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School Social Workers' Perceptions of the Impact of High-Stakes Accountability Testing in Schools

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School Social Workers' Perceptions of the Impact of High-Stakes

Accountability Testing in Schools

by

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School Social Workers' Perceptions of the Impact of High-Stakes Accountability Testing in Schools

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African American and Hispanic students and students from families with lower income are particularly at-risk for differential academic achievement and dropout. When students underachieve at school or dropout, they often face severe consequences such as increased risk of incarceration and unemployment. School social workers strive to prevent poor academic achievement and the associated negative outcomes. In recent years, federal and state education policy has focused on reducing disparities in academic achievement through the creation of policies that use high-stakes testing requirements to hold schools accountable for student learning. Research studies on teacher perceptions of high-stakes testing indicate that it is having a negative impact on their job tasks and on school systems. However, there are few studies that examine school social worker perceptions about the impact of high-stakes testing.

This study examines school social workers' perceptions about high-stakes testing. Specifically, it assesses school social worker perceptions about the impact of high-stakes

testing on school systems and how school ratings and student performance might influence these perceptions. It also examines school social workers' perceptions about the impact of high-stakes testing on their abilities to perform their work tasks. The study sample is drawn from respondents to the Texas School Social Work Survey (n=177). Data were analyzed through secondary data analysis using factor analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM).

Findings indicate that school social workers perceive high-stakes testing as having a largely negative impact on school systems and their job tasks. School social workers who predominantly worked with students from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to have negative opinions about the impact of high-stakes testing on their job tasks. School social workers from schools with lower school ratings and those who felt that the students on their caseload tended to struggle on high-stakes tests had more negative perceptions about the impact of high-stakes testing on school systems. Results indicate the need for school social workers to become more involved in education policy and macro practice, to connect their services to improved academic outcomes for students, and to find new ways to provide school social work services in the "age of accountability."

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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND POLICY OVERVIEW

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

School social workers are often called upon to work with students who are at-risk of poor school achievement such as students experiencing economic disadvantage, disability, truancy, and behavior problems, among many others. School social workers strive to help students overcome these obstacles to ameliorate their higher risk for academic failure or dropout. They also seek to reduce disparities in educational outcomes for students that experience significant educational barriers and those who do not (Allen-Meares, 2007).

In recent years, U.S. education policy has also focused on disparities in academic achievement between white, economically advantaged students and students "at-risk" of school failure (Shavelson & Huang, 2003). Among students at-risk are those who have historically underperformed academically and those who are at greater risk of dropping out of school. Minority students, particularly African American and Hispanic students, and students from families with lower socioeconomic status are particularly at-risk for differential achievement on national academic indicators and for increased rates of dropout.

One such indicator is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a standardized assessment that is administered to a nationally representative sample of fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade public school students at least once every two years. The purpose of the NAEP is to keep the U.S. public informed about the academic achievement of school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Data

from the 2009 NAEP show that there is a large gap in reading and math scores for African American and Hispanic students when compared to white students. For instance, African American fourth graders scored an average of 26 points below white peers and Hispanic fourth graders scored an average of 25 points below white peers. Similar gaps in reading exist at the eighth grade level with average gaps of 26 points for African American and 24 points for Hispanic students when compared to white students. The trend continues in fourth grade and eighth grade math where white students outperform their African American and Hispanic peers by an average of 21-32 points (Aud et al., 2010). Students in these minority groups are also more likely to drop out of school. In 2008, the percentage of young people ages 16-24 that had dropped out of school was much higher for Hispanic (18.3%) and African American (9.9%) students than for white students (4.8%) (Aud et al). With students from Hispanic and African American backgrounds making up 38% of the total student population, this data reveals that a large portion of public school students are at-risk of negative school outcomes (Aud et al).

In 2006, 16.9% of American students were living below the poverty threshold and 20.8% were living near the threshold (families at 100 -199 percent of the poverty threshold) (Planty et al, 2008). More than 30.5 million students receive free and reduced lunch at school due to family income status (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2009). On the NAEP, schools with higher proportions of students who were financially eligible for free or reduced lunch have lower average student scores than schools with lower proportions of students who were eligible for this service. An example in point can be observed in the scores of fourth grade students in the highest poverty public schools with

more than 75% eligible for free or reduced lunch as they scored an average of 34 points below schools with the lowest percentage of eligible students (10%) (Aud et al., 2010). Similarly, dropout rates are correlated with socioeconomic status such that students from families with incomes in the lowest quartile (16.7%) drop out at higher rates than students in the middle (10.5%), high middle (6.4%), and uppermost (3.2%) income quartiles (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

These indicators make it clear that a large portion of U.S. students are at substantial risk of poor school outcomes. This risk has been addressed through many avenues during the last decade including the introduction of federal and state policies, adaptation in teaching techniques, and through supplemental school services such as school social work services. Addressing the risk of school failure is a major concern because the consequences of school failure are pervasive and long lasting.

Consequences of School Failure

When students underachieve at school or dropout, they often face severe consequences. Students with poor academic performance are much more likely to drop out of school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Richman, Bowen, & Wooley, 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). Students who drop out of school are more prone to depression and feelings of isolation. They are more likely to use drugs and alcohol and are more likely to join gangs and engage in violent activity (Aloise-Young & Chavez, 2002; Harlow, 2003; Rumberger, 2004). Students who do not graduate high school are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested and 8 times more likely to be incarcerated (Christeson et al., 2008). The majority of inmates incarcerated in state prisons (68%) do not have a high

school diploma (Harlow, 2003). Adults without a high school diploma are more likely to be unemployed and tend to make lower salaries when they are employed (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003; Rouse, 2005). The average income for a citizen without a high school diploma is $12,000, which is half of the average income for those with a high school diploma only and one third of the average income for those with more than a high school diploma (Rouse, 2005). In addition, high school dropouts are only half as likely to have health insurance or pension plans as those whose high school diploma is their highest level of education. Finally, there are large-scale economic consequences for failing to graduate high school. High school dropouts contribute $50 billion less ($60,000-$150,000 per individual) in federal and state taxes per year than those with a high school diploma as their terminal degree (Rouse, 2005).

On the front line, educators, school administrators, school counselors, and school social workers have identified and worked to alleviate the individual and social burden of school failure for decades. Since the 1980's, disparities in academic performance, differential dropout rates, and the consequences associated with school failure and dropout have led to increased public scrutiny of public schools. Federal and state education policy has also been aimed at reducing these problems and improving academic outcomes for all students through implementation of strict standards and accountability procedures.

Federal Implementation of Education Accountability Policy

Since the 1980s, the concepts of standards and accountability in education have been gaining momentum. In 1983, the newly formed National Commission on Excellence

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in Education was tasked by the Secretary of Education to assess the U.S. education system, including teacher quality and student achievement. The result of this task was the *Nation at Risk* report in which American students were compared to students in other advanced nations. The report found that American students had fallen academically behind other nations and were even performing poorly compared to previous U.S. generations. The report warned that if the American education system was not improved, there would be dire consequences to the U.S. economy and even to democratic society (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This caused widespread criticism of both U.S. schools and educators and led to calls for increased educational accountability (Superfine, 2005).

Soon after the *Nation at Risk* report, the Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, instituted the *Wall Chart* of state educational statistics comparing test scores, graduation rates, and education financing. This was the first time that education statistics had ever been compared across states in a public manner (Macpherson, 1996; Vinovskis, 1999). Many considered the *Wall Chart* flawed because it included SAT and ACT scores of students bound for college in its calculations of student achievement even though these measures left out all non-college bound students and the percentage of students who took these assessments in each state varied widely. It also reported dropout rates inconsistently between states, but did draw attention to a dropout rate that was much higher than the public had previously perceived (Ginsburg, Noell, & Plisko, 1988). Despite criticisms, this marked the beginning of the use of state-by-state comparisons as a means to educational accountability (Vinovskis, 1999) and shifted state and school assessments to

assessing student outcomes rather than input of resources (Ginsburg, Noell, & Plisko, 1988). Congress soon tasked the National Center for Educational Statistics with recommending national educational indicators that could be compared across states, leading to development of the NAEP (Macpherson). These publications culminated with a new federal education policy in 1994 called Goals 2000. This legislation aimed to increase educational accountability through standards and assessments. However, it was never fully implemented due to a lack of state support, elimination of key statutes, inadequate funding, and a lack of reauthorization (Superfine, 2005).

In 2001, the drive for educational accountability resurfaced with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 called the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Many consider NCLB to be one of the most complex and expansive federal education policies in the history of U.S. public education (Orlich, 2004). NCLB has four major targets: 1) Reducing the achievement gap through stronger accountability for academic outcomes, 2) Flexibility in the use of federal funds, 3) Focus on evidence based practices, and 4) Increased school choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This dissertation will focus predominantly on the first target related to achievement gaps and accountability.

One of the stated purposes of NCLB is to "improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged" by ensuring "that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, 115 STAT 1439). To accomplish this, the legislation

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requires states to set content standards for what students should know, assess students to see if they are meeting the standards, and report the results (Hess, 2005). NCLB mandates that each state tests students regularly and reports the results by measuring Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), or the percentage of students that score at the "proficient" level or higher on state assessments (Hursh, 2005). Each state determines its own benchmarks for proficiency for each subject. States have been allowed to set and adjust AYP targets annually since 2001, but NCLB mandates that 100% of U.S. students meet proficiency standards in reading and math by the 2013-2014 school year (Hess, 2005; Hursh, 2005; Orlich, 2004).

NCLB requires states to publically report AYP results at the state, district, and school level. Schools must report both their overall AYP and their AYP for specific at-risk subgroups. NCLB defined at-risk subgroups include low-income students, minority students, students with disabilities, and students for whom English is a second language (Hess, 2005). Schools that do not meet AYP for their entire student population or for any single subgroup for two consecutive years could face sanctions in funding, services, and organization that increase in severity for each year that AYP is not achieved (Hursch, 2005).

The rationale behind accountability systems, such as the one set forth by NCLB, is that high-stakes testing can serve as motivation for students, teachers, and administrators to improve educational conditions and academic achievement. Testing requirements and the threat of sanctions are intended to stimulate schools to use the resources that they already have to improve test scores and promote academic

advancement (Herman, Baker, & Linn, 2004). While NCLB has had some positive

impact in addressing the needs of underachieving students (Dworkin, 2005; Fusarelli,

2004), children in at-risk subgroups continue to underperform when compared to their

peers (Aud et al., 2010; Belfiore, 2005; Planty et al., 2008). Some studies have also found

that NCLB may be widening the achievement gap (Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Jones, 2004)

and that high-stakes testing can exacerbate dropout rates (Dworkin, 2005; Haney, 2000;

Lipman, 2002; Urrieta, 2004).

Many studies have found that high-stakes testing is also changing teacher roles

and is altering their ability to perform their daily tasks (Abrams, 2003; Booher-Jennings,

2005; Burroughs, Groce, Webeck, 2005; Costigan, 2002; Crocco & Costigan, 2007;

Haney, 2000; Jones et al., 1999; Massey, 2006). In addition, many teachers have negative

perceptions about the impact of accountability testing on school systems (Craig, 2004;

Flores & Clark, 2003; International Reading Association, 2003; Pedulla et al., 2003).

Less research is available about school social worker perceptions about NCLB and any

direct impact that accountability testing may be having on the abilities of school social

workers to accomplish their work tasks.

State Implementation of Education Accountability Policy

Public education is regulated, in part, by the federal government, but the United

States does not have a central education system. Instead, it has 50 separate state school

systems (plus the District of Columbia), which vary according to the policies and

practices of thousands of individual districts (Black & William, 2005). NCLB set up a

system of federally mandated educational accountability based on high-stakes testing to

ensure quality education in these systems, but each system remains highly individualized. In other words, each state has the latitude to interpret and implement the mandates as they see fit as long as they meet basic requirements. As a result, there is substantial variation in how individual states have chosen to implement NCLB (Hess, 2005).

NCLB provides some guidelines that are firm such as requirements to develop content standards, align assessments with these standards, determine the percentage of students deemed proficient on those standards, and publically report the findings. However, it offers little guidance on the types of content that should be covered for different grade levels (Hess, 2005). Therefore, some states have ambitious content standards, while others are more basic (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). However, schools are not compared based on what students are learning. Instead, they are compared by the number of students who are able to score adequately on standardized assessments.

Similarly, each state determines its own definition of "proficiency" and decides how well students must do on its test to be considered proficient. State-developed tests are also inconsistent and less reliable than commercially developed tests (Kirby et al., 2002). For these reasons, variability among test scores and passing rates is a one of the major criticisms aimed at implementation of this policy. Furthermore, there are often discrepancies between student scores on state tests and scores on national indicators. Both before and after the passing of NCLB, studies found that improved student scores on high-stakes state tests often did not correlate with improved scores on national standardized tests such as the NAEP, Advanced Placement tests, ACT or SAT where scores often remained the steady or decreased (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Fuller et al.,

2007; Haney, 2000; Linn, 2000, 2005; Moss, Pullin, Gee, & Haertel, 2005). Linn (2005) highlights this phenomenon by pointing out that in 2003, the state that ranked second to last on NAEP performance had over 90% of its schools meet AYP.

Other analyses have produced similar findings. A recent study in Texas, for example, found that while only a small achievement gap was reported for state test scores in reading for Latino and white students, the gap was very large on the NAEP (McCombs, Kirby, Barney, Darilek, & Magee, 2005). As part of Harvard University's Civil Rights Project, Lee (2005) systemically analyzed NAEP trends in reading and math scores for 4th and 8th graders before NCLB was enacted (1990-2001) and after (2002-2005), as well as discrepancies between state and NAEP assessment results. He found that federal and state accountability practices did significantly impact national averages in math or reading and did not help to close the achievement gap on a state or national level. Overall, he found that high-stakes test results are misleading because state tests tend to inflate student scores and signal reductions in the achievement gap that do not transfer to the NAEP. States with higher-stakes tests had greater discrepancies between state results and NAEP results.

It is important to note that the NAEP has also come under criticism since it was first implemented in 1986. The psychometric properties of this assessment have been refined and improved over time (Huynh & Schneider, 2005), but it is still criticized for being too challenging and setting the bar so high that no state has a more than 50% of students meeting the proficient level in reading and math (Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Linn 2003; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). However, the NAEP continues to be a low-

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stakes benchmark to which students and schools in all states can be commonly compared and a steady indicator that can be used to judge the accuracy and stringency of state accountability tests (Linn, 2003).

States also vary in their techniques for meeting intermediate goals and performance targets. Under NCLB, each state has been required to set up intermediate goals to define a plan for reaching the required 100% proficiency status by 2013-2014. Some states chose to set these goals in equal increments, but others chose to front or back load their targets so they would became increasingly easier or more difficult to meet over time even though the end goal is universal. This causes some states to appear more or less successful than others because they are working with different starting points, definitions of proficiency, and yearly goals. For instance, in the first year of NCLB, North Carolina started with 74.6% of students already proficient, while Arizona started with only 7% of students proficient and both are working toward the goal of 100% proficiency (Linn, 2005).

By the time NCLB was passed, every state except one had some form of accountability system that connected curriculum standards with some form of assessment (Linn, 2005). Approximately 25 states had state accountability policies that linked aggregated standardized testing outcomes with consequences for schools or school personnel in place before the passing of NCLB (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005). With the passing of the federal legislation, states had to decide what to do with their existing accountability systems. Some of these states chose to meet the mandates of NCLB by incorporating them into their current state accountability systems, while others chose to

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maintain their separate state and federal accountability systems (Linn, 2005). Layering accountability systems can be problematic because of the sheer number of expectations schools must meet such as ensuring acceptable passing rates on high-stakes tests linked to AYP, as well as preparing students to pass separate grade-level or high school exit exams so they can progress to the next grade or graduate (Hursh, 2005; Orlich, 2004). Having dual systems can also be inconsistent and unreliable in that the outcomes for the systems can differ. For instance, schools can receive the highest marks on their state accountability measures, but fail to make AYP or they can make AYP but fail to meet state expectations (Linn, 2005). This can cause confusion for students, educators, and parents and further highlights the volatility of the use of high-stakes assessments to gauge student learning.

Given the large differences in policy interpretation and implementation among different states, it can be helpful to examine a single state's policies and the perceived impact of policy implementation from the viewpoint of school social workers. Texas has been a longtime proponent in the push for educational accountability and high-stakes testing and has instituted educational accountability systems in the state for many years. For these reasons, it is an interesting state to examine in terms of education policy implementation and the perceived impact on students and social worker roles in the schools.

State Example: Texas Accountability Policy Implementation

Concerned about educational accountability, the Texas state legislature required the creation of a public school accountability system in 1993. This made Texas one of the

first states to implement a high stakes accountability system. This legislation mandated that all school districts and school campuses must be rated according to several indicators: standardized test pass rates, dropout rate, and attendance. The Texas Education Agency (TEA), the body that guides and monitors Texas schools, was able to enact this legislation quickly because they already had a mandated curriculum, a student-level data collection system, and a statewide assessment (Texas Education Agency, 2008).

From 1993 through 2002, the state used the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) as the standardized test linked to school and district accountability ratings (Texas Education Agency, 2008). The test was administered to students in grades 4, 8, and 10 for reading, writing, and mathematics. Schools and districts were required to report the TAAS pass rates for the entire student population, as well as ethnic groups and economically disadvantaged students. To achieve high rankings, schools and districts had to show acceptable TAAS passing levels for subgroups of students as well as the entire student body. The TAAS was linked to both cash incentives for thriving schools and severe sanctions for failing schools. This high-stakes accountability system, enacted under Texas Governor George W. Bush, was used as the model for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 when he took office as the President of the United States (Haney, 2000).

In 2003, Texas began using a new, more difficult high-stakes test for education accountability purposes. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test scores in reading and math (for grades 3 through 8 and grade 10), along with several

other indicators, began to be used to determine whether schools made AYP under NCLB (Texas Education Agency, 2008). At this time, Texas also redesigned its state-wide accountability system with requirements similar to, but more stringent than those stipulated in NCLB. To meet current state accountability requirements, the TAKS test is administered to students in grades 3 through 11 for reading/language arts and mathematics, and has been expanded to writing (grades 4 and 7 only), social studies (grades 8, 10, and 11 only), and science (grades 5, 8, 10, and 11 only) for specific grades. At the same time, Texas also began to use a new rating system that corresponded with TAKS test scores (Texas Education Agency). Please see the Explication of Variables section for a detailed description of how the TAKS test was used to help determine educational accountability rating calculations in Texas at the time of the study.

After the data collection phase of this dissertation was complete, Texas began to transition to a new accountability system. This system is designed to be more rigorous and have higher stakes for students. Beginning in the 2011-2012 school year, a new series of tests dubbed the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) will replace the TAKS tests for students in grades three through eight. Students will be tested at the same grade levels and in the same subjects as the TAKS, however the tests have been designed to be more difficult, to test fewer skills in a more in depth manner, and to have higher achievement standards for students (Texas Education Agency, 2010c). Theses assessments will be more complex, have more items, and take longer to complete (Texas Education Agency, 2010b). For high school students, a series of 12 end-of-course assessments in four subject areas (math, science, social studies, and English) will replace

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the TAKS test. These assessments will count for 15% of the final course grade in each course. To pass the set of tests in each subject, students must reach a cumulative score that is equal to or greater than the number of assessments in each subject area multiplied by the satisfactory score for those subject areas. If a student fails to meet a minimum threshold score on any single test, that score is not counted toward the cumulative score. Students are able to retake tests that they do not pass and the highest score on each test is counted toward the cumulative score. Overall, students must pass each set of tests with a satisfactory cumulative score or they will not be permitted to graduate. Students who entered the ninth grade in the 2010-2011 school year will be the first cohort to fall under these graduation requirements (Texas Education Agency, 2010c). A new accountability rating system aligned with the STAAR will begin in 2013 (Texas Education Agency, 2010a).

Research on the impact of state and federally mandated accountability systems in Texas has been mixed in its conclusions. While some studies have found that Texas has made strides in closing the achievement gap among disadvantaged students (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000; Kober, Chudowsky, & Chudowsky, 2010; Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000; Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001), others have posited that these gains are false or are accounted for by faulty statistical procedures, shifting achievement targets, and poor educational practices aimed at excluding underperforming students from taking the assessments (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Haney, 2000; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Studies from Texas are reviewed, along with similar studies from others states, in the following section on the

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impact of education accountability policy on students, as well as in the literature review section.

Impact of Education Accountability Policy on Students

Research on educational accountability policy implementation outlines the impact that high-stakes testing has had on students and in achieving the stated goals of closing the achievement gap. These studies tend to be split between those that focus on the positive impact of accountability policies such as NCLB and those that focus on the harmful, unintended consequences.

Positive Findings

Many authors have pointed out the positive impact that accountability policy has had on education in the United States in general. They argue that it has helped school personnel and the American public to become aware of the need to improve the educational experience of underserved and underachieving students (Dworkin, 2005; Fusarelli, 2004). Since overall and subgroup scores must be reported, schools and districts can no longer hide struggling subgroup scores within average scores (Fusarelli, 2004). NCLB has ensured that students within each state are tested uniformly regardless of ethnicity, disability, or other demographics. In addition, students, teachers, administrators, parents, and general citizens now have detailed and readily available information about academic achievement and school quality (Cizek, 2001).

There is some evidence that accountability systems have helped to improve standardized test scores and decrease the achievement gap. Prior to NCLB implementation, for example, researchers had already begun examining the impact of

high-stakes testing and state accountability systems. In a comparison of states with higher stakes rewards and sanctions for schools to those with lower stakes, Carnoy & Loeb (2002) found that states with higher stakes accountability systems made more significant gains on the fourth grade NAEP math assessment from 1996-2000. This study also found that the gains were greater for African American and Latino students, resulting in a narrowing of the achievement gap. Rosenshine (2003) compared the eighth grade NAEP scores for states with more severe consequences associated with their testing system to comparison states without high-stakes testing systems. Examples of more severe consequences included graduation and grade promotion being linked to test scores and state ability to replace teaching staff, take over, or close schools where students do not perform well on accountability tests. This study found that states with high-stakes testing systems had better average test scores on three NAEP tests than states without these systems. Similarly, Hanushek & Raymond (2003) found that accountability systems had a positive impact on NAEP test scores at the 4th and 8th grade level.

In another analysis of high-stakes test results from 45 states beginning in the 2002-2003 school year, Springer (2008) found that underachieving students in schools that are under threat of sanctions have greater test score gains. In other words, the threat of NCLB sanctions for failing schools is correlated with greater than expected test score gains for struggling students. This may indicate that the threat of sanctions does indeed motivate schools to find ways to improve student achievement. Kober et al. (2008) analyzed test scores for the four at-risk subgroups since the implementation of NCLB in all states with sufficient data. They found that achievement gap effect sizes had narrowed

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in 184 instances, increased in 56 instances, and remained about the same in 30 instances. Consequently, the achievement gap across states has narrowed more than it has increased overall (Kober et al., 2008). Some teachers also believe that NCLB implementation has improved student achievement. In a survey of 248 special and general education teachers and service providers in 15 school districts in Texas, over 50% of teachers believed that NCLB accountability policies had improved students' high-stakes test scores and 37% believed that they had improved in-class test scores (Vannest, Mahadevan, Mason & Temple-Harvey, 2009).

Studies have also found that NCLB implementation has been motivational for some schools. For instance, when leaders are highly responsive to accountability policies, this can create a drive to improve instructional practices and student outcomes. In high-performing schools, test scores can be an effective way to motivate school staff and identify areas in need of improvement (Diamond & Spillane, 2004). In addition, NCLB implementation has helped to improve school leadership structures in some schools and has been the driving force in creating new instructional responses that can benefit students. For instance, Fusarelli suggests that NLCB can motivate school leaders to more closely monitor student performance, develop improved curriculum, and organize communities and parents to work together to improve schools (Fusarelli, 2004).

Unintended Consequences of Accountability Policies
Despite the perceived positive impacts of accountability policies there are also negative and unintended outcomes associated with them. There is growing evidence that accountability policy implementation, for example, may not be improving and may even

be widening the achievement gap for the ethnic minority and low income students that school social workers often serve. First, some scholars believe that assessing student school and state accountability via any standardized test score is undesirable. They categorize test scores as misleading and uni-dimensional, point out that a rise in test scores is not necessarily indicative of student progress, and believe that errors in test design and scoring are numerous (Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Hursh, 2005; Jones, 2004; Lane, 2004; Linn, 2003; Raywid, 2002; Russell, Higgins, & Raczek, 2004). In addition, studies have uncovered discrepancies when comparing student progress on state specific accountability tests and progress on commonly defined national indicators such as progress on NAEP (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Haney 2000; Lee & Wong, 2004). According to national indicators, students in at-risk subgroups continue to significantly underperform when compared to students outside of these subgroups (Aud, 2010; Belfiore, 2005; Planty et al., 2008). In some states, when state test scores have increased, the achievement gap has remained large and has even widened on the NAEP (Hanushek & Raymond, 2003; Linn, 2005), indicating that some state tests may not accurately measure student progress.

Discrepancies between NCLB state assessments and national indicators have also been linked to questionable practices in some states that are aimed at inflating test scores, but are harmful to students. These strategies include assigning students disproportionately to special education placements (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Figlio & Getzer, 2002; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008), retaining students in their current grades to avoid testing years (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Pedulla et al., 2003; Wheelock, 2003), and pushing

students toward the decision to drop out of school (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Dworkin, 2005; Figlio & Getzer, 2002; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Lipman, 2002; Pedulla et al., 2003; Urrieta, 2004; Wheelock, 2003). Consequently, NCLB implementation seems to be having a negative impact on grade retention rates, particularly for students from at-risk subgroups (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Pedulla et al., 2003; Wheelock, 2003). This is a major concern because students who are retained are more likely to drop out of school (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997; Rumberger, 1995). Similarly, high-stakes testing seems to exacerbating dropout rates in many states (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Dworkin, 2005; Figlio & Getzer, 2002; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Lipman, 2002; Pedulla et al., 2003; Urrieta, 2004; Wheelock, 2003).

For instance, Wheelock (2003) found that when Massachusetts adopted a tenth grade exit exam with scores tied to accountability ratings, grade retention rates and dropout rates increased significantly, especially in ninth grade and particularly for African American and Latino students. Schools that experienced the largest gains in student test scores also had some of the highest retention and dropout rates. In a study of Texas schools, Amrein & Berliner (2003) found that schools with higher stakes testing have higher dropout rates than those where the stakes are not as high. These schools also had higher grade retention rates with nearly 25% of all African American and Latino students being retained in ninth grade. In a national survey of teachers from states with both higher stakes and lower stakes testing programs, one study found that 25% of teachers in high-stakes schools and 3% of teachers in low-stakes schools reported that NCLB testing contributes to grade retention. Also, 25% of teachers in high-stakes schools

and 10% of teachers in low-stakes schools felt that state testing contributed to student dropout (Pedulla et al., 2003).

In an analysis of longitudinal student achievement data (1995-2002) for a student cohort in a large urban district in Texas where accountability testing was implemented in the 1990s, Helig & Darling-Hammond (2008) found that more than 30% of ninth graders were retained for one year or more and that although the reported dropout rate was under 3.5%, the number of students who withdrew or disappeared was as high as 40% for the cohort. There were some students that were retained in ninth grade and then skipped to the eleventh or twelfth grades, seemingly to avoid testing in the tenth grade. In addition, schools that had higher ninth grade retention rates and those with more student leavers had greater gains in test scores and higher accountability ratings. Interviews with teachers and administrators revealed that these trends were the result of strategies used to improve school and district accountability ratings.

Since school social workers predominantly serve students who are at-risk of negative educational outcomes, the academic practices outlined above may be a major concern for school social workers. If the advent of high-stakes testing is having a negative impact on at-risk students, it is likely that school social workers have observed this impact in student populations and that they have opinions about the effectiveness of the legislation. Similarly, if the number of students at-risk for retention or dropout is increasing, this is likely to have an impact on school social worker tasks and expectations.

Research on school-level accountability data has uncovered that accountability testing policies that tie test scores to accountability schemes have a disparate impact on certain types of schools, with more negative outcomes for the vulnerable populations that school social work services often target. For instance, schools with larger populations of low-income and minority students are less likely to make AYP (Dworkin, 2005; Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Koski & Weis, 2004). Also, small schools and schools with larger at-risk or mobile student populations, particularly those in urban or rural areas, are more likely to fail to make AYP (Dworkin, 2005; Jimerson, 2005). Harris (2007) found that low poverty schools are 22 times more likely to reach high academic achievement when compared to high poverty schools. Schools that have few minority students and are low poverty are 89 times more likely to reach high academic achievement than schools that have many minority students and are high poverty. These findings suggest that schools with larger populations of minority students and students from low-income families are more likely to receive financial and organizational sanctions. Since these schools tend to have fewer resources to begin with, these sanctions can further deplete their ability to improve student learning in the future, contrary to the intention of NCLB (Shavelson & Huang, 2003). Based on these findings, it is possible that school social workers who work in schools with a large number of students from minority backgrounds and those with lower socioeconomic status, and hence schools with lower ratings, might have more negative perceptions of high-stakes testing than school social workers who work in more affluent schools with higher ratings.

RELEVANCE OF EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY TO SOCIAL WORK

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), there are approximately 34,200 social workers currently employed in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Approximately 41% of public elementary schools and 38% of secondary schools employ a school social worker. These numbers likely represent an underestimate since social workers may be labeled with other titles within the school system such as pupil personnel workers, truancy officers, and student support specialists. The school social work profession is forecasted to increase in coming years as a result of increasing student enrollments (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

While school social workers perform a variety of functions in schools, most focus on identifying and assisting at-risk students to help them reach their full academic potential (Allen-Meares, 2007). School social workers target students in the at-risk categories defined by NCLB, as well students experiencing other problems that put them at-risk for school failure such as homelessness, drug and alcohol use, truancy, teen pregnancy, mobility, illness, sexual orientation, abuse and neglect, migrant status, and delinquent behaviors (Allen-Meares). Consequently, school social workers concentrate their efforts on the same at-risk students targeted by NCLB (Allen-Meares, 2007; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). In fact, school social workers and other mental health professionals are addressed in NCLB policy. NCLB authorizes local education agencies to apply for federal funding to improve and expand mental health counseling in schools. The policy recognizes school social workers as qualified mental health providers and

encourages an adequate ratio of school social workers to students (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

School social workers clearly play a vital part in identifying and assisting at-risk students. While teachers focus on directly improving students' academic abilities, school social workers target social and emotional factors that lead to academic risk (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Studies find that academic achievement is more likely to improve when social and emotional contexts, such as poverty, are addressed directly (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). Schools should address personal and family characteristics such as mental health problems, community violence, unemployment, health care, nutrition, and housing in order to improve academic outcomes (Borman et al., 2004; Demie, 2002; Gerstl-Pepin, 2004; Mathis, 2004; Price et al., 2006; Prodente et al., 2002; Repie, 2005). School social workers are often the primary source of mental health care for school-aged children (Kelly et al., 2010). As teachers and school counselors must focus more of their attention on high-stakes testing, it is likely that social workers have become one of the primary sources of general social and emotional support for students as well (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). NCLB policy dictates that school social workers should focus on direct service targeting the emotional and social needs of students. States that accept mental health grants under NCLB agree that their school social workers will spend the majority of their time counseling students and providing direct services such as counseling, improving student understanding of peer and family relationships, improving peer interaction, improving decision making, increasing parent involvement, and linking community and school services (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

This study examines the perceptions of a sample of school social workers concerning the high-stakes testing enacted as a result of federal and state education accountability policies. Specifically, it assesses school social worker perceptions about the impact of high-stakes testing on the school systems in which they practice and how school ratings and student performance might influence these perceptions. It also examines the impact of the TAKS test on school social workers' perceptions about their abilities to perform their daily work tasks and how the types of students that they serve might influence these perceptions. A convenience sample of school social workers from the state of Texas is used in this study.

Though the research literature is mixed regarding the positive and negative impact that high-stakes testing mandated by federal and state education policies has had on public schools, it is clear that this policy has caused fundamental changes to the U.S. education system. Discussions about NCLB in the media and research on high-stakes testing in education journals have brought the current education policy context into the public arena. However, school social worker perceptions about the impact of high-stakes testing on school systems has been largely absent in the research literature. Current social work literature identifies some of the advantages that accountability policies may pose such as increased attention to school social work services for at-risk students (Frey & Dupper, 2005) and the contributions that social workers can make in ensuring that at-risk students have more positive school outcomes (Franklin & Gerlach, 2006). However, there are few studies that directly examine school social worker perceptions about the impact

of accountability policy and/or high-stakes testing on the school systems where they work and the students they serve. This study will allow school social workers to join these controversial policy discussions regarding student assessment, academic achievement, and educational equity.

While we have information about how high-stakes testing has impacted teachers' abilities to accomplish their job tasks, we know very little about its direct impact on school social workers. There are few studies on school social worker roles and tasks in schools, with only one large-scale study on this topic in the last decade (Kelly et al., 2010). The Kelly et al. study, and the series of studies upon which it is based, give valuable information about the tasks that school social workers currently accomplish in schools, but analysis is largely limited to the broad roles that social workers assume in schools (i.e. providing primary, secondary, or tertiary intervention), rather than the support or barriers that they face in accomplishing these job tasks. They also do not examine the impact that accountability policy has on social workers' abilities to *effectively* accomplish these tasks.

This study will add to the existing literature on school social work tasks and roles by examining the ability of school social workers to perform their daily job tasks in the current policy context, highlighting their perspectives about the advantages or barriers that high-stakes testing may pose for school social workers. Current education research shows that high-stakes accountability testing has had a largely negative impact on teachers' abilities to accomplish their job tasks (Abrams et al., 2003; Au, 2007; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Burroughs et al., 2005; Certo, 2006; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Costigan,

2002; Lamb, 2007; Massey, 2006; Olsen & Sexton, 2009). It is likely that similar impacts are being felt by other school personnel, such as school social workers, since state and federal accountability policies are largely believed to have contributed to a more negative school culture in many schools with decreased staff morale or increased pressure on teachers or students (Burroughs et al., 2005; Certo, 2006; Costigan, 2002; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Jones et al., 1999; Massey, 2006). In addition, there is evidence that high-stakes testing has limited the educational focus of many schools to securing high pass rates on state mandated tests, which may leave little time for creative learning or supplemental services such as social work services (Dorgan, 2004; Haney, 2000; Jacob, 2004; Jones et al., 1999; Mathison & Freeman, 2003; Pedulla et al, 2003; Sandholtz et al, 2004). This may put a strain on school social workers' abilities to access and serve at-risk students. Since high-stakes testing seeks to address educational disparities for specific at-risk groups (i.e. students who are ethnic minorities or have low socioeconomic status), this study will also determine whether there are perceptual differences about high-stakes testing between school social workers who predominantly serve students in these at-risk categories and those who do not.

Finally, the education literature points out that the negative impact of high-stakes testing can be felt more harshly by schools higher concentrations of minority or low income students, which are at higher risk of sanctions due to poor federal and state accountability ratings (Dworkin, 2005; Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Hursh, 2005; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Koski & Weis, 2004; McCarthey, 2008). These schools are under a great deal of pressure to raise test scores and improve their accountability ratings because

they are under threat of sanctions such as reductions in resources. Therefore, they may be subject to school cultures that are even more test focused, which may leave even less time for services such as school social work services. For these reasons, it is likely that school social workers assigned to schools with lower accountability ratings or those that serve higher concentrations of minority or low-income students are more likely to perceive the impact of high-stakes accountability testing to be largely negative. Since school social workers most often serve individual students, rather than classrooms or large groups (Kelly et al., 2010), this study will also examine whether school social worker perceptions about high-stakes testing performance among the students that they serve influences their overall perceptions about the impact of testing on school systems. With few studies examining first line school social workers perceptions of high-stakes testing, the impact of school ratings and student test performance on these perceptions is currently missing from the research literature. This study will fill this gap in the research literature, as well.

These gaps in the literature are significant because school social work is a discipline that is primarily concerned with the functioning of at-risk students, which is also the target population for NCLB and many state accountability systems. School social workers are in a prime position to discuss their perceptions about the positive and negative impacts of high-stakes testing. This study will be one of the first to examine the connections between education policy, school social work practice, and at-risk students. This study is also timely given the upcoming reauthorization of NCLB that is anticipated some time in 2011.

The research questions for this study are:

1. *Research Question 1*: How do school social workers perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems and on their ability to perform their job tasks?

2. *Research Question 2*: Do the characteristics of the students that school social workers serve predict their perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks?

3. *Research Question 3*: Do perceptions about TEA ratings in schools where they work and student performance on the TAKS test among students on their caseloads predict school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SOCIAL WORK LITERATURE REVIEW

School social workers complete a variety of tasks and assume a variety of roles in schools. Although it is an area that has been minimally explored, existing research has shown that school social worker tasks and roles have experienced changing trends over time, but that the change has been small in recent years. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed, marking a large and pervasive policy shift in education toward accountability and high-stakes testing. To date, there are very few research studies exploring the direct impact that state mandated high-stakes testing has had on school social workers and how they practice (Aguilar & Lagana-Riordan, 2008; Thiede, 2005). The task studies that are available examine more global tasks (i.e. individual interventions versus macro practice) and do not directly link social worker task analysis with education policy implementation (see Agresta, 2006; Jonson-Reid et al., 2004; Kelly et al., 2010; Lynn, McKay, & Atkins, 2003). However, research on teacher roles, classroom instruction, and student-teacher relationships show that each has been directly influenced by the implementation of high-stakes testing. Consequently, it is likely that a policy of this magnitude has had an impact on other school personnel, such as school social workers, and their abilities to accomplish their typical job tasks in schools.

This chapter will synthesize literature from five major areas. First, it will describe the historical tasks and roles of school workers from the beginning of school social work practice in 1906 until 2000, before the passing of No Child Left Behind. This section

includes empirical research on the changes in school social work roles and tasks over time. Second, it will present the scarce empirical research on school social work services after the passing of NCLB in 2001 and the widespread focus on high-stakes testing, as well as the conceptual and theoretical arguments of leading school social work scholars regarding the possible implications of NCLB on school social workers. Included in this section are more recent task analyses that lend additional insight into the current tasks of school social workers, but do not shed light on the impact that high-stakes testing may have on the ease or difficulty in which school social workers accomplish these tasks.

Since research on the direct impact of high-stakes testing on school social worker tasks and services is scarce, research on the impact of accountability policy implementation and high-stakes testing on other school professionals is likely to shed light on this topic. Research literature on teacher perceptions about education policy can lend insight into the ways in which school professionals are impacted by these policies, particularly since teachers and school social workers practice in the same settings and serve the same student populations. The third section of this literature review will outline a theoretical framework for understanding the impact that large-scale education policies can have on educators and other school personnel and will show how this framework can also apply to school social workers. The fourth section of the literature review will present studies on teacher perceptions about state and federal accountability policies that require high-stakes testing, focusing on any differences between teachers who work at different types of schools and with different categories of students. The final section will

discuss the impact that high-stakes testing has had on teachers' abilities to perform their tasks and on their relationships with students.

Historical Functions of School Social Workers

Although school social workers have always focused on the mental health and social needs of children, their primary roles in schools have shifted over time. As a profession, school social work came into existence in 1906. Called "visiting teachers," school social workers first began practicing in Boston, New York and Hartford (Morrison, 2006). From this time until the 1920s, school social workers' primarily roles included interpreting the home lives of children, supplementing teachers' knowledge of the children in their classes, and alleviating parental stress. School social worker roles as liaisons between the school and the family/community became more formalized in the 1920s. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the primary tasks of school social workers changed as a reflection of a new focus on mental health. During the subsequent years, school social workers began to focus on clinical work with individual children (Essex & Massat, 2005). There was also widespread support at this time for comprehensive schools that provided health and social services on site (Franklin & Gerlach, 2006).

In the 1960s, group work with communities became more common for school social workers as a reflection of the increased emphasis on community structure and inequality (Essex & Massat, 2005). In the education community, however, support for comprehensive school models soon began to wane, resulting in increased emphasis on individual students and their families in school social work practice that lasted through the 1970s. By the 1980s, school social workers once again experienced a shift toward

more community-oriented practice. This led to the diversification of school social

worker roles in the 1990s toward more multifaceted tasks. Although a primary focus on

individual work persisted, home-school-community liaison roles among school social

workers began to once again surface (Essex & Massat, 2005; Franklin & Gerlach, 2006).

These trends, however, did not push the primary roles of school social workers toward

macro focused work such as parent groups, teacher workshops, research, and leadership

or systems change at this time (Stuadt, 1991).

Historical accounts of school social worker roles postulate that they have

experienced multiple shifts over time. These alternating shifts show movement both

toward and away from more individually-focused practices and practices that link

communities/families to schools. These differences among school social worker tasks

lend evidence to the argument that school social workers are impacted by changes in

education policies and priorities. As a community based professionals, social workers do

not provide their services in a vacuum, but are often subject to the policies, procedures,

and norms of a host site (Altshuler, 2006). So when education policy or funding emphasis

shifts to a new model, such as mental health promotion or comprehensive schools, school

social workers may adjust their tasks or the ways that they perform them to fit into the

current policy context. This may be particularly crucial when the policy is in conflict with

the professional and ethical goals of school social workers. Since these historical

accounts do not give us direct evidence about the ways in which changes in education

policy can influence school social workers' abilities to perform their tasks in schools.

Therefore, it is necessary to examine the empirical research on school social worker roles before the implementation of NCLB.

Empirical Research on School Social Work Roles before NCLB

Besides historical accounts, there is available research that gives insight into trends in school social work services before and after widespread high-stakes testing was implemented. Costin's survey of Master's level school social workers in 1969 is considered the seminal work in the area of school social work task analysis. She found that school social workers primarily engaged in clinical casework with a focus on personality and emotion. She recommended that school social workers take on other tasks, especially tasks involving policy, leadership, and advocacy, to better serve their clients. In 1977, Meares replicated Costin's survey. She found that school social work appeared to be in a time of transition away from an individual focus, but policy and leadership tasks were still considered least important to school social workers.

After a decade of little research in school social work role analysis, the 1990s experienced a surge of research in this area. Surveys of school social work employment rates and job characteristics became more common. For instance, in a 1990 survey of chief education officers in each state, Torres (1996) found that the most common social work tasks included individual casework, home-school liaison roles, student assessment and testing, teacher consultation, referral to community services, and work on interdisciplinary teams.

In 1991, Staudt conducted a survey of 32 principals, 98 special education teachers, and the nine school social workers employed by an intermediary education

agency in Iowa. This study sought to determine how frequently school social work services were provided in schools and how effective school staff members perceived them to be. Teachers and administrators were asked to rank possible school social work tasks according to the degree that they desired the task to be provided, rate the services that school social workers were currently providing, and describe their levels of satisfaction with current school social work services.

The results of this study again indicated that school social workers were most frequently involved in individually oriented tasks such as assessments for special education placement, participation in special education placement staffings, and individual student consultation. School social workers were also likely to engage in making referrals to community services, counseling students about education programs and needs, and crisis intervention. The services least likely to be performed by school social workers included program planning in the school and community, research, work with entire classes of students, teacher in-service training, parent groups, and involvement in the IEP process. Surveyed school staff members stated that they would like to increase their work in the areas of student-specific consultation, family counseling, group work, parent counseling, and IEP involvement. Overall, 75% of teachers and 45% of principals were not satisfied with the quantity of time that school social workers spent in their schools.

In 1994, Paula Allen-Meares once again replicated Costin's original study of school social work roles. The sample for this study was drawn from several sources, including member lists from the National Association of Social Workers, several state

associations of school social workers, and major employers of school social workers. Of 11, 285 names, 2,257 were randomly selected for the study. The response rate for the mailed survey was 49.5%. This study grouped possible school social work tasks into five categories: Leadership or policy-making, educational counseling, home-school liaison, administrative and professional tasks, and facilitating family use of community resources. School social workers were asked to rate these tasks in order of importance. The results indicated that administrative and professional tasks were the most important to school social workers, followed by home-school liaison roles and educational counseling. The least important role was identified as leadership or policy-making, followed by facilitating family use of community referrals. Even though school social workers preferred administrative and professional tasks, the results of this large scale study once again suggested that school social workers were primarily engaged in individual or family tasks and that the areas of policy and leadership were considered least important. School social workers did indicate, however, that they would like to engage in more macro level tasks such as helping with school change, meeting with parents in groups, in-service training for teachers, advocacy with community agencies, and developing out-of-school programs.

Although Astor and colleague's survey of school social workers in 1998 primarily focused on school violence programs, it also included questions about the programs and services that school social workers provided in schools. This survey, send to a random sample of 1,163 social workers from the 1994 National Association of School Social Workers membership list, obtained a 52.8% response rate. Results indicated that the

highest percentage of school social workers was engaged in counseling and skills training tasks in relation to school violence. School social workers were less likely to be involved in peer programs, teacher-based programs, and community programs.

More recently, two studies reviewed the empirical literature in school social work from a number of years spanning both before and after NCLB (1999 to 2003). Stuadt, Cherry, and Watson (2005) examined 32 studies in school social work. These studies gave some insight into the types of school social work interventions most often studied by researchers. The most frequent types of interventions studied were group counseling interventions, followed by population-specific programs such as mentoring or parenting programs. The outcomes of these studies tended to focus on individual student diagnosis and symptom relief, student functional improvement in social/emotional skills or academic indicators, client satisfaction with services, school and home environmental change, and community or systems change. In 2009, Franklin, Kim, and Tripodi produced a meta-analysis of school social work practice studies published between 1980 and 2007. They also found that group counseling interventions (43%) and individual counseling interventions (19%) were the most studied school social work interventions.

Though historical accounts of school social work roles seem to indicate that school social workers tasks have changed over time, surveys conducted since 1969 show very little movement in the primary job tasks of school social workers, with most of their energy being focused on clinical interventions with individual students. This may indicate that this time period was one of more stagnant education policy or one in which education policy did not have a large impact on social worker job tasks. These surveys

also did not ask social workers about their perspectives about education policy or the impact that policy contexts had on their ability to perform their tasks.

In addition, while many authors pointed out the need for increased school social worker participation in macro level tasks such as education policy analysis and decision-making, these roles were rarely embodied by school social workers. This observation may indicate that school social workers have been historically out of touch with the impact of education policy implementation on schools or that these policies have not had a large impact on their abilities to perform their job tasks. However, recent federal and state education policies have had such a pervasive impact on U.S. schools that it would be difficult for school social workers and their services to have gone untouched by these changes. Literature on school social work tasks since the passage of NCLB highlight potential impacts that the policy may be having on school social workers.

School Social Work Services after Implementation of NCLB

The No Child Left Behind Act, arguably one of the largest and most intrusive federal education policies in U.S. history, was passed in 2001. With a focus on the at-risk students that school social workers typically serve, this legislation could potentially impact social workers' abilities to accomplish their tasks. On one hand, school social workers have the knowledge and skills necessary to help educators reach the at-risk students targeted by federal and state accountability policies and remove the systemic learning barriers that contribute to the achievement gap. On the other hand, with an increased focus on academic indicators and instructional accountability and a lack of funding to accomplish these goals, school social workers may find that their services

have been de-emphasized and that it is more difficult for them to access students or provide their services.

Many scholars have offered conceptual or theoretical analyses as to how federal and state accountability policy could be impacting the field of school social work. For instance, Frey and Dupper (2005) suggest that NCLB is likely to alter the type of school support services that are available to students and how they are perceived. They state that this is a time that school social work services could be pushed to the forefront of the education arena, as educators need assistance targeting their students in at-risk subgroups. The authors also point out that this is a prime opportunity for school social workers to become involved in macro roles and policy implementation decisions. They warn that social workers have been ineffective in past school reform efforts because the support services that they provide have been viewed as supplemental only. This could mean that school social workers more difficulty justifying and implementing their services in this new policy context. Additionally, it points out that social workers' perceptions have been absent from the educational decision-making table, even when conversations involve their areas of expertise, such as the best ways to remove learning barriers for at-risk students.

Similarly, Franklin and Gerlach (2006) postulate that school social workers could have a strong impact on attempts to effectively implement NCLB in schools, especially in regards to the clauses surrounding parental involvement. However, these authors point out that to do so, school social workers will need to work around barriers that have likely increased due to NCLB such as decreased funding and skepticism from educators about

the appropriateness of including social services in an academic environment. They suggest that social workers learn to utilize diverse funding streams available through educational and community organizations. In addition, the authors conclude that school social workers must institute a major change in practice; overtly linking how their interventions impact academic outcomes.

There is a growing body of literature suggesting that school social workers must make their services more visible or clearly show how their services are linked to teacher collaboration and improved academic outcomes, particularly for at-risk students (Franklin & Gerlach, 2006; Kelly et al., 2010; Raines, 2006). Adopting approaches such as Response to Intervention (RtI), a team based approach for identifying students who are at risk of school failure, and developing multi-faceted tiered interventions to improve school outcomes are showing promise as ways that school-based mental health professionals can link their services to academic outcomes (Ervin et al., 2006; Sullivan & Long, 2010). The wide-scale use of strategies such as RtI have largely been a result of federal education policies such as NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Act reauthorization in 2004, which have prioritized scientifically-based research and evidence based practices (Sullivan & Long, 2010). RtI techniques are recommended by social work scholars not only as mechanisms for increasing teamwork with educators and other school professionals, but also for adapting to an environment where academic success is valued over other student outcomes or indicators of well being (Kelly et al., 2010; Massat, Constable, & Thomas, 2009). If school social workers are employing strategies such as

RtI more often in schools due to federal policy and funding priorities, this may be one way that accountability policies are impacting school social work tasks.

These predictions and recommendations shed some light on the impact that accountability policy could have on school social work practice, but important questions remain: What, if any, impact is accountability policy and high-stakes testing having school social workers' abilities to perform their tasks in school? Have school social workers begun to take advantage of this time of change or has the increased emphasis on academics proven to hinder the provision of social work services in schools?

Few studies on school social worker roles and tasks have been conducted since the passage of NCLB in 2001 and even fewer assess the direct impact of policy implementation on school social worker tasks. A review of the empirical literature in 2003 highlighted the current continuum of school-based mental health services provided by social workers (Lynn, McKay, & Atkins). This study found that school social workers continue to target children exhibiting emotional or behavioral difficulties in schools through individual and group counseling. In addition, school social workers sometimes take more universal approaches, such as integrating positive mental health activities into the whole school environment through school-wide behavioral management systems, classroom reorganization, and school-wide curriculums for pro-social behaviors. School social workers are also engaging in prevention efforts for at-risk students by consulting with teachers, striving to involve parents, and by targeting expected transitions that might have a negative impact on student academic outcomes. Although these findings are not specifically linked to accountability policy, they once again suggest that school social

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workers often focus on the at-risk students that these policies target and could indicate that school social workers are taking greater efforts to link their services to academic outcomes. However, this connection is impossible to determine because the study did not explore the specific impact of education policy on social worker tasks.

A study in 2004 tracked the case referrals, services, and outcomes for school social workers in one large, suburban school district in the Midwest (Jonson-Reid, Kontak, Citerman, Essma, & Fezzi). This district employed four full-time social workers and four part-time student interns who had received a total of 911 referrals in the course of a school year. The findings of this study indicate that students were most often referred to school social workers for family issues (39.4%), attendance problems (38%), and academic difficulties (27.8%). The services that school social workers provided to the students on their caseloads were tracked throughout the course of the year. Most cases involved teacher consultation and collaboration (85%) and student counseling (52%). In many cases, school social workers had extended contact with students' family members (31.6%), collaboration with outside agencies (20.3%), and/or provided assessment services (10.6%). This study did not specifically address the implications of accountability policies, but the findings seem to be in line with NCLB's goals for social work services in schools. Social workers in this study seemed to employ more family and collaborative services than in previous studies, though this may have been specific to this district. The results of this study may indicate that many students are being referred to social work services for academic or attendance issues that could have a negative impact on school accountability ratings. However, this study does not address any supports that

might help or barriers that might interfere with school social workers' abilities to provide services to these students.

Recently, a 2006 survey by Agresta measured the job satisfaction and professional roles of a random sample of 183 members of the School Social Work Association of America (response rate of 45.8%). Findings from this study indicate that school social workers allocate most of their time to individual counseling, consultation with teachers and administrators, and group counseling. Ideally, school social workers reported that they would continue to allocate most of their time to these tasks. Once again, this study did not explore any impact that education policy has had on school social workers' abilities to perform their preferred tasks.

The aforementioned meta-analysis by Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi (2005) sheds some light on school social worker tasks in the NCLB era. This article characterized school social work research studies according to the outcome variables of interest in the study: internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and academic and school-related outcomes. Of the 21 studies, four studies assessed outcomes related to student learning (primarily learning related to social issues such as pregnancy and child abuse), four studies assessed student attendance, and five studies assessed grade point averages or credits earned. It is notable that, with the exception of the studies on pregnancy and child abuse knowledge outcomes, the vast majority of the studies occurred after 2001. This may indicate that school social workers are becoming more concerned with linking their services to the academic and attendance outcomes that are also targeted by education policy.

The above studies give some important clues into the typical tasks of school social workers, but most were focused on a single school or limited sample. The most recent task study of school social workers was completed in 2010 by Kelly, Frey, Alvarez, and Shaffer. This large-scale study once again followed the format of Costin's original study and Paula Allen-Meares' follow-up studies. This online survey of 1,639 school social workers found that school social worker characteristics are still very similar to those found in the 1994 study (Allen-Meares). School social workers receive the majority of their referrals from teachers and emotional or behavioral problems are the most common reason for referral. School social workers reported that less than 10% of their caseload receives counseling or therapeutic services from an outside agency – confirming that school social workers are often the primary mental health providers for school age children. Similar to previous studies, Kelly et al. found that school social workers spend more time on individual level interventions than on primary or secondary prevention, intervention with larger groups, or macro level practice. School social workers reported individual and group counseling as their most frequent practice activities, but that they would like to engage in more macro level activities. They also reported high administrative demands and a lack of involvement in school leadership. These findings lend evidence that the types of tasks that school social workers perform in schools remain relatively unchanged. However, this study did not examine the ease or difficulty with which school social workers are able to perform these typical tasks, given the new high-stakes context in schools.

These task surveys highlight school social worker roles and tasks after the implementation of state accountability policies based on No Child Left Behind. The surveys show that school social worker tasks to do not seem to have shifted dramatically since 2001, as they continue to focus on individualized, clinical interventions and teacher consultation. However, none of these task surveys explore school social worker perspectives about educational accountability policies and their impact on school systems. Similarly, while these surveys provide evidence that school social workers are executing the same tasks in schools, it is impossible to tell if accountability policies have had an impact on the ease or difficulty that school social workers have providing these services.

There is some evidence that accountability policy has had an impact on school social worker tasks. A recent case study by Thiede (2005) links NCLB's emphasis on parent involvement and academic outcomes for at-risk students to specific school social work interventions. In this case, a school social worker helped organize teachers to create a series of reading workshops for the school's largely minority, low-income Kindergartners. The focus of this program was to increase parental support and time spent reading outside of school to meet the parental involvement requirements of NCLB and to decrease the risk of academic failure for these students. In this case, the school social worker secured grant funding and administrative support, recruited teachers to implement the instructional components of the workshops, and focused on parent outreach and overcoming barriers to parent attendance. Though students had started below a normed group of Kindergarteners in all reading skills at pretest, on average they

had caught up to the normed group on all but two reading skills at the end of the three months of workshops. This type of example of a school social worker implementing a policy focused macro practice is rare in the social work literature, but may show that some school social workers are taking advantage of the new policy context.

A recent study of school social workers in Texas was one of the first to examine the direct impact of accountability practices on school social workers (Aguilar & Lagana-Riordan, 2008). This study drew its sample from two focus groups (n=8) and 13 semi-structured telephone interviews with school social workers from across the state. The purpose of the study was to determine what impact, if any, accountability policies and practices had on school social workers and whether these policies and practices had strengthened or weakened school social work service provision to at-risk students. Results indicated that school social work practices had changed due to the emphasis on the TAKS test. School social workers often felt they had been asked to perform more academic tasks such as proctoring the TAKS test, tutoring students for the test, and motivating students to do well on the test. Many school social workers in this study revealed that they were now using student TAKS test performance in their assessment of whether students required school social work services. While some saw this as a positive way to link social work services to academic outcomes, others felt that the emphasis on testing forced them to give less attention to students with other significant social and emotional problems. Finally, this study found that as schools shifted their focus to testing and accountability, they often failed to address the social and emotional issues that contributed to poor student performance and the need to alleviate these issues. The

results of this study were used to help create the survey used in this dissertation (see Research Design and Methodology section for details).

Overall, empirical studies on the impact of accountability policies on social work practice are scarce in the social work literature. Neither has school social work research examined the perceptions of school social workers concerning the impact of accountability policies or high stakes testing on school systems. Similarly, there are very few studies of other school-based professionals, such as school counselors or psychologists, regarding these topics. On the other hand, education literature is ripe with research on teacher perceptions of accountability policy implementation and how it has impacted their abilities to accomplish their tasks. Therefore, this literature may give the best insights into the changing landscape of schools and the potential for accountability policy to affect how other school personnel, such as school social workers, provide their professional services. Education literature also provides a theoretical framework for understanding how policy implementation can influence the ability of school professionals to perform their typical roles. The following section will explain this framework and how it can be extended to school social workers, as well.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Just as social work research on policy implementation is scarce, so are existing theoretical frameworks for understanding the impact of education policy. However, education literature does provide some theoretical explanations for how policy change is translated from conceptualization to implementation and how this implementation can impact school professionals. These explanations have traditionally been applied to

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teachers, rather than school social workers, but they can conceptually extend to other school professionals since teachers and school social workers practice in the same settings and serve the same student populations.

In 1957, Robert Merton introduced a typology for identifying how individuals adapt to changing cultures or social systems. He posited that all social systems have both goals – systemic purposes that apply to all members of the social system, and means – the ways that the goals are achieved. While members of a social system typically are presented with the same goals, groups and individuals within the system may accept or reject these goals. Similarly, they may accept or reject the means typically utilized to meet the goals. This theory presents five distinct methods of individual adaptation in response to changing culture or social systems.

Although Merton's typology has not been applied specifically to school social work in the past, it has been applied to teachers and schools. Merton's typology has been adapted to explain teacher and student responses to school culture (Reid, 1978, 1986) and more recently to provide a framework for understanding how teachers respond to and mediate education policy (Brain, Reid, & Comerford Boyes, 2006). Brain et al. suggest that the "goals" in the original theory can represent education policy and that the "means" can represent teacher practices. Using the adapted framework, they suggest that the impact of an education policy is dependent upon whether or not teachers accept the policy and/or the practices required to achieve the policy goals. Similarly, policy impact can depend on the extent to which teachers accept, resist, or attempt to change the goals of the policy. This revised framework is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. A typology of teacher adaptations to education policy and practice

Adaptation	Policy	Practice	Descriptors
Conformity	Accepts	Accepts	Policy acceptor Minimalist mediator Technocrat teacher
Innovation	Accepts	Rejects	Policy acceptor Professional mediator Innovative teacher
Ritualism	Rejects	Accepts	Policy rejecter Minimalist mediator Technocrat teacher
Retreatism	Rejects	Rejects	Policy rejecter Rejecting mediator Anomic teacher
Rebellion	Rejects/substitutes	Rejects/substitutes	Policy creator Creative mediator Creative teacher

Source: Brain, K., Reid, I., & Comerford Boyes, L.C. (2006). Teachers as mediators between educational policy and practice. *Educational Studies, 32*(4), 411-423.

Using this framework, teachers vary in how they mediate the practice changes brought about by education policy. While some teachers mediate these changes in only a minimal manner, others mediate the changes by rejecting them altogether or by creatively trying to change them. Applied to the education setting, conforming teachers buy in to the new policy and to the change in practices needed to achieve the policy. This can result in a teacher who follows the rules and strives to meet them to accomplish technical proficiency. Similarly, teachers who adapt through ritualism may reject the new policy, but buy in to the new practices to achieve the policy. Theoretically, this could result in teachers who subscribe to practice change and attempt to become proficient in these changes rather than trying to alter them (Brain et al., 2006)

On the other hand, innovative teachers strive for new ways to meet the goals of the policy without having to fully buy into the practices prescribed by the policy. They often look for innovative practices to mediate the requirements of the policy and what they know to be best practices. Teachers who retreat from policy change will reject both the policy and the practices to achieve policy goals. They may feel a decline in professional standards and values and may feel a loss of purpose or worth due to professional incongruence with the changes. Finally, teachers who react to policy change through rebellion may try to create new policies, creatively mediate existing policies, and alter practices in imaginative ways (Brain et al., 2006).

Although teachers may differ in how they respond to policy changes, this theory makes it clear that policy can have a large impact on teacher tasks and their abilities to accomplish them. It postulates that all teachers attempt to navigate and mediate education policies in some way. It is likely that other school personnel, such as school social workers, must make similar choices about how they respond to education policy. Policy implementation does not typically depend on a single group of stakeholders, such as teachers, but on the adaptation of all of the various stakeholders who are impacted the policy (i.e. teachers, administrators, counselors, school social workers, parents, students). Given the scope of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and state accountability mandates and their impact on the U.S. education system, it seems impossible that school social workers have not been impacted by this policy in some way. Consequently, continuing policy implementation has likely influenced school social workers' abilities to practice in schools, which is supported by the above typology.

If school personnel must find ways to adapt to education policy implementation, the next logical step is to examine theories for how these adaptations might impact their ability to perform traditional professional roles. Like school social worker roles, many believe that teacher roles have been remarkably static in the past (Cohen, 1988; Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Cuban, 1993; Elmore, 1996; Rowan, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, a new body of evidence is showing that strong external policy mandates can lead to changes in teachers' abilities to accomplish their job tasks (Bailey, 2000; Bartlett, 2004; Calderhead, 2001; Richardson & Placier, 2001).   In this context, a role is typically defined as a set of tasks expected of a professional in his or her position (Valli & Buese, 2007). The literature on role theory has highlighted areas of impact such as teacher role conflict and role adaptation based on different professional situations (Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000; Kirtman, 2002; Turner, 2001).

Valli and Buese (2007) have theorized how recent high-stakes accountability policies are changing the ways that teachers execute their professional roles. They suggest that there are three major ways in which teacher roles are changing: 1) Role increase, 2) Role expansion, and 3) Role intensification. Role increase refers to the direct increase in the number of tasks that teachers are asked to complete due to policy mandates and new expectations. Teachers attempt to accomplish additional tasks with similar resources and time constraints. They have increased expectations for their work and for justifying their work to others.

If school social workers have been impacted by accountability policies in similar ways, it may mean that the number of tasks that social workers are asked to complete,

such as administrative tasks, could be increasing even though they typically lack resources. It could also mean that though primary school social worker tasks have remained the same, they could be under pressure to provide services to larger numbers of at-risk students or to provide more intensive services to students to help improve their academic outcomes. If this is the case, school social workers could be performing the same types of tasks, but with increased expectations for their productivity and outcomes.

Accountability policies can also cause role expansion or the need for teachers to broaden their work tasks, particularly outside of the classroom (Bailey, 2000; Valli & Buese, 2007). Expectations set forth by recent education policies have expanded teacher roles to include heightened leadership, collaborative, and reform tasks (Lieberman & Miller, 1999). These new "social realities" of teaching increase the complexity of teacher roles and force teachers to adapt to new expectations. Lieberman & Miller (1999) highlight recent teacher role expansions in Table 2. These expectations ask teachers to move beyond their individual teaching methods and student-teacher relationships into a broader, more learning-oriented, and accountable realm.

Table 2. Expanded teacher expectations

From	To
Individualism	Professional Community
Teaching at the center	Learning at the center
Technical work	Inquiry into practice
Controlled work	Accountability
Managed work	Leadership
Classroom concerns	Whole-school concerns and beyond
A weak knowledge base	A broad knowledge base

Adapted from: Lieberman, A. & Miller, L. (1999). *Teachers transforming their world and their work* (New York, Teachers College Press).

Bartlett (2004) hypothesizes that these role expansions are a result of education policy changes that started with *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and the subsequent drive for increased educational standards. Teachers who support their expanded roles may have higher levels of job satisfaction. However, role expansion can also lead to overwork and additional job stress. Often there are few organizational supports to help teachers cope with their expanding roles (Bartlett, 2004).

Although school social workers are community-oriented by nature, education policy may also have an impact on their ability to perform their roles and meet task expectations. Like teachers, role expansion could mean that social workers are being asked to complete tasks that fall outside the realm of ordinary school social work practice to better accomplish the missions set forth in education policy. The 2010 task survey on school social workers (Kelly et al.) does not support this position because school social workers do not seem to be expanding their leadership or organizational roles in recent years. However, role expansion for social workers could also mean that they are asked to

be more accountable in their work or to connect their services to improved academic outcomes.

Finally, new education policies can lead to teacher role intensification, which refers to increased pressure and expectations associated with professional work (Valli & Buese, 2007). Policy directives exert external controls over teachers and can cause them to become de-skilled as they strive to meet mandated benchmarks (Apple & Jungck, 1996). Role intensification theory (Apple, 1986; Apple & Jungck, 1996; Hargreaves, 1992, 1994) postulates that an increase in role intensity can lead to less focus on teaching skills and best practices, chronic work overload, a focus on only short-term goals, and reliance on external experts leading to mistrust in self.

Ballet, Kelchtermans, and Loughran (2006) have expanded on the concept of role intensification originally put forth by Apple (1986). They have found that increased role intensity can have multiple sources including policy mandates, self-imposed pressures, and school structure such as the number of classes in the school day and class size. Policy change does not often have a direct impact on teachers, but instead teachers must mediate policy implementation by determining how they will cope with new policy demands. These changes are always filtered through teachers' personal perspectives. When policies do not align with their personal ideologies, this can induce feelings of guilt and increased stress as they strive to meet policy expectations while maintaining personal standards for pedagogy. Finally, individual teachers can respond to role intensification in different ways. Some become de-skilled as they accept standardized practices to meet policy goals,

while others develop new skills in an attempt to meet policy goals in new and creative ways.

For school social workers, it is yet to be seen if changes in education policy, such as the implementation of NCLB and high-stakes testing, have had a similar impact on their role intensity. Just as teachers struggle to balance the academic needs of their students with policy regulations, so too might social workers struggle to meet the social and mental health needs of students in an environment that is increasingly focused on standardized skill sets and tests to hold students accountable for learning. It is unclear how education policy has impacted expectations for school social workers or their relationships with at-risk students. Like teachers, however, job structure and individual beliefs about both policy and social work practice are likely to impact how school social workers deal with role intensification. An assessment of the literature surrounding teacher perspectives on high-stakes testing may lend insights into how other school professionals, such as school social workers, view recent education policy changes.

TEACHER LITERATURE ON EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY

Teacher Perceptions of High-Stakes Testing

In recent years, several research studies have examined teacher perceptions about high-stakes testing and NCLB implementation. It is important to evaluate policy not only by measuring changes in target outcomes, but also by exploring stakeholder perceptions of the implementation. This information can provide impressions about whether a policy is accomplishing the intended goals, as well as provide explanations as to why it may or may not be doing so. In addition, stakeholder perceptions can help researchers to

determine if certain groups of stakeholders are aiding or impeding policy implementation (Akerstrom, 2006; Vannest, Mahadevan, Mason, & Temple-Harvey, 2009). Similar studies are not currently available in the school social work literature, so it is helpful to examine research for other school professionals, such as teachers, who practice in the same settings and serve the same students.

Prior to full implementation of NCLB, Pedulla et al. (2003) conducted a national survey of teachers to assess attitudes toward high-stakes testing. The sample for this study was stratified by grade level, content area, geographic setting, and 5 distinct types of stakes tied to testing outcomes (i.e. high stakes for districts, schools, and/or teachers *and* students; moderate stakes for districts, schools, and/or teachers *and* low stakes for students). The results of this study indicate that most teachers viewed high-stakes testing in a predominantly negative manner, but that teacher views varied according to the type of stakes attached to testing. Teachers from all types of states felt pressure for their students to perform well on the tests, but teachers from states where stakes were high for teachers and/or students were more likely to report that they felt extreme pressure. Some teachers even reported the desire to transfer out of tested grades.

Flores and Clark (2003) also found that teachers were supportive of accountability measures, but did not believe that students could be properly assessed through high-stakes testing. Teachers in this study revealed extreme pressure on particular grade levels and some teachers had considered or were actively considering a different career due to the pressures of high-stakes testing. The study found that teachers often believe that test results should not be used in a high-stakes manner because it has a negative impact on

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students. While there are few social work research studies that examine school social worker perspectives about high-stakes testing, if other school professionals feel that this testing is harming at-risk students, it is possible that school social workers will also have negative perspectives on policy implementation.

Evaluations of teacher perceptions about high-stakes testing continued after the implementation of NCLB and the results have been varied. In a 2005 study of International Reading Association members, most participants had a negative view of NCLB. Of those surveyed, 78% felt that teacher morale had not improved as a result of NCLB and 75% believed that the policy was underfunded (International Reading Association). In a qualitative case study of a high school, Craig (2004) found that teachers and administrators felt that NCLB narrowed curriculum, required large amounts of test preparation time to the detriment of other subjects, and that it caused teachers to decrease the time they spent on higher level thinking skills. In addition, many teachers were unsure that NCLB was promoting quality reading instruction.

A more recent study surveyed teachers from 15 school districts in Texas about NCLB implementation (Vannest et al., 2009). Overall, they found there was a strong positive trend in views about the use of evidence based practices and standards for teachers. However, views were about equally split when it came to the impact of changes brought about by NCLB in general and those brought about for at-risk students, with about half of the views being positive and half negative. Yeh (2005) found similar results in his qualitative interviews with teachers and administrators. In this study, the participants often felt that focusing curriculum on tested areas was appropriate and that

they did not need to severely narrow their curriculum. Participants in this study felt more positively than negatively about NCLB at a 2:1 ratio.

While the above studies examined teacher perceptions overall, other studies have compared teacher perceptions across criteria such as school ratings and student income levels. In a survey of 1,445 educators, The Harvard Civil Rights Project (2004) sought to determine teacher perceptions about NCLB implementation and whether these perceptions varied by school NCLB rating. They found that results did not vary greatly according to school rating and that overall views about NCLB were split with about half of all teachers reporting that NCLB had positively impacted schools and students and half reporting that it had a negative impact. However, this study also found that many teachers felt that their schools had inadequate resources to implement the policy. Teachers also had concerns that accountability measures had not improved instructional practices and had decreased morale.

A separate study found that there were differences in teacher perceptions depending on whether they taught at low-income or high-income schools (McCarthey, 2008). Qualitative interviews with 18 teachers revealed that while all teachers had criticisms of NCLB, teachers at high-income schools rarely felt any direct impact from its implementation. Teachers at low-income schools, however, often felt high degrees of pressure, frustration, and stress directly related to NCLB implementation. They felt that their jobs were often threatened and tended to have lower morale and less confidence in their teaching abilities.

With few social work research studies that directly assess opinions about accountability policies, it is difficult to predict how school social workers at different types of schools might perceive them. School social workers frequently fight to help their vulnerable and at-risk clients to overcome disparities based on economic and social disadvantages (National Association of Social Workers, 2002). In the case of education, schools with higher populations of disadvantaged students and schools with fewer resources are more likely to have lower accountability ratings and higher consequences for students (Dworkin, 2005; Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Harris, 2007; Hursh, 2005; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Koski & Weis, 2004; McCarthey, 2008). Social workers are often trained to recognize these types of disparities and to try to alleviate them. Given this, one could reasonably postulate that school social workers practicing at schools with lower ratings would have more negative views about high-stakes testing than those working at more affluent schools with higher ratings. This relationship has yet to be tested. While the aforementioned studies give insight into teacher opinions about accountability policy implementation, another body of literature education literature focuses on the impact of high-stakes testing on teacher tasks.

Impact of Accountability Policy on Teacher Tasks and Roles

Prior to the implementation of NCLB, several researchers examined state accountability systems that emphasized student test scores and attention to at-risk subgroups. Jones et al. (1999) surveyed 236 elementary school teachers in North Carolina on how their instruction had changed since the state accountability system was implemented. The authors concluded that teachers spent more of their school day on

reading, math, and writing instruction; that curriculum had become narrowed to areas that were on the standardized test; and that teachers were spending much more time prepping students for tests than they had before the policy was implemented. In addition, over 75% of teachers reported lower morale and increased job related stress. In a survey of secondary teachers in Texas, Haney (2000) found similar results related to narrowed curriculum, time spent on test preparation, and additional time spent on tested topics. Teachers also reported the pressure that they felt to increase test scores. Other studies found similar results regarding teaching to the test and the narrowing of curriculum (Dorgan, 2004; Jacob, 2004; Mathison & Freeman, 2003; Pedulla et al., 2003; Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004). These studies laid the groundwork for research following the implementation of similar policy changes due to NCLB.

One frequently used method for investigating the impact of high-stakes testing on teacher tasks is to study the experiences of new teachers. Using qualitative interviews with six beginning teachers throughout the course of a school year, Costigan (2002) found that by the last month of their teaching experiences, new teachers reported that testing had become the focal point of their classroom activities. The study found that teachers often felt powerless, that their instructional quality had decreased, and that teaching to the test had forced teachers to perform outside of best practices. The focus on accountability also accounted for a large proportion of work-related stress.

In a case study of one beginning teacher, Massey (2006) came to similar conclusions. The teacher he studied was frequently frustrated and disenchanted with her roles as she felt pressure to deliver standardized lessons, focus on practice tests, utilize

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test preparation materials instead of authentic literacy tasks, and abandon the skills she had learned to be best practices. Certo (2006) utilized qualitative interviews with four beginning teachers and their mentors in Virginia. Findings from this study confirmed previous studies on new teachers teaching under NCLB. The participants felt extreme pressure to fit in all of the tested curriculum, leave out non-tested curriculum, follow prescribed pacing charts, and increase the amount of tests and quizzes they gave to their students. Finally, Crocco and Costigan (2007) conducted 200 interviews with beginning teachers in New Your City. They determined that beginning teachers experienced decreased classroom decision-making power, had depersonalized connections with students, focused primarily on test preparation, and were forced to teach in a rigid, inflexible manner due to the state testing requirements brought on by NCLB.

Though studies of beginning teachers lend some insight into teacher roles in the era of NCLB, similar small-scale qualitative studies have also addressed the practices of experienced teachers and found similar results. In a case study of an elementary school in Texas utilizing participant observation, Booher-Jennings (2005) found that non-academic classes had become marginalized, that increasing amounts of time were being spent on test preparation, and that teachers felt severe pressure to improve their students' test scores. This pressure resulted in poorer student-teacher relationships and the practice of educational triage in which teachers tended to focus most of their attention on students likely to pass the standardized tests, while largely ignoring more gifted students and those who were struggling the most academically.

In 2007, Lamb completed a study of his own teaching practices after the implementation of NCLB in a small, rural school in Mississippi. He found that his teaching methods had become more procedural, that he utilized more rote drilling and worksheets, and that the curriculum that he taught had become limited to tested material. In addition, he began to feel a sense of panic about increasing student test scores and began to doubt his effectiveness as a teacher. Similarly, a recent mixed-method study involving 34 teachers found that the overall time spent on social studies had decreased as teachers felt pressure to focus their attention on tested subjects (Burroughs, Groce, & Webeck, 2005). They too found that high-stakes testing requirements increased teacher roles involving test preparation, decreased teacher morale, and increased teacher stress.

A more recent study involved qualitative interviews with six English teachers at an underperforming high school in California that was seeking reform (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). The results of this study suggest that federal policies, such as NCLB, and state mandates intended to implement these policies, have caused schools to feel threatened and defensive. In an attempt to meet policy mandates, this school increased administrative control and created an atmosphere where teachers could rarely give feedback and were restricted to prescribed roles. Changes at this school left teachers feeling devalued and hostile.

Wayne Au (2007) analyzed 49 qualitative studies that examined the impact of high-stakes testing on teaching practices. He found that in the majority of studies, teachers had changed their teaching styles and tended to be more teacher-centered than student-centered. In addition, most studies reported a narrowing of the curriculum and

concentration on test-related content. In a small number of studies, however, these trends were contradicted, indicating the need for further examination.

A national study on teacher role perceptions is even more revealing. A national survey of teachers conducted by the National Board of Educational Testing and Public Policy (Abrams, 2003) categorized responding teachers into two groups: those from states with high-stakes consequences attached to test results and those with lower-stakes consequences. This study found that 43% of teachers in high-stakes states and 17% of teachers in low-stakes state believed that the time they spent on instruction for tested areas had increased. More disturbingly, 75% of teachers in high-stakes states and 63% of teachers in low-stakes states stated that testing policies had led them to teach in ways that were contradictory to best educational practices. Forty-five percent of all teachers reported low morale in connection to accountability policy.

While teachers may have varying perceptions about the impact of high-stakes testing and NCLB, it is clear that this policy has had an impact on their abilities to perform their daily tasks. Most commonly, teachers felt that high-stakes testing and accountability policies had harmed their ability to perform their traditional tasks to their standards. This literature also highlighted perceived cultural shifts in schools where increased value was placed on rote learning and standardization, while best practices and student well being were de-emphasized. However, this body of literature fails to address the perceptions of high-stakes testing among other school personnel, such as school social workers, and its impact on their job tasks. Lessons learned from the education literature about teacher tasks and changing school cultures may indicate that school social

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workers are also experiencing changes in their abilities to provide services to students. This literature highlights the importance of examining both social worker perceptions about accountability policy implementation and the impact it has had on their ability to perform their typical tasks.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

This chapter has presented a thorough review of existing literature on school social worker roles over time and the perceptions and specific outcomes of high-stakes testing on school practices. Most of these studies focused on the perspectives of teachers and can be used to gain insight into current educational contexts. Overall, the findings related to teacher perspectives about accountability systems and testing are somewhat mixed. Many teachers reported negative feelings about accountability policy such as a lack of funding to properly implement accountability programs, decreased staff morale, and feeling that high-stakes tests do not seem to appropriately assess student outcomes. However, some teachers were also in favor of accountability policies and reported positive feelings about them. Existing research on the impact of accountability policies on teacher roles and tasks is less ambiguous with most studies finding teacher job tasks have been negatively impacted by accountability policy. Some of the major concerns about the impact of accountability policies included a large focus on test preparation, lack of use of best practices, poor morale, high pressure work environments, and depersonalized relationships with students.

There is a considerable gap in school social work literature that addresses the perceptions of school social workers' on accountability policy and how high-stakes

testing influences their ability to accomplish their job tasks. Four national surveys, each conducted a decade apart, comprise the bulk of what we know about school social workers' daily tasks (Costin, 1969; Meares, 1977; Allen-Meares, 1994, Kelly et al., 2010). Studies on school social worker roles and tasks after 2001, when NCLB was implemented, do not commonly explore education policy related questions. In general, there is scarce research literature on the direct impact of accountability policies or high-stakes testing from a social work perspective. Consequently, it is difficult to determine what, if any, affect accountability policy implementation and high-stakes testing is having on school social workers' practice and the students they serve.

This study will help to fill these gaps in the literature, while incorporating the lessons of previous research. The studies in this literature review indicate that school personnel, namely educators, often view federal and state accountability implementation as having a detrimental impact on school systems and their job tasks. This study will explore school social worker perceptions of policy implementation to see if they perceive the high-stakes testing component of these policies as having a predominantly positive or negative impact on their job tasks and on school systems. This study will further explore the types of at-risk students that social workers serve and how this relates to their perceptions about the impact that accountability policy has on their job tasks. Finally, research on teachers has revealed some relationships between the type of schools where they teach and their perception of high-stakes testing, with teachers in more affluent schools having more positive perceptions of policy implementation. This study will examine whether school social workers assigned to schools with lower accountability

ratings or who predominantly serve students that tend to struggle with high-stakes tests have differential perspectives on policy implementation when compared to those assigned to schools with higher ratings or those with students who tend to excel on the tests.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The research questions and hypotheses examined in this study are:

Research Question 1: How do school social workers perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems and on their ability to perform their job tasks?

- *Hypothesis 1*: Most Texas school social workers will perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on school systems and school social worker job tasks.

Research Question 2: Do the characteristics of the students that school social workers serve predict their perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks?

- *Hypothesis 2.1*: School social workers who predominantly serve students of color and students with low socioeconomic status will be significantly more likely to perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on their ability to accomplish their job tasks.

- *Hypothesis 2.2*: Adding ethnicity, education, years of school social work experience, and perceptions of preparation for job tasks to the structural model as covariates will improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the structural equation model showing that student characteristics predict social

worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to

perform their job tasks.

Research Question 3: Do perceptions about TEA ratings in schools where they work and

performance on the TAKS test among students on their caseloads predict school social

worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems?

- *Hypothesis 3.1*: School social workers who perceive that their students are less

    successful on the TAKS test and those that work in schools with lower TEA

    ratings will be more likely to report negative perceptions about the impact of

    the TAKS test on school systems.

- *Hypothesis 3.2*: Adding ethnicity, education, years of school social work

    experience, and perceptions of preparation for job tasks to the structural model

    as covariates will improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the

    structural equation model showing that TEA ratings and perceptions of

    student performance on the TAKS test predict social worker perceptions about

    the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The literature review in Chapter Two reveals a large gap in the research regarding the impact of education policy implementation on school social work practice. The purpose of this study was to examine school social workers' perceptions about high-stakes testing and its impact on school systems and their work, using a sample of school social workers in the state of Texas. In Texas, the TAKS test is used to measure student achievement and it is the primary basis for federal and state accountability ratings. This study examined school social worker perceptions about how implementation of the TAKS test supports or hinders their ability to execute their job tasks and how the characteristics of the students that they serve further influences these perceptions. Finally, this study examined the relationship between state accountability ratings (TEA ratings) for the schools where social workers in the sample work, their perceptions of student performance on the TAKS test, and their perceptions about high-stakes testing. This study was part of a larger study examining school social worker perceptions of accountability in schools.

THE TEXAS SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER SURVEY

The current study was conducted utilizing data from an exploratory survey of Texas School Social Workers entitled "Further Exploration of Texas School Social Workers' Constructions of Accountability using Qualitative and Quantitative methods" (Aguilar, Lagana-Riordan, & Gerlach, 2009), hereafter referred to as the Texas School Social Worker Survey (TSSWS). Social work researchers at the University of Texas at

Austin initiated the study with the support of a small faculty grant from the university. The purpose of the original study was to describe and define the concept of accountability in school social work practice, along with the mechanisms used to demonstrate accountability. This dataset was used with permission from the principal investigators (one of which is the author). The TSSWS was designed to provide information on Texas school social workers' job tasks, roles, and responsibilities, as well as the characteristics of the students that they serve and their perceptions about standardized tests implemented as a result of federal and state accountability mandates. The TSSWS was developed and tested with a survey design process that included an exploratory qualitative study, initial administration with a large sample, and expert review.

Survey Instrument Design

Qualitative Study

The survey instrument was designed, tested, and revised through an initial mixed methods study that took place from October 2007 to October 2008. The initial study began with two focus groups (n=8) and 13 telephone interviews with Texas School Social Workers. Participants were recruited through an email sent to all members of the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work Office of Professional Development listserv. Of those who responded to the email with interest, respondents local to the Austin area were asked to participate in focus groups. The remaining respondents were asked to participate in telephone interviews. In the focus groups and interviews, school social workers were asked a variety of open-ended questions related to their job experiences including typical job tasks, job structure, student characteristics and

stressors, job rewards and challenges, self-assessment, and perceptions of accountability in their work. They were not asked specifically about accountability policy or high-stakes testing, but themes about the TAKS test and accountability policy emerged repeatedly.

The results of the qualitative portion of this pilot study were used to create a comprehensive survey for use with Texas School Social Workers (see Chapter 2 for details about study findings). Emerging themes from the qualitative data, along with a substantial literature review, were used to create survey items about school social worker job structure, tasks, student characteristics, and a series of positively and negatively worded Likert items covering a wide variety of possible school social worker perceptions about accountability policy implementation and high-stakes testing. Use of this initial qualitative study helped to establish face and content validity in the survey measure. These in-depth interviews helped the authors of the survey to determine the issues that school social workers felt were important to them in the current education context, including the large range responses that they might have to these issues. This step increased the likelihood that the measure would adequately represent the true meaning of the concepts under study and improved methodological rigor (Rubin & Babbie, 2005). The adequacy of the survey instrument was further examined and revised after its first administration with school social workers.

First Administration of the Survey

The original version of the TSSWS was comprised of 51 closed and open-ended items. It was administered in paper and pencil format to a large group (n = 188) of school

social workers that attended the Annual Texas School Social Workers Conference at the University of Texas at Austin on February 20-22, 2008. This type of large scale testing can improve the validity of a survey instrument and reduce the chance of measurement error (Rubin & Babbie, 2005). In addition to traditional and Likert style items, this version of the survey also included many open-ended response questions about social work practice, as well as text boxes for school social workers to add comments or other information after many of the questions. These open-ended responses were reviewed to assess whether additional items needed to be added to the survey and to ensure that response categories were exhaustive, had adequate variance, and were mutually exclusive. Respondents were also asked for feedback and suggestions for improving the content and format of the survey after they completed it.

As a result of respondent feedback, the survey was adapted to decrease response time, eliminate redundant questions and questions that were less relevant to school social work practice, improve question clarity, and add Likert items specific to the TAKS test. Further revisions took place after the researchers examined the responses to each item for frequently skipped questions and write-in information while coding and entering the data. As a final step to assure rigor, the survey instrument was reviewed by several school social workers, social work researchers, and doctoral students to assess for the elements of an adequate questionnaire including face and content validity, item clarity, relevance, and bias, along with logical item ordering and instruction clarity. Based on this additional feedback, several items and instructions were reworded and the item order was altered

slightly in the revised questionnaire. This revised version of the TSSWS was the version used for the current study.

The Revised TSSWS

The revised TSSWS is a 36-item, self-report measure available in paper and pencil format (see Appendix A), as well as web-based format via Zoomerang (MarketTools Inc., 1999-2010). The unit of analysis is the school social worker. The time needed to complete the questionnaire is estimated at approximately 30 minutes.

The final survey questionnaire contained four major components: 1. Demographic section, 2. Section on job roles, responsibilities, and tasks, 3. Section on student characteristics and experiences, and 4. Section on perceptions about the TAKS Test. The demographic section collected information regarding age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational background, years of social work and school social work experience, information about place of employment, and recent Texas Education Agency ratings for the school or school district where employed. The section on job roles, responsibilities, and tasks asked for information about job structure, supervision, employment configuration, funding structure, and caseload size. In addition, participants were asked to choose the student service techniques and job tasks that they typically perform from several large and comprehensive lists. The section on student characteristics asked the participants to indicate the characteristics and life situations that the majority of students on their caseloads had experienced. Questions regarding perceptions of the TAKS test were asked in Likert scale format with an equal number of positively and negatively phrased statements about the impact of the TAKS test on educational systems, school

social work tasks, and students. The reliability of the two sets of Likert items used in this analysis were within acceptable limits (Cronbach's α = 0.72 and 0.89).

Independent (exogenous) and dependent (endogenous) variables for this dissertation were chosen based on relevance to the research questions. The many Likert scale items assessing the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks and the impact of the TAKS test on school systems were subjected to exploratory factor analyses to determine if they measured the concepts that this study intended to measure. Some individual items were eliminated from this analysis due to poor factor loadings on the constructs. Rationale for the use of each variable is included in the Explication and Measurement of Variables section.

Strengths of this survey questionnaire included rigorous survey design with the use of qualitative data to design the initial version of the questionnaire, a large initial sample used to test and revise the questionnaire, and expert review. These methods helped to ensure that the questionnaire contained items that were relevant to school social work practice, covered the full range of school social worker experiences in Texas, and that items were easy to understand and complete. The major weakness of the survey questionnaire was that it did not contain any previously validated scales and had not been assessed for validity or reliability with a large sample.

SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

Texas was an ideal state for administration of a survey about the effects of high-stakes testing because of its long history in implementing state tests and high-stakes accountability systems. The target population for this study was all school social workers

employed in the state of Texas. However, the hiring and organizational practices for school social workers in Texas made it difficult to determine the number of school social workers in the state and even more difficult to reach school social workers. Texas school social workers are a hard-to-reach population because there is no centralized list or even a population estimate of school social workers in Texas. Compounding this problem is the way that many school social work jobs are structured. Texas does not only employ school social workers solely through district funded positions, but also utilizes other mechanisms including government agency funded positions such as placement through the Department of Health and Human Services. Texas also has a large non-profit agency, Communities in Schools, which places social workers and other mental health professionals directly on school campuses (Communities in Schools of Central Texas, 2010). Furthermore, while some schools and school districts have multiple school social workers, many do not employ any social workers (Texas Mental Health Transformation Working Group, 2009). For these reasons, the original study utilized purposive and convenience sampling to identify potential survey participants.

The sampling frame for the TSSWS was constructed from multiple existing organizational and institutional member lists of school social workers in Texas. These organizational member lists included the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work Office of Professional Development Listserv (host of the Annual Texas School Social Workers Conference), Texas Education Agency employed social workers, and Communities in Schools employees. It consisted of all potential participants that had either an e-mail or standard mailing address registered to one of the above organizations.

Many of these lists also included other related professionals, such as school counselors, but did not distinguish between professional disciplines. Interview, focus group, and survey participants from the initial TSSW study were excluded from this sample due to the amount of overlap between the original survey and the revised version of the survey. When they could be identified, participants who were not currently practicing as school social workers, such as other school personnel (school counselors or psychologists), were also excluded from the sample.

All data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin prior to study implementation. The TSSWS was administered to school social workers in Texas from April 2009 – September 2009. Recruitment e-mails were sent to all school social workers in the sampling frame with valid e-mail addresses in April 2009. The recruitment e-mail included the purpose and goals of the project, an explanation of what participants would be expected to do, contact information for the researchers, and a link to the online survey posted on Zoomerang. Participants who did not have a valid e-mail address received the recruitment letter and a paper copy of the survey via standard mail, along with a postage-paid, addressed return envelope. For monitoring purposes, Zoomerang data tracking features were used to separate email addresses for respondents versus non-respondents, which enabled the study investigators to send follow-up emails only to non-respondents. Similarly, each paper survey was tracked with a participant number to distinguish between responding and non-responding participant addresses. After completion of the data collection phase, all documentation related to participant contact information was destroyed.

Several steps were taken to increase the response rate. First, non-respondents received a reminder via e-mail or a mailed postcard two weeks after the initial mailing. Second, non-respondents with email addresses also received a series of three additional follow-up reminders over a four-month period following the initial recruitment email. Third, snowball sampling techniques were employed at the time of survey administration. The closing statement of each survey asked participants to pass a general link to the online survey onto any other Texas school social workers that they knew or to provide the mailing or e-mail address of any other school social workers that might be interested in taking the survey. These participants were then contacted in the same manner as the original participants. Finally, participants were offered a small incentive to complete the survey. All participants who completed the survey were entered in a drawing to receive one of 100 five dollar gift cards.

PARTICIPANTS

The TSSWS was sent to a total of 518 email addresses and 799 mailing addresses for a total of 1371 surveys sent. For the electronic survey, 163 of the email addresses bounced back due to invalid addresses and 12 respondents informed the research team that they were not eligible for the study because they were not school social workers. The response rate for the electronic survey was 25% (n=87). For the mailed survey, 83 surveys were returned to sender due to incorrect addresses. Additionally, 5 potential participants were excluded because they did not meet the study criteria. The response rate for the mail survey was 13% (n=90). The total response rate for electronic and mail surveys was approximately 17% (n=177). This response rate falls below typical response

rates for mail (50%) and online/email surveys (30-40% surveys) (University of Texas at Austin Center for Teaching and Learning, 2010).

There are several issues that may have contributed to the less than average response rate in this study despite the use of practices designed to increase response rate such as providing information about the survey, providing a self-addressed stamped envelope, sending reminders, and offering incentives to participate (University of Texas at Austin Center for Teaching and Learning, 2010). First, the sampling frame was derived from several existing databases that had been created and added to over a number of years. Consequently, the likelihood for inaccurate or older mailing addresses was quite high. In addition, since many potential respondents provided their work addresses in the database rather than home addresses, it is likely that many surveys were delivered to schools but discarded if the named recipient no longer worked at that school. Finally, the databases also contained an unknown number of related school professionals who attended the Texas School Social Worker's Conference or worked for the Communities in Schools Agency, but were not school social workers. There was no way to determine the professional designation of the respondents from these lists. After reading the instructions to the survey, these potential respondents likely found that they were not eligible for the survey and did not respond. For these reasons, it was difficult to determine the true response rate of eligible participants for this study, as it is likely higher than the response rate reported above.

The response rate for this dissertation is considered a limitation because it is lower than the typical response rates for mailed or electronic surveys. However, this

study is one of the first of its kind to explore social workers' views about accountability policies and the impact that these policies may be having on their jobs. In addition, it has attempted to access a population that is difficult to reach because there are no population estimates for the number of school social workers in the state and no central registries for communicating with them. Given these circumstances, the results of this study are likely to yield valuable insights into aspects of school social work practice and education policy implementation that have not yet been represented in the research literature. It can serve as a small-scale or pilot study that can be replicated with larger samples over time.

Overall, sample characteristics for this study were similar to the sample characteristics for Texas school social workers in a recent national study of school social workers (Kelly et al., 2010). In Kelly et al.'s study, the sample population was 84% female and 43% Caucasian with 68% holding a master's degree in social work and 39% holding a social work license. The average length of practice in the previous study was over 11 years with 30% practicing in elementary schools, 21% in middle schools, and 29% in high schools. In comparison, the sample population for this dissertation study was slightly more likely to be female and Caucasian. The sample for this dissertation had practiced social work for three additional years on average and participants were more likely to have a social work license.

DATA PREPARATION

To date, the Principal Investigators of the TSSWS have not yet analyzed the survey data collected for the original intentions of the study. For the purposes of this dissertation, several doctoral students, including the author, manually coded and entered

the paper surveys. Internet surveys were first automatically coded by Zoomerang and were then manually adjusted by the same coding team to match the codebook created for the paper surveys. After initial coding, a member of the coding team checked each case for coding accuracy and consistency.

EXPLICATION AND MEASUREMENT OF VARIABLES

The following section outlines each Research Question that was addressed and the corresponding hypotheses that were tested in this study. It describes the variables used in each analysis, as well as the specific measures that were used to answer the research questions.

Variables for Hypothesis 1

Research Question 1: How do school social workers perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems and on their ability to perform their job tasks?

Hypothesis 1: *Most Texas school social workers will perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on school systems and school social worker job tasks.*

Hypothesis 1 was examined using descriptive and factor analysis techniques only and therefore has "variables of interest" rather than dependent and independent variables. To answer this research question, the researcher examined two different set of Likert items from the TSSWS that asked school social workers to respond to 1) Statements about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems in general (*TAKS Impact on School Systems)* and 2) Statements about the impact of the TAKS test specifically on their job tasks (*TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*). Responses to these sets of items allowed the

researcher to identify trends among school social worker attitudes and determine if they tended to feel that the TAKS test has a predominantly positive or negative impact on school systems and job tasks. Table 7, at the end of this section, displays the two sets of Likert items that were used in the analysis of Hypothesis 1. These items also comprised the factors that were used as dependent variables in Hypotheses 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, and 3.2.

TAKS Impact on School Systems

Description. The TSSWS has 20 Likert items that attempt to measure school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on schools, teachers, and students. The Likert items were not designed as a scale to measure a single construct, but were instead designed to measure a full range of possible positive and negative effects of the TAKS test. However, many of these items seemed to be conceptually related to the concept of *TAKS Impact on School Systems* under study in this dissertation so the use of factor analysis was an appropriate method for determining which items could be used to measure this construct. Each of the Likert items begins with the stem "The TAKS test…" and then makes a positively or negatively worded statement about the influence of the TAKS test on students, teachers, or schools. There are an equal number of positively (i.e. "The TAKS test helps students gauge their learning") and negatively (i.e. "The TAKS test causes teachers a great deal of stress") worded statements.

An initial exploratory factor analysis was run on the full set of 20 items to determine whether some of the items could be used to measure the overall impact of the TAKS test on school systems. In factor analysis, factors should have Eigenvalues of greater than one (Kaiser, 1960). As a rule of thumb, factor loadings of .40 or higher are

considered significant and any loadings below .40 are not considered adequate (Sheskin, 2004). This initial factor analysis revealed that the items loaded onto three factors. Only a single item, *Teacher Stress*, loaded on the third factor, so the two factor solution was examined (see Table 3). Results of the factor analysis indicated that most items loaded cleanly onto one of the two factors, with the exception of *Behavior Problems*, *Resource Reduction*, and *Impact on Social Work Services*, which did not load on either factor and were eliminated from the factor analysis. The first factor contained 13 items and had good reliability ($\alpha=0.88$) and the second factor contained four items and had adequate reliability ($\alpha=0.75$).

Table 3. Exploratory Factor Loadings for All Possible TAKS Impact on School Systems Indicators, Two Factor Solution

	TAKS Impact on School Systems		
Possible Indicators	Geomin Rotated Loadings†		Eigenvalue
	Factor 1	Factor 2	6.56
Fairness	0.55	0.15	
Gauge of teaching	0.71	-0.06	
Social service resources	0.46	0.04	
School measure	0.69	<0.01	
Student stress	-0.02	0.76	
Relevance to classes	0.58	<-0.01	
Grade retention or dropout	-0.18	0.48	
Impact on achievement gap	0.59	0.13	
Behavior problems	<0.01	0.39	
Gauge of learning	0.66	0.02	
School choice	0.57	-0.12	
Resource reduction	0.02	0.23	
Uniform testing	0.47	<-0.01	
Prevents overlooking students	0.71	-0.02	
Underprivileged students	0.73	0.06	
Test preparation	0.06	0.75	
Hard work by students	0.73	0.11	
Teacher stress	0.18	0.70	
School accountability	0.71	-0.12	
Impact on social work services	-0.04	0.26	

Analysis of Hypothesis 1 laid the foundation for multivariate analysis of the same constructs, *TAKS Impact on School Systems* and *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*, in all of the subsequent hypotheses. Consequently, care was taken to ensure that these variables were measured uniformly in descriptive, factor, and multivariate analyses. For this reason, measurement decisions were based not only on requirements for the analysis of Hypothesis 1, but also the requirements for hypotheses 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, and 3.2, which were analyzed with SEM.

In SEM, correlated dependent variables can cause concerns with multicollinearity and are not recommended for use because they can make models difficult to interpret (Hair et al., 1998). Therefore, the correlation between the factors was examined and they were found to be correlated (β=0.51, p=<0.01). For this reason, only one factor was chosen for use in the analysis. The factor with 13 indicators was chosen because it seemed to better conceptually represent a wide range of possible impacts that the TAKS test could be having on school systems, rather than the second factor with 4 indicators and a more narrow range of concepts related to some possible impacts of the TAKS test on teachers and students only.

SEM also requires identification of a measurement model that specifies the indicators that represent each factor and tests to ensure that the specified model is a good fit for the data. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is used to assess the contribution of each indicator on the factor and how well the factor measures the intended construct. When a CFA was performed on the 13 items comprising *TAKS Impact on School Systems,* it resulted in a less than adequate model fit (see Chapter 4 for CFA results). For

this reason, the geomin rotated factor loadings were examined for each indicator to identify the indicator that loaded least well on the factor. The indicator *Social Services Resources* had the lowest loading (0.47) and was therefore eliminated as an indicator.

An additional EFA was run to confirm the factor structure with 12 items. It revealed that the remaining 12 items had an acceptable Eigenvalue of 5.64, indicating that 47% of the variance was explained by the factor. Factor loadings were significant with a range of .49 - .77 (See Table 21 for all factor loadings). A subsequent CFA with the 12 items had good model fit, so these were the final items selected for use in the structural equation model (see Chapter 4). For consistency and clarity, these 12 items were also the final items used in the analysis of Hypothesis 1. Table 4 identifies the final items from the survey used to represent *TAKS Impact on School Systems* in the analysis of Hypothesis 1.

Table 4. Indicators for TAKS Impact on School Systems Variable

Indicator	Item
	The TAKS test…
Fairness	is fair
Gauge of teaching	helps teachers gauge their teaching
School measure	is a good measure of overall school performance
Relevance to classes	is well matched with requirements to pass classes
Impact on achievement gap	is helping to close the achievement gap
Gauge of learning	helps students gauge their learning
School choice	helps parents to choose better schools for their kids
Uniform testing	ensures that all students are tested uniformly
Prevents overlooking students	prevents students from being overlooked
Underprivileged students	helps traditionally underprivileged students to succeed in schools
Hard work by students	helps students see the importance of working harder in school
School accountability	keep schools accountable for student learning

Reliability analyses of these items revealed that they have good reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.89) indicating that they are a good measure of school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on schools.

Scoring. Response categories for each of the above Likert items on the TSSWS were originally scored as follows: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 =Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree. All of the final items that were used to represent the *TAKS Impact on School Systems* were positively worded. For ease of interpretation, these items were directionally re-coded so that higher values indicated more positive perceptions of the impact on school systems. Therefore, the final response categories that were used for this analysis were 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 =Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree. For the purposes of this analysis, scores on each of these items were summed to provide a single score for each participant representing overall perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. The distribution and mean of these scores were used to test Hypothesis 1 by examining trends in school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.

TAKS Impact on Job Tasks
Description. The TSSWS has 10 Likert items that attempt to measure school social worker perceptions about the impact that the TAKS test has on school social work in particular. The Likert items were not designed as a scale to measure a single construct, but were instead designed to measure a full range of possible positive and negative effects of the TAKS test on school social work. However, many of these items are

conceptually related to the concept of *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* under study in this dissertation. Each of the Likert items begins with the stem "The TAKS test…" and then makes a positively or negatively worded statement about the influence of the TAKS test on social workers. There are an equal number of positively (i.e. "The TAKS test gives me a chance to connect my services to student academic outcomes") and negatively (i.e. "The TAKS makes it difficult to pull students from academic classes") worded statements. An initial exploratory factor analysis was run on the full set of 10 items to determine whether some of the items could be used to measure the specific impact that the TAKS test is having on school social worker job tasks. This factor analysis revealed that the items loaded onto three factors. Only a single item, *Change in Job Tasks*, loaded on the third factor, so the two factor solution was examined (see Table 5).

Table 5. Exploratory Factor Loadings for All Possible TAKS Impact on Job Tasks
Indicators, Two Factor Solution

	TAKS Impact on Job Tasks		
Possible Indicators	Geomin Rotated Loadings		Eigenvalue
	Factor 1	Factor 2	2.37
Job impact	0.44	-0.23	
Student access	0.69	0.11	
Opportunity for service	0.29	0.59	
Change in tasks	0.43	-0.49	
Accountability for work	0.11	0.61	
Service provision	0.84	<0.01	
Number accessible	0.63	-0.22	
Connection to academics	-0.01	0.61	
Additional students	<0.01	0.66	
Direct academic instruction	0.26	-0.36	

Results of the factor analysis indicated that most items loaded cleanly onto one of the two factors, with the exception of *Change in Tasks,* which loaded on both factors, and

Direct Academic Instruction, which did not load on either factor. Both of these items were subsequently eliminated from the factor analysis. Both factors had 4 items and had adequate reliability (α=0.72). The factors were not found to be correlated to one another (β=0.12, p=0.24).

Upon further inspection, Factor 1 best represented the concept under study (*TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*) by measuring the direct impact of the TAKS test on job tasks, school social workers' ease of access to students, service provision, and the number of students accessible for services. This factor had an acceptable Eigenvalue of 2.22, indicating that 55.5% of the variance was explained by the factor. Factor loadings were significant with a range of .40 - .96. While the indicators for Factor 2 measured some possible positive impacts that the TAKS test could have on school social workers, it was difficult to tell how these items, when used together to represent a factor, could give cohesive insight into the impact of the TAKS test on school social worker job tasks. For this reason, only the first factor was used in subsequent analyses. Table 6 identifies the final items from the survey used to represent *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* in the analysis of Hypothesis 1.

Table 6. Final Indicators for TAKS Impact on Job Tasks Variable

Indicator	Item
	The TAKS test…
Job impact	has impacted my job a great deal
Student access	makes it difficult to pull students from academic classes
Service provision	makes it more difficult to provide social work services to students
Number accessible	has limited the number of students I can work with

Reliability analyses of these items revealed that they have acceptable reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.72), indicating that they are an acceptable measure of school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school social worker job tasks.

Scoring. Response categories for each of the above Likert items on the TSSWS were scored as follows: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 =Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree. All of these items were negatively worded so that higher values indicated more positive perceptions of the impact on job tasks. For the purposes of this analysis, scores on each of these items were summed to provide a single score for perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks. The distribution and mean of these scores were then used to test Hypothesis 1 by determining trends among school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks.

Table 7. Measures of Variables of Interest for Hypothesis 1

Variable	Values	Range	Mean (SD)
TAKS Impact on School Systems			
Fairness	1 = Strongly disagree	1 – 5	2.38 (.90)
Gauge of teaching	2 = Disagree	1 – 4	2.41 (.93)
School measure	3 = Neither agree nor disagree	1 – 5	2.17 (.88)
Relevance to classes	4 = Agree	1 – 5	2.48 (.77)
Impact on achievement gap	5 = Strongly agree	1 – 5	2.21 (.92)
Gauge of learning		1 – 5	2.54 (.82)
School choice		1 – 5	2.58 (.89)
Uniform testing		1 – 5	2.95 (.99)
Prevents overlooking students		1 – 4	2.50 (.92)
Underprivileged students		1 – 4	2.13 (.84)
Hard work by students		1 – 5	2.43 (.94)
School accountability		1 – 5	3.06 (1.08)
TAKS Impact on Job Tasks			
Job impact	1 = Strongly agree	1 – 5	2.85 (1.0)
Student access	2 = Agree	1 – 5	2.04 (.94)
Service provision	3 = Neither agree nor disagree 4 = Disagree	1 – 5	2.59 (.95)
Number accessible	5 = Strongly disagree	1 – 5	3.14 (1.01)

Variables for Hypothesis 2.1

Research Question 2: Do the characteristics of the students that school social workers serve predict their perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks?

Hypothesis 2.1: *School social workers who predominantly serve students of color or students with low socioeconomic status will be significantly more likely to perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on their ability to accomplish their job tasks.*

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The research literature presented in chapters one and two showed that students from minority backgrounds and those with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to experience negative school outcomes and that they are also more likely to have poor outcomes on high-stakes accountability tests. Analysis of Hypothesis 2.1 sought to determine whether school social workers who predominantly served students in these at-risk groups had more negative views about the impact of the TAKS test on their abilities to perform their job tasks. To explore this hypothesis, the researcher examined the relationship between these two student characteristics (exogenous variables) and a latent dependent (endogenous) variable: Impact of the TAKS test on job tasks. Covariates were not included in this analysis. Table 8 displays the dependent and independent variables that were used in the analysis of Hypothesis 2.1 at the end of the section.

Independent Variables: Serve Ethnic Minority Students and Serve Students with Low SES

Description. In the TSSWS, respondents are instructed to review a list of 57 student characteristics or situations that impact students. They are asked to place a check mark beside each of the student characteristics that apply to the MAJORITY of the students that they serve or MOST of the students on their caseload. The student characteristic variables chosen for this study were: *Serve Ethnic Minority Students* and *Serve Students with Low Socioeconomic Status*. These variables were chosen because they represent two of the largest "at-risk" categories outlined by federal and state accountability policy. These student characteristics were also more relevant to the research questions in this study than other items regarding student problems such as

various family issues, specific mental health diagnoses, and peer relationship problems. These dichotomous variables are measured in the TSSWS by the presence or absence of a check mark in the box beside each of items, "Students of color" and "Low socioeconomic status." A check mark indicates that respondents do predominantly serve students in the stated demographic category and a blank box indicates that they do not.

Scoring. Response categories for *Serve Ethnic Minority Students* and *Serve Students with Low Socioeconomic Status* were scored using the following values: 1 = Majority of students served have this characteristic and 0 = Majority of students served do not have this characteristic. This variable distinguished between school social workers who predominantly serve students in at-risk sub-categories identified by major accountability policies and those who do not.

Dependent Variable: TAKS Impact on Job Tasks

Description. The dependent (endogenous) variable that was used in the analysis of Hypothesis 2.1 was *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*. The four Likert items that were used to measure *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* in the analysis of Hypothesis 1 were also be used to measure this construct in Hypothesis 2.1 (see Table 7). The reliability of these items was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$) indicating that they are an acceptable measure of school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on social worker job tasks.

Scoring. The response options for each of the Likert items used to measure *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* on the TSSWS are as follows: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree. These items are all

negatively worded so that higher values indicate more positive perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks.

In the analysis of Hypothesis 1, the scores on each of the four Likert items that make up *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* were summed and averaged to provide a single score representing perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. However, for the analysis of Hypothesis 2.1, the researcher utilized structural equation modeling (SEM), which allowed for more advanced analysis with latent variables. For this reason, these four Likert items were treated as indicators that represented the construct or factor *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*. Analysis of *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* among school social workers who predominantly serve students from ethnic minority backgrounds or those with lower socioeconomic status and those who do not allowed the researcher to determine if there were any perceptual differences among these two groups of social workers.

Table 8. Measures of Independent and Dependent Variables for Hypothesis 2.1

Independent Variables			
Name	Values	Range	Frequency
Serve Ethnic Minority Students	1 = Majority of students have this characteristic	0 – 1	40.3%
	0 = Majority of students do not have this characteristic	0 – 1	59.7%
Serve Students with Low SES	1 = Majority of students have this characteristic	0 – 1	77.4%
	0 = Majority of students do not have this characteristic	0 – 1	22.6%

Dependent Variable			
TAKS Impact on Job Tasks	Values	Range	Mean (SD)
Job impact	1 = Strongly agree	1 – 5	2.85 (1.0)
Student access	2 = Agree	1 – 5	2.04 (.94)
Service provision	3 = Neither agree nor disagree	1 – 5	2.59 (.95)
Number accessible	4 = Disagree	1 – 5	3.14 (1.01)
	5 = Strongly disagree		

Covariates for Hypothesis 2.2

Hypothesis 2.2: *Adding ethnicity, education, years of school social work experience, and perceptions of preparation for job tasks to the structural model as covariates will improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the structural equation model showing that student characteristics predict social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks.*

To examine Hypothesis 2.2, it was necessary to take covariates into account when exploring the relationship between student characteristics and social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test. To test this hypothesis, the independent and dependent variables were the same as those used in the analysis of Hypothesis 2.1, but

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several covariates were added to the model. This helped determine whether the addition of covariates resulted in a more parsimonious model that explained the relationship between student characteristics and perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks. At the end of the section, Table 9 displays the additional covariates that were used in the analysis of Hypothesis 2.2.

The TSSWS collects relevant demographic information on each of the survey respondents, including the variables that were used as covariates in the analysis of Hypothesis 2.2: *Race/Ethnicity, Education Level, School Social Work Experience,* and *Preparation.* There are other demographic variables that were collected in the survey, but were not selected for this analysis largely due to possible correlations with other covariates (i.e. age, level of licensure, general social work experience). Justification for the inclusion of each covariate is presented below.

Social Worker Ethnicity (African American, Latino, and Other)

Description. Ethnicity was chosen as a covariate because Hypothesis 2.2 required a comparison between school social workers who predominantly serve students from ethnic minority backgrounds to those who do not. Therefore, it was also important to examine the possible role that the school social workers' own ethnic background might have in this relationship. In addition, the sample for this study is comprised of Texas school social workers and provided the opportunity to compare the perspectives of three large-sized ethnic groups: White, African American/Black, and Latino/Chicano/Hispanic. Past school social worker task surveys were comprised of predominantly white

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populations, so including this variable provided a unique opportunity to account for diverse school social worker perspectives.

Scoring. To be compatible with SEM, the TSSWS item measuring race/ethnicity had to be recoded in the data preparation phase. In the TSSWS, respondents are asked the question: "What is your race/ethnicity?" and are given seven response options (1=Black/African American, 2=White/Caucasian, 3=Native American, 4=Latino/Chicano/Hispanic, 5=Asian/Pacific Islander, 6=Bi-racial, 7= Other). An initial frequency distribution showed that very few respondents selected 3=Native American, 5=Asian/Pacific Islander, 6=Bi-racial or 7=Other as their race/ethnicity. For this reason, these response categories were combined into a single "Other" category. Therefore, the new *Race/Ethnicity* categories that were used in this analysis were: 1=African American, 2=White, 3=Latino, and 4=Other. In SEM, nominal variables such as race/ethnicity must be dummy coded into dichotomous variables. For this analysis, *Race/Ethnicity* was recoded into three dummy coded variables with "White" as the reference category: *African American* (1=African American, 0=Other), *Latino* (1=Latino, 0=Other), and *Other* (1=Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Bi-racial, or Other; 0=Any other race selected). These dummy coded variables were used to represent *Race/Ethnicity* in the analysis.

Education Level

Description. Education Level was used as a covariate in this analysis to account for any differences in policy perceptions based on educational factors such as experience with policy analysis of social welfare or education legislation. For instance, it is possible

that school social workers with higher levels of education may have received additional instruction in policy analysis and may be more likely to critically examine policies that impact their jobs. This covariate was included to determine whether or not educational differences might help to explain some of the variance in school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks.

Scoring. In the TSSWS, respondents are asked: "Please indicate the highest degree you have obtained" (1=BSW, 2=Non-social work Bachelors degree, 3=MSW/MSSW, 4=Non-social work Masters degree, 5=PhD in social work, 6=Non-social work PhD). An initial frequency distribution showed that very few respondents indicated that the highest degree that they obtained was a PhD and very few indicated that their highest degree was in a discipline other than social work. For these reasons, all Bachelