Pivoting during a Pandemic: School Social Work Practice with Families during COVID-19
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The COVID-19 global pandemic led to the unprecedented shuttering of nearly all K–12 public education settings across the United States from March through June 2020. This article explores how school social workers’ roles, responsibilities, and work tasks shifted during spring 2020 distance learning to address the continuing and changing needs of families and the larger school community. Interviews were conducted with 20 school social workers in K–12 public schools, across three states, to understand the primary needs of children and families during the pandemic and to learn how school social workers can be most effective in responding to these needs. The data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Study findings revealed that during spring 2020, school social workers consistently had increased contact and interaction with students’ parents that centered around two major activities: (1) food assistance and referrals for families and (2) parent check-ins and coaching. The article discusses implications for the field of school social work during crises and beyond. Considerations include increased funding for schools that serve communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the reprioritization of school social workers’ roles and responsibilities to include increased contact with parents.

KEY WORDS: COVID-19; K–12 education; parent engagement; school social work

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic led to the unprecedented shuttering of nearly all local education agencies across the United States from March through June 2020. As education systems around the country closed their physical school doors, professionals in K–12 education scrambled to develop and implement online and distance-learning curricula to meet the academic needs of the nation’s children. However, in addition to academic needs, children and families also experienced significant psychological, social, and economic challenges during this time of social distancing and the closure of key social institutions (Golberstein, Wen, & Miller, 2020). Although school social workers have traditionally been charged with addressing these larger well-being needs for children and families within the education system (Constable, 2016; Frey et al., 2012), in recent decades, school social work practice has become dominated by individual and small-group special education as well as mental health services to students within the confines of the school building and the traditional school day (Kelly et al., 2010; Phillippo, Kelly, Shayman, & Frey, 2017).

The purpose of this article is to explore if and how school social workers’ roles, responsibilities, and work tasks changed during Spring 2020 distance learning to address the continuing and changing needs of families and the larger school community. As COVID-19 infections continue to rise across many areas in the United States, school districts are dramatically altering the way they provide education during the 2020–2021 academic year. The field of social work has an obligation to respond to this pandemic and requires school social workers to expeditiously consider how to restructure their work and roles to meet the current needs of students and their families.

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY FOCUS

School social work as a field began during another period of significant social upheaval: at the turn of the 20th century. This period, referred to by Wenocur and Reisch (1989) as the New Era, was characterized by skyrocketing rates of immigration, massive industrial expansion, increasing inequality in wealth distribution, and a high incidence of poverty (Trattner, 1999). Public schools were charged with responding to these social and economic instabilities by increasing literacy and enhancing positive socialization for their diverse student bodies. The position
of “school social worker,” then referred to as “visiting teacher,” was created to help schools meet the academic and social needs of an increasingly economically, linguistically, and culturally diverse population (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013).

The visiting teacher title reflects the origins of school social work practice as one that was largely concerned with what happened in the homes and neighborhoods of students and how that carried over to students’ school experiences (Culbert, 1916; Knupfer, 1999; Phillippo & Blosser, 2013; Sugrue, 2017). Traditional teachers were confined to their classrooms all day, focusing on curriculum and instruction, whereas visiting teachers conducted home visits and social assessments; facilitated relationships among teachers, parents, and students; and made referrals on behalf of students to mental and physical health clinics (Culbert, 1916; Sugrue, 2017). In addition, they addressed attendance and truancy concerns, created after-school programs, and assisted parents and older students with vocational needs and financial resources.

With the rise of the psychiatric movement in the 1920s and the shift in the larger field of social work more toward a medical model, visiting teachers began to modify their scope of practice (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013; Sherman, 2016; Sugrue, 2017). This marked the beginning of school social work’s shift from a community-based model of work preferred by the settlement houses toward a treatment and intervention focus, as reflected in the traditional medical model (Sherman, 2016; Sugrue, 2017). Many present-day school social workers could be described as case managers and mental health clinicians for individual students who are struggling in schools (Sherman, 2016). Although this narrower and more constrained role has some benefits for students on the school social worker’s caseload, it ultimately minimizes their contributions to the larger school ecosystem.

