engage in candid and open conversation about how SSW spend their time, and what might be done to enhance the ability of SSW to deal with their workload/caseload issues using time-study data.

Conclusion

The pilot year of this Time-Study Project has been illuminating and according to the participants, effective in enhancing their SSW practice. We anticipate that after establishing the feasibility of the tool with this pilot year, that subsequent years working with new CoP cohorts will allow us to continue to build on these initial successes and to further engage SSWs with our work. We also plan to present these findings at SSW and school mental health conferences around the country, and to explore the development of a possible online app to help disseminate the tool more widely.

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