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## School Social Workers and Extracurricular Activities: The Unanswered Questions About Potential Role Conflict

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### Abstract

#### Abstract

School social workers respond to students' mental health needs from an education training perspective that defines set professional role boundaries in service provision that may differ from the multiple roles teachers have with students. One of those perspectives is a recognition of what may happen if a boundary crossing was to occur in a dual relationship with a client. Teachers are encouraged to take on a secondary role with students by coaching athletics or advising a club. Taking on dual roles with students has led to both increased job satisfaction and concerns regarding burnout for teachers. There is an absence of information that exists on what the experience has been of school social workers taking on secondary roles with students. Not having guidance for school social workers who elect to oversee extracurricular activities led the authors to explore what is the intended mission for the practice of school social work, how the existing literature on dual relationships may apply to school settings, and the findings from research conducted with teachers who take on dual roles with students. The recommendations provided are a need for data to establish what experience school social workers have with managing secondary roles and to not preclude school social workers from extracurricular activities when their presence can be of benefit to students and the school if dual relationships are properly managed.

### Keywords

School social work, dual relationships, role conflicts, extracurricular activities, education policy

### Cover Page Footnote

School Social Workers and Extracurricular Activities: The Unanswered Questions About Potential Role Conflict Jeffrey McCabe Department of Social Work, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania 350 Old Main Kutztown, PA 19530 610-683-4184 [mccabe@kutztown.edu](mailto:mccabe@kutztown.edu) and Hannah Hagan School of Social Work, New Mexico State University Amistad Family Services 3100 Oak St. Las Cruces, New Mexico 88005 [h.hagan2015@gmail.com](mailto:h.hagan2015@gmail.com) Jeffrey McCabe is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania with research interests in school social work, child welfare, and social work and the law. Hannah Hagan is a MSW graduate from New Mexico State University who is currently working in family practice. Keywords: School social work, dual relationships, role conflicts, extracurricular activities, education policy

### **School Social Workers and Extracurricular Activities: The Unanswered Questions About Potential Role Conflict**

School social work has origins from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that incorporated practice components from multiple professions with an intent of treating the needs of the individual child instead of treating the needs of the individual specifically within a school setting (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013). In the current delivery of service, the standards set forth by school administrators for what interactions school social workers are to have with students lack universal recognition across buildings, school districts, or states (Bye, 2009). An absence of federal guidance that regulates the specific duties of school social workers has restricted school administrators from grasping the collection of skills built into social work curriculum at the bachelor's and master's level that provides the preparation for professional practice (Whittlesey-Jerome, 2012). Progress to find commonalities among the role of school social workers has been limited by the absence of standard criteria for certification as a school social worker in all 50 American states (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Boland-Prom & Alvarez, 2014).

What data were most recently made available on the school social work profession from the Second National School Social Work Survey (Kelly et al., 2015) were in the areas of

“(a) the demographics (that is, gender, race, state of practice, degree, licensure, and community and school context), (b) common student issues (that is, grades, individualized education program or 504, presenting issues, involvement with other community services such as mental health or child welfare), (c) types of barriers to effective school social work practice (that is, administrative demands, paperwork, overwhelming caseloads, and so on), and (d) the extent to which SSWAA's school social work practice model is implemented by school social workers (p. 18).”

Knowing there is an absence of clear guidance in expectations set by local school administrations and role differences that can exist in the duties performed by a school social worker depending on if they are licensed and certified leaves unknown the potential within a school setting to take on secondary professional roles such as coaching or club advising that teachers are known to hold. The analysis in this paper provides a review of the roles held by school social workers, the ethical dilemmas associated with dual relationships in social work practice, and consideration for if the known secondary roles schoolteachers have with students through extracurricular activities would constitute a dual relationship ethical dilemma for school social workers to take on in similar settings.

Essential in attempting to clarify the role of school social workers is addressing how this specialty area of practice fits neither the traditional provision of social work nor education services (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013). Having a role as a specialty area of practice when compared to the more defined roles as school psychologist or school counselor requires in certain situations school social workers need to prove their belonging in establishing acceptance and earning credibility for their role within the school setting (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). There was a response in the syllabi used by universities for the training of school social workers by assigning coursework that reflected an expectation for school social workers to focus on the clinical provision of care for students (Berzin & O'Connor, 2011). The essence of practice for social workers placed in schools to reflect the epitome of collaboration to be responsive to the needs of students is unifying with teachers in recognition of an ability to identify when student concerns are present (D'Agostino, 2013).

### **Integrated Roles of School Employees**

Extracurricular activities offered by schools are customarily coached or advised by teachers (Aoyagi, 2018; Konukman et al., 2010; Sutton, 2015; Whiteley & Richard, 2012). Any extracurricular activity made available to students has been realized as contributing to the growth of students as learners when they participate (Gorbunova & Kalimullin, 2017). A clear indicator does not exist if teachers elect to oversee extracurricular activities because of an interest in the activity, recognition of the need to contribute to the culture of the school, or a belief that taking on multiple roles within the school will lead to better performance evaluations (Rocchi & Camiré, 2018; Winchester, et al., 2013). What is known is there has been recognition of a teacher-coach role conflict where educators who take on dual relationships within a school have the presumptive responsibilities when the two roles become at odds with each other (Konukman et al., 2010).

Currently the Second National School Social Work Survey conducted in 2014 provides the most up-to-date analysis of what roles school social workers adopt in their professional capacity (Kelly et al., 2015). Not collected in the data were if extracurricular activities comprised how school social workers interact with students in the same dual-natured relationships that teachers do. An awareness of what school social workers contribute to the extracurricular activities offered by schools is of importance to the profession because teachers who were expected to take on a secondary role within a school setting reported increased tendencies toward feelings of burnout when asked to lead students in activities they were not knowledgeable about (Aoyagi, 2018). If school social workers are advising student clubs and coaching athletic teams, the potential for encountering the boundary crossings of a dual relationship with students and their families appears inevitable.

### **The Collaborative Design of School Social Work**

How school social work services were provided to students this century became primarily defined as a clinical role with the student serving as the client for administering direct services without ancillary roles for supporting students within the school environment (Raines, 2019; Phillippo et al., 2022). Specifically, school social workers who are licensed, hold an advanced degree, and practice in a state that regulates certification requirements for school social workers are those whose interventions with students are more evidence-based strategies that reduce non-clinical ancillary roles with students (Thompson et al., 2019). While the focus might have shifted toward more clinical interactions with students, school social workers have been required to collaborate with administrators, teachers, and family members that provided a connection for school social workers to the overall functioning of the school (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010). In shifting away from a strictly clinical focus with a select population of students, school climate was suggested to increase when school social workers are permitted to offer a broader range of services across the entire student body (Tan et al., 2015).

Intervention efforts that are undertaken to improve all aspects of school operations have lacked social workers taking the lead on these projects (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; Kelly et al., 2010). Evidence for school social workers not having lead roles that contribute to the overall functioning of a school were found in a survey asking school administrators to report the primary tasks of school social workers, where the top three tasks were crisis intervention, community resource specialist, and consultant for teachers and staff (Stalnecker, 2022). How school social workers reported their time was utilized during the school day did not reflect services that were regularly provided to the entire student population. Over 50% of time logged by a sample of school social workers was used providing direct, indirect, and documentation of services provided to students from an assigned caseload compared to 25% of their time on tasks not related to students from an assigned caseload (Kelly & Whitmore, 2019). Which categories of students the sample of school social workers reported to work with in this study were further identified as 78% of their time utilized providing direct services came with students who were assigned an IEP (Kelly & Whitmore, 2019). Having limited roles in efforts that impact the entire school and a caseload that prioritizes students with an IEP does not preclude school social workers from expanding the scope of their work because the collaborative work they conduct includes multiple levels of the school community and community-at-large (D'Agostino, 2013).

This collaborative-practice approach was depicted in a model by Frey et al. (2012) with students at the center of a school social worker's practice with the school, home, and community as settings to where enhancing the academic and

behavioral performance of students requires practicing within and across these settings. This model was constructed with four key constructs and three practice features. The four key constructs were “social justice perspective, ecological approach, ethical–legal practice, and data-informed practice” (Frey et al., p. 3). The three practice features were to “provide educationally relevant mental health services, promote healthy contexts for learning, and leverage resources” (Frey et al., p. 3).

A universal delivery model of intervention led by school social workers where all students can benefit from a program was reported to require commitment from both teachers and other school staff (Lynn et al., 2003). Cross-disciplinary work that incorporates collaborating with more professionals than only teachers and school staff is considered essential to make mental and behavioral health services work effectively in a school setting (Weist, 2006). What was reported by school social workers in a qualitative study that reflected on participation in a year-long professional learning community was while personal autonomy was permitted by school administrators to build collaborations at and outside of the school, the collaborations being made did not result in leverage that allowed input towards school social workers influencing the overall direction of the school (Brake & Kelly, 2019). Less decision making that is afforded to school social workers by school administrators has been identified as a missed opportunity for the social and emotional needs of students that has a health focus incorporated through the educational training of social workers (Berzin et al., 2011).

### **The Nature of Dual Relationships**

Dual relationships and boundary management have been ongoing subjects of social work practice and scholarship. Kagle & Giebelhausen (1994) examined dual relationships and professional boundaries from the perspective of what constitutes a boundary violation when considering the legal and practice issues that arise when a practitioner initiates a secondary relationship with a client. Any relationship that exists between a clinician and client outside of a clinical one crosses a boundary that is no longer of a professional character (Hancock, 1997; Mayer, 2005.) Green et al. (2006) proposed that “instead of a static delineation of acting in a professional role or not a professional role, a more elastic continuum between the ‘professional, objective expert,’ and the ‘helpful friend’ should exist in determining what competent practice looks like when boundary crossings emanate with a client” (p. 450). A distinction along this continuum was made by Kagle & Giebelhausen (1994) between sexual and nonsexual dual relationships in determining the potential for harm, but they maintained the latter is only slightly less egregious than the former and dual relationships are not conducive to the provision of care in social work practice.

The idea that dual relationships are never appropriate in the context of the helping professions remained a point of contention within professional counseling scholarship following the notion made by Kagle and Giebelhausen to consider avoiding dual relationships at all costs (Freud, & Krug, 2002; O'Leary et al., 2013; Pugh, 2007; Reamer, 2003; Vodde, 1997). It was Vodde (1997) who made the near-opposite argument from Kagle & Giebelhausen (1994) that non-sexual dual relationships are often useful to clients so long as social workers handle them with care. This was based on a premise that leaned toward a strictly prohibitive stance on dual relationships being unrealistic, as these relationships are simply unavoidable in some contexts. The possible inevitability of dual relationships brought forth by Vodde (1997) has been echoed by numerous social work scholars. If dual relationships were inevitable in practice, Pearson and Piazza (1997) devised a classification in the development of these roles that consisted of "circumstantial multiple roles, structured multiple professional roles, shifts in professional roles, personal and professional role conflicts, and the predatory professional" (pp. 91-92).

Bonosky (1995) identified how dual relationships are commonplace in social work education and practicum settings, as professors and supervisors may operate as teachers, mentors, and colleagues to their students. Given some dual relationships are unavoidable, a call was made for closer consideration to use the terminology of boundary violations where a breach of ethics was made instead of labeling all dual relationships as unethical (Freud, & Krug, 2002). This notion for use of revised terminology was echoed by other social work scholars who noted the nature of dual relationships is positioned to be more context-dependent than indistinguishable. The unique challenges of navigating dual relationships in rural settings, for example, because of the limited options for treatment providers have been widely documented for the need to assess within the context of the relationship (Barnett & Yutrzenka, 2002; Gonyea et al., 2014; Helbok et al., 2006; Moleski & Kiselica, 2005; Pugh, 2007; Scopelliti et al., 2004). Moleski and Kiselica (2005) noted that the practitioner's avoidance of dual relationships may be interpreted as rudeness or disinterest by some clients of various cultural backgrounds in smaller populated communities. Of concern in any community if a dual relationship develops is removing the self-determination of a client to resolve treatment needs on their own without a dependency that forms from the clinician serving in the dual role (Johner, 2006; Mayer, 2005).

Syme (2006) took an opposite stance in questioning why the extent to which non-clinical professionals who serve clients with less of a mental health medical need are provided greater flexibility in taking on dual roles. An example provided by Duvall & Jordan (2001) that detailed how an agency required services be provided to asylum seekers by social workers to avoid the possibility of dual relationships were opposed by the social workers who participated in the study on

the grounds of lacking the dignity deserved by the clients if dual relationships were not formed (Doel et al., 2010). Forming a common understanding of what to expect in the role between the client and clinician should start at the beginning of the therapeutic process to avoid unrealistic expectations for the relationship (Guthmann, 2019). In the asylum seeker example, the standard of expectations for the clinician and client to have compatible goals for the therapeutic relationship might not have applied because the asylum seeker would have had no baseline of understanding for the relationship and the overall need for assistance that extended beyond what an ethical boundary in the provision of service was at their point of adapting to a new culture.

How close of a relationship a clinician can develop with a client when services are needed in addition to the confines of a professional role was referred to through the use of professional objectivity, where the clinician cannot become subjectively attached to the client (Green et al., 2006; Shulman, 1991). A sample of former clients at a counseling center responded to a survey by indicating a clinician who participated in activities with clients that included consuming alcohol, providing a job, or attending a social function presented the most risk in the clinician losing the objectivity of a professional relationship with a client (Carney & McCarren, 2012; Ramsdell & Ramsdell, 1993). These examples of dual relationships extend beyond incidental client encounters outside the clinical setting that are of limited risk in exposing the clinician to operate a practice where certain clients are subjectively favored over others (Nigro, 2004; Ringstad, 2008). Determining the potential for harm in forming a dual relationship was addressed in a model developed by Kitchener (1988) that explained how the risk for harm rises as the clinician and client move further from the set expectation of a boundary violation, subjectivity and blurred understandings of the relationship increase as expectations from the secondary relationship divide the professional one, and the danger for abuse imposed by the clinician on the client intensifies the further the relationship moves from professional to personal because of the inherent power imbalance that favors the clinician (Gottlieb, 1993).

If opinions on the appropriateness of dual relationships exist on a continuum between Kagle and Giebelhausen's (1994) prohibitive stance and Vodde's (1997) optimism, the majority of social workers who examine the literature are likely to reside in the in-between. Reamer (2003) introduced the idea of "boundary crossing" versus "boundary violation" to help social workers better conceptualize when a dual relationship can be beneficial or harmful. Moleski (2005) asked social workers to consider if their dual relationship to a client is the product of "choice" or "chance," the former being more likely to indicate an inappropriate relationship. Freud and Krug (2002) made the assertion that categorizing "incidental encounters or insignificant transactions" as dual relationships posed a threat to one's ability to consider and address "legitimate ethical concerns" (p. 85). Instead, Freud & Krug

suggested social workers only be concerned with what Reamer (2003) would label as “boundary violations”.

Indeed, the discussion of dual relationships and boundary management within the helping professions has been abundant yet appears to have not produced a unified stance in the literature. However, very little scholarship exists surrounding these topics within the specific context of school social work. There has been much discussion of role ambiguity in school social work practice (Berzin, 2011; Bye et al., 2009; Leyba, 2009; Phillippo & Blosser; 2013), and although the issues of role ambiguity and dual relationships are certainly adjacent, dual relationships have ultimately failed to receive their fair share of consideration. Boland-Prom and Alvarez (2014) contributed what appears to be limited information regarding this topic, noting school social workers are more likely to form dual relationships when they live in the same community as their clients and colleagues. Lord Nelson et al. (2004) noted mental health professionals have stringent guidelines about setting boundaries between professionals and clients in ways that suggest distinctions from the field of education. Their work suggested that educators are granted more leniency in boundary formation with students and their families, a factor which could lead school social workers to adopt similar practices. The boundary intended for social workers with adherence in practice is to avoid secondary roles with clients when the conflict of interest may present the possibility of exploitation or harm to the client (National Association of Social Workers, 2017).

Agencies are expected to have a recorded set of standards for dual relationships that guide the practice of clinicians and have colleagues available who can offer professional consultation when ethical dilemmas arise (Guthmann, 2019). School social workers employed by a public-school district may serve as the only social worker for the entire district with no colleague consultations available and work under a policy manual that does not treat the relationship a teacher develops with a student different than the clinical role of a social worker. In situations where the employment contract with the agency is a determining factor for what is a boundary crossing and not all boundary crossings being reported, the standard for a dual relationship between a school social worker could be less clear despite public agencies being known to hold higher standards for identification and reporting of boundary crossings than private practice (Doel, 2010; Ringstad, 2008).

### **Managing Dual Roles at Schools**

One potential outcome of taking on dual roles in a school is the employee becoming better recognized by their administrators for the secondary role that is not the full-time employment position held by the employee (Konukman et al., 2010). Social contexts that underlie what are ultimately separate and distinct job positions when either teachers, social workers, or other professional school

employees accept a position overseeing extracurricular events contribute to the uncertainty in how school employees encounter role conflicts (Richards & Templin, 2012). One aspect of this conundrum that could benefit from closer examination is the extent to which school employees perceive an obligation to take on multiple roles in their school employment when there is not a formal requirement to do so (Sutton, 2015; Whiteley & Richard, 2012). Both the additional time commitment and role ambiguity have been noted as concerns when viewed in the realm of the perspective from teachers who experience role conflicts (Konukman et al., 2010; Rocchi & Camiré, 2018).

Current guidance does not suggest if taking on a dual role in a school setting aid in what is believed to be a need among school social workers to address their visibility, viability, and value within the school community (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). What has been addressed was how teachers needed more training provided by school administrators in how to approach the role conflicts and time management constraints that may arise when taking on dual roles (Aoyagi, 2018; Rocchi & Camiré, 2018; Sutton, 2015). Social workers when compared to teachers are known to receive targeted instruction on recognizing indicators for work burnout and boundary crossings in dual relationships (Leyba, 2009; Reamer, 2003). Part of this training recognizes social workers practice under the auspices as though any relationship that is secondary to the therapeutic one compromises the integrity of the professional one (Dybicz, 2012). Teachers, physical education teachers in particular, enter their profession with affinities toward accepting the secondary role (Konukman et al., 2010; Richards & Templin, 2012).

Removing the possibility for school employees to take on secondary professional roles with students has not been incorporated because those who find value in the secondary role they take on with students tend to report higher levels of satisfaction in their primary job role (Rocchi & Camiré, 2018). The issue becomes a matter of training employees to manage the dual nature of their roles and how to incorporate training curriculum across professional positions in schools. A need for the training of teachers has indicated less readiness for those in undergraduate teacher preparation programs compared to those enrolled in graduate-level education training programs (Gorbunova & Kalimullin, 2017). How prepared educators reported being were at a lower level for leading sport activities when the educator has no background in sport and is at the higher level of preparation when information to lead an activity is readily available online or through trainings (Matuszak et al., 2019). Information for how to manage the commitment for overseeing extracurriculars, collaborating with colleagues for support, conflict management, and work-life balance have been identified by educators as beneficial to prepare for secondary roles with students (Rocchi & Camiré, 2018).

## Recommendations and Conclusion

Not enough data is available to support if school social workers taking on dual roles in extracurricular activities with students is a concern in need of a solution. One reality may be not enough school social workers take on dual roles in either a coaching or advising capacity to assess how dual relationships are managed. Previous reporting that the role of a school social worker itself can lead to a sense of fatigue and disregard at the school may lead to a lack of interest in taking on additional responsibilities to interact with students during extracurricular events (Brake & Kelly, 2019). The reality that educators who reported fulfillment in the secondary role they take on with students also reported satisfaction with their teaching responsibilities should support, not preclude school social workers from further enriching the lives of students if the dual roles can be appropriately managed (Rocchi & Camiré, 2018). Ultimately social workers attempt to provide an opportunity to improve the lives of the clients they work with. Becoming involved in a coaching or advising capacity allows a school social worker to guide the activity in a way where participation can be focused on how the activity contributes to healthy life development for students.

In considering taking on the dual role, the school social worker must consider if the secondary role is one that is unavoidable with little threat of harm because of employment in a school setting or one that positions students who interact as both client and extracurricular participant to experience duress because of the conflicting roles. Duress can result from the student knowing that while in the extracurricular role that the client role revealed details to the school social worker no one else in the setting was made privy to. Setting the standard at the beginning of the therapeutic relationship is the expectation to avoid unrealistic expectations of the clinician by the client. A school setting is one where a student in the role of a client would not have known the school social worker would later become a coach or advisor after receiving services.

Of importance in consideration of the impact of dual relationships on the client is the possible removal of client self-determination to resolve issues on their own when additional dependency on the clinician exists (Johner, 2006; Mayer, 2005). A case can be made that under no circumstances in the secondary extracurricular role could the school social worker identify a student in the extracurricular setting as a client. An unforeseen incident with the student in the extracurricular setting experiencing a trigger could lead to relying on the social worker in a non-social work setting where a boundary violation is likely to occur if the coach or advisor adopts the social work role that reveals the student as a client. The absence of research on school social workers who serve in secondary roles with students precludes evidence for what the school social worker is to do in this dual-relationship scenario. Client self-determination could be jeopardized if the student

is dependent on the school social worker to resolve an issue outside of a clinical setting at an activity that is intended to promote student growth and development.

The National School Social Work Practice Model developed by Frey et al. (2012) has no direct connection to how an extracurricular dual relationship fits with the model other than supportive development and capacity building as possible if the dual relationships are properly managed. If improperly managed, another staff member educated with a clinical background may not have access to witness the activity where signs of a dual relationship could be recognized. Administrators at the school may see a need for any staff member to coach or advise as a way to fill a position without consideration for the harm that can result for students by the school social worker taking on a dual role. Responsibility is ultimately placed with the school social worker to keep responsible boundaries with clients. If adhering to that responsibility becomes muddled because of prioritizing the extracurricular activity over ethical considerations of clinical practice remains unknown without the experiences of those who held the dual role.

School leaders and their students must be aware school social workers becoming involved with extracurriculars is a dual relationship and dual relationships are not all harmful if in the context there is not a boundary crossing from professional to personal relationship. The extracurricular role would still fit within a professional role through employment by the school, but not a clinical role that social workers are trained for. A possible benefit of having the ability to consider taking on a coaching or advising role may persuade a potential social work student who otherwise had not considered the profession to pursue a school social work concentration if they had a positive experience participating in extracurricular activities as a student. An additional benefit of school social workers being involved with extracurricular activities is school climate being known to increase when what services school social workers provide are offered to a wider range of students (Tan, 2015). What school social workers offer to students in an extracurricular capacity cannot be replicated from what is provided to students in a school setting. The social and emotional needs of students that school social workers seek to address also exists on playing fields, theater auditoriums, and classrooms where other activities are taking place after school. Providing social emotional support when needed by students in extracurricular events without doing so clinically is training that could be provided as more is learned about the number of school social workers who take on professional dual roles.

In what capacity and to what extent social workers take on a dual role in school settings was an omission from the Second National School Social Work Survey (Kelly et al., 2015) that left unknown even an estimate of the number who take on dual roles. A sample of school social workers who have taken on the dual role may have guidance for how to manage the dual role in schools that to date remains a gap in the literature. Any future research will contribute to what has

worked and not worked for those who choose to coach a sport or advise a club. Surveys conducted through members of the School Social Work Association of America, American Council for School Social Work, and state school social work associations are a starting point in determining if extracurriculars are a dual role held by school social workers. The similarities and differences of potential boundary crossings when compared to teachers who take on dual roles will not be known in the absence of research.

A general standard in conducting social work practice and research is to do no harm (Drake, 2014). School social workers, as employees of school districts, stand eligible to gain the similar benefits from coaching and advising that teachers do. Monitoring for complications that can arise from taking on a dual role is an issue social workers are trained to be continuously aware of. The possibility of complications from a dual role in a school setting has not been proven to detract from the level of care provided to students in practice if harm is not occurring that would categorize all school social workers who take on dual roles as committing boundary crossings if properly monitored.

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