BEST PRACTICES FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN SCHOOLS

Near the turn of the century, there was a call within mental health professions to replace the traditional medical model of conceptualizing child and adolescent functioning that asked, “What is wrong with this individual?” to an ecological model that instead asked, “What are the school, family, and community environmental and relational factors contributing to the child’s functioning?” (Ysseldyke, Lekwa, Klingbeil, & Cormier, 2012). This shift in assessment and conceptualization of student needs led to more robust assessment-to-intervention connections for students’ academic and social-emotional needs.

Consistent with this shift to ecological assessments, treatment and outcome studies for children and youths have consistently demonstrated stronger and lasting intervention effects when supports and interventions are provided not only to the student but also in partnership with families (Lechuga-Peña & Brisson, 2018; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). Practitioners who provide early intervention services in school and health care settings have long emphasized the importance of delivering services not only to the individual student but also to their families. This is emphasized in the very title of early intervention service plans, such as the individualized family service plan (IFSP). Moreover, K–12-related service providers often overlook that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-446) explicitly names parent counseling and training as a related service to support parents’ ability to understand their child’s exceptional needs, learn about typical child development, and acquire skills to support their child’s individualized education program (IEP) or IFSP. The act further includes both child and parent counseling within the descriptions of both social work services and psychological services.

Since the shift to an ecological focus on family and the community environment to aid a child’s functioning, schools have been tasked with increasing and maintaining school-based parental engagement to support students beyond academics (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Child Trends, 2013; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Social ecological theory suggests family members and, primarily, parents have the first—before the child begins school—and foremost influence on a child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is thus widely accepted that children whose parents are involved in their education benefit in multiple ways, not only academically, such as having regular school attendance and earning higher grades and test scores (Topor, Keane, Shelton, & Calkins, 2010; Wolpert-Gawron, 2019), but also socially because they have better social skills and improved behavior (Henderson, & Mapp, 2002).

Although parent engagement is an effective strategy to promote academic success and positive behaviors for students, schools continue to
struggle with engaging minoritized and high-poverty parents (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). Some strategies, such as relationship building, advocacy, and efficacy of parental involvement that are effective for students of color and low-income families, are often missing from schools (Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2015; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Abrams and Gibbs (2002) found that schools marginalize parents, ignoring the status differences and recreating the dominant power relationships of race and social class reflective of the larger society. As a result, unequal relationships between teachers and parents may occur as a result of power differentials (O’Connor & McCartney, 2007). This lack of involvement because of barriers that parents experience may be perceived as a lack of interest in their child’s education.

Recognizing the importance of parent engagement, particularly in schools serving students of color and low-income students, school social workers have become key facilitators in connecting schools and parents to ensure that each student’s basic needs are being met during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their role has become even more essential in facilitating these connections as teachers become overwhelmed while supporting and focusing on their students’ academic needs.

THE PRESENT STUDY AND METHOD
This study examined the nature of school social work practice during the Spring 2020 COVID-19 school shutdown. The purpose was to understand the primary needs of children and families during the pandemic and to learn how school social workers can be most effective as the pandemic continues to disrupt communities and institutions. Our primary research question was: How did school social workers adapt their roles and work tasks to better meet the needs of students, families, and the larger school community during the Spring 2020 COVID-19 school closures? University institutional review board approval was granted before beginning this study.

Sampling and Participants
A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify participants. School social workers in K–12 public schools across three states and who were employed during the Spring 2020 closures of physical school campuses were eligible to participate. The first and second authors identified school social workers within their professional networks and directly asked them to participate in the study and to share the recruitment invitation with their school social worker colleagues. Twenty school social workers (all with MSW degrees) participated in key informant interviews. Ages of participants ranged from 27 to 51 years old, and the median age was 34.5 years old. There was little gender and racial diversity in the sample. Eighteen participants (90 percent) identified as female, 15 (75 percent) identified as White, two (10 percent) identified as Hispanic, two (10 percent) identified as Asian, and one (5 percent) identified as Black.

At the time of the interviews, participants had an average of 8.6 years of post-MSW degree experience in the field of social work and an average of four years of post-MSW school social work–specific experience. Participants worked in nine districts in three different states (Colorado, Minnesota, and Nevada). The majority of school social workers (n = 14; 70 percent) served urban schools; six served suburban schools. The participants worked at an elementary, middle, or high school or a combination of these schools. The majority of participants (n = 16; 80 percent) served general education schools; four participants (20 percent) worked in alternative school settings (for example, behavioral placements, schools for pregnant and parenting teens). Three quarters of participants (n = 15; 75 percent) served schools in which the majority of students qualified for free or reduced lunch; also, three-quarters of participants (n = 15; 75 percent) served schools in which the majority of students were students of color. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Collection
Participation in this study involved a one-time, semistructured individual interview. All interviews were conducted via the online video conferencing tool Zoom. Interviews lasted between one hour and two hours and took place between May 4 and June 17, 2020. All interviews were conducted by the first or second author, audio recorded, and later transcribed.

Data Analysis
All transcripts were uploaded to Atlas.ti 8.4.4 qualitative data analysis software for the purposes of data management. Transcripts were analyzed using a
grounded theory approach; in the first coding cycle, the researchers used open coding to identify emerging ideas and concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The first and second authors both precoded the first two transcripts, identifying preliminary phrases and words to use as codes (Saldaña, 2009). Then they compared transcripts and codes applied, discussed similarities and discrepancies, and further refined initial codes. The first author then continued coding the remaining 18 transcripts, adding additional codes that reflected the meaning and action of each quotation as needed (Charmaz, 2014). Example codes included attendance, crisis management, meetings, trainings, structural impacts, providing telehealth services to individual students, equity/inequity, and challenges. Next, the second author completed a peer debrief by reviewing each quotation and code and validating where she agreed and did not (Patton, 2002; Spall, 1998).

The second cycle of coding involved axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The second author read through all of the codes from the first round and looked for relationships among codes. She then grouped those codes into larger categories. Example axial codes included parenting interventions, assessment of parent/family needs, structural/scheduling changes related to working with more parents/families, and challenges encountered when working with parents. During the process of open and axial coding, the first and second authors identified the central role that parent and family work played in the participants’ interviews. Thus, school social work practice with parents and families became the core category (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The first author then completed a third round of selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to further clarify the dominant narrative emerging from the data (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019).

RESULTS
One of the most dramatic shifts in school social work practice after the transition to online learning in spring 2020 related to increased contact and interaction with students’ parents. This increased contact with parents is not surprising, given that school social workers no longer had in-person contact with teachers and students; therefore, Mark, an elementary and middle school social worker, noted that “parents [became] the gatekeepers, where the teachers were the gatekeepers [before the pandemic].” Communication with parents centered around two major activities: (1) food assistance and referrals for families and (2) parent check-ins and coaching. These two dominant themes are more thoroughly discussed throughout this section.

Food Assistance and Referrals for Families
All 20 of the school social workers interviewed described increased contact with parents to ensure that they had their basic needs met (for example, food as well as rental and utility payments). Particularly in the early weeks of school closures, as school staff reached out to families to communicate about distance-learning needs, schools became the first point of contact for many families seeking assistance.

Family outreach took on many forms. Some participants discussed sending surveys to students, their parents (often reviewed and responded to by social workers and administrators), or both, to determine the needs of the families. Other participants stated that their school leadership instructed teachers to contact their students’ parents directly to assess each family’s needs and then make referrals to the school social workers as appropriate. Still, other participants were instructed by their administrators to contact the parents of students on their caseload. Participants also indicated that, in some cases, parents reached out to them directly to ask for assistance. Patricia, a middle and high school social worker, stated,

Parents have asked for a lot more help. Whether it was “I can’t pay my rent” or “We need help finding food,” “We need help paying for utilities,” “We all lost our jobs...” We’ve had a lot more requests for just basic needs support.

To meet the increased needs of families during this time of crisis, school social workers and their schools took different approaches. Jennifer, a social worker who worked in elementary school, middle school and a high school, reported that her school district created a multilingual help line for parents and families to provide referrals to appropriate supports. Other school social workers created resource guides for families. For example, Miriam, an elementary school social worker, described how she and the school psychologist worked together on a resource Web site for parents to help them directly link to agencies providing basic needs, such as food
as well as rental and utility assistance. Because food was the most frequent request that school social workers reported addressing, in addition to referring families to local food banks, some school social workers reported that their schools began offering or expanding food assistance programs for families. Although the majority of school social workers interviewed were restricted from conducting home visits during the pandemic, multiple school social workers described delivering bags of food to families and dropping them off on porches and front stoops because many parents did not have their own cars and were avoiding public transportation as a result of the pandemic. Elena, a high school social worker, stated,

Taking public transportation is frowned upon right now, and then also to come and to get big boxes or bags of groceries. So, I just started offering to drop stuff off at people’s houses. And yeah, there are some families that I just know have lots of kids and no income, so I know that it’s really needed there, too.

As the end of the academic year drew near, school social workers discussed concerns about families accessing the support they needed over the summer, when school staff would be off contract and unavailable. Some school social workers helped families develop a specific summer resource plan that they hoped would be enough to help families manage during their time away from the school. Mark, an elementary and middle school social worker, stated,

I have told parents and told families especially in these last couple of weeks. I am making sure that they have some sort of resource or some sort of plan for the summer. We are not going to be available.

**Parent Check-Ins and Coaching**

In addition to providing food assistance and connecting parents to resources, participants indicated that they had more regular check-ins with parents about how they were doing after distance learning began. Although these interactions with parents often began as a way to connect and check in, to schedule social–emotional services for students, or both, the conversations with parents often evolved beyond the initial reason for the call. Ella, a middle school social worker, said, “I would call to do check-ins with students, but I could spend 30 minutes with the parents and five with the student.” Ultimately, many “student check-ins” became an opportunity for school social workers to provide broader emotional support to the parents as well.

Holly, an elementary school social worker, explained that when supporting parents with distance learning, she felt “like the conversation behind it was, ‘I’m exhausted. I cannot parent and teach, and the fact that you’re expecting that of me is just absurd.’” In response, she tried to reframe the expectations from “You need to be the educator” to “How can we help you and support you in this, like, absurd time?” Another elementary school social worker, Tula, echoed this sentiment:

I also think that there’s a real need for ... helping parents to navigate this [pandemic] in terms of expectations and what’s okay to let go in the name of sanity versus how hard we push for schoolwork and things like that.

The school social workers ultimately reported feeling like the pandemic provided the opportunity to engage parents on a much more personal level, particularly with regard to navigating parenting during a national crisis. For example, Ella, a middle school social worker, spoke about connecting with parents “mom to mom” about teenage sleep and school work habits during the shutdowns:

Some moms would be like, “Well, she’s sleeping till noon,” and I’m like, “You know what, she’s getting her stuff done. My 16-year-old is doing the exact same thing. She’s sleeping in and getting her work done in the afternoon and evening. It’s totally fine.”

In some cases, the check-ins with parents turned into “coaching” sessions in which school social workers provided parents with training related to digital literacy, social–emotional interventions for their children, or both. For example, Julia, an elementary school social worker, indicated that an important part of her work involved coaching parents to “access the technology.” Other school social workers coached parents on how to provide the
same social–emotional strategies they typically provided to students at school. This was particularly the case for parents who have children with educational disabilities and receive services via their IEP. Mark, an elementary and middle school social worker, described his work as “coaching the parent so that they can provide some of the interventions that I would do otherwise.” Similarly, Patricia, a middle and high school social worker, discussed providing parent education regarding “setting routines and setting limits,” “mental health topics,” and identifying “some things to look for and . . . ways to support your child and stay connected in a world where they can’t connect physically.” This type of “train-the-trainer” approach allowed parents to gain the necessary support and expertise to assume the role of teacher or school social worker, as students no longer received in-person instruction or social–emotional supports.

**DISCUSSION**

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity for the field of school social work to reevaluate its role in the U.S. public education system and to reshape its practice approach to better reflect core social work perspectives, such as person-in-environment and ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Findings from this study illustrate how school social workers returned to their roots during the Spring 2020 school closures as “ecologically driven and community-oriented” (Sherman, 2016, p. 147) professionals who appreciate the importance of healthy families and communities for the well-being of individual students.

In recent years, the focus of school social work practice has been to provide direct services (tier II and III interventions) to students (Kelly et al., 2010; Phillippo et al., 2017). Although this focus continues to be important, the findings highlight the need for school social workers to reprioritize their focus to include increased communication with parents, food assistance, and referrals to community resources. Although crises are unexpected and overwhelming, they also serve as opportunities to establish personal connections with families, build rapport, and provide emotional support for parents as they navigate difficult situations—in this case, a global pandemic. In addition, school social workers have used their platform to provide needed training to parents (that is, digital literacy, children’s socioemotional needs) to improve student outcomes.

School social workers need to determine how to continue to use this approach when full-time, in-person school resumes.

Findings indicate that, during the pandemic, school social workers have served not only as school–community connectors, but also as family resource agents. Often, these direct services are not emphasized in school social work practice (Kelly et al., 2010; Phillippo & Blosser, 2013). In providing needed resources to families, school social workers may have strengthened the school and parent connection, thereby improving parental school engagement among schools in which the majority of students qualify for free or reduced lunch and are students of color. Ongoing contact with families is important, because parent involvement in schools improves child academic outcomes and is particularly beneficial for children of color and youths living in poverty (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Topor et al., 2010).

After the physical closure of schools, the school social workers interviewed for this study had increased contact with parents to ensure that families had their basic needs met. Unfortunately, the direct support that school social workers provided to families was limited to food assistance and referrals to community agencies for rental and utility assistance. Because schools are already intimately connected to families, it would be more effective for schools serving lower income communities to receive direct funding to provide financial support to their students and families in need. This effort could be achieved by expanding the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act [CARES] Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-136) or creating additional emergency funding to be funneled through K–12 public schools that are serving historically marginalized communities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). This expansion of funding is especially important because lower income families and communities of color (Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities, in particular) have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic (APM Research Lab Staff, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2020).

Furthermore, findings from this study clearly indicate that school social workers have stretched themselves throughout the pandemic and will continue—for the foreseeable future—to take on additional labor outside their traditional job roles. This study highlights the importance of support-
ing school social workers who have been forced to shift from focusing on direct services to students to providing additional supports to families that have been affected most by the pandemic. Much of the public discourse has been devoted to the various ways of supporting teachers and educators during the pandemic; however, school social workers need to be included in these discussions.

LIMITATIONS
This is an exploratory study, and the findings cannot be generalized to all school social workers in all settings. That said, the findings provide important perspectives from the field for school social workers to reflect on. School social workers should actively reflect on their engagement with parents and families and ways to increase their engagement—not just during the pandemic and online or hybrid learning but as a way to maintain meaningful relationships with parents and families when schools return to full-time, in-person learning.

As noted in the Sampling and Participants section, similar to the larger school social worker population, the school social workers included in this study were majority White and female (n = 14; 70 percent); however, the students the school social workers serve are majority low-income students of color. This brings up questions about how the school social workers engage with students, parents, and families in culturally responsive and anti-oppressive ways. Participants often described their social work practice before the pandemic centering around interactions directly with the students (the teachers were “gatekeepers” to the students) and with teachers but not with the parents. This exposes a problem. School social workers should be engaging with the parents of the children they are working with more consistently, because families of color often operate from a collectivist perspective that includes the family and not just the individual. This is especially important, given the ethnic and cultural mismatch of many school social workers and the students they serve. The increased contact between school social workers and parents subsequent to the pandemic should continue to be a priority for school social workers when schools resume normal, in-person operations.

A final limitation of the study is the lack of specific questions related to anti-oppressive and culturally responsive practice when engaging with parents and families of color. In addition, participants generally did not address this issue in their responses. This is an opportunity for future research, more specifically, to identify the challenges, successes, and areas for growth related to social work practice within a largely homogeneous profession serving a heterogeneous public school community.

CONCLUSION
The results of this study add to the literature on school social work responses during crises and inform school social work policy and practice during times of catastrophe and beyond. However, the findings also offer opportunities for school social workers to shift their practice to be effective during “normal” circumstances. For example, the majority of participants discussed increased contact with parents during remote learning. In returning to more community-oriented practice, school social workers had the opportunity to build rapport, build stronger relationships with parents, and improve the school–community connection. In addition, this increased contact with parents provided a greater opportunity for them to play a more active role in their children’s intervention. This type of intentional connection with parents is a best practice that should be ongoing rather than applied only in times of crisis.

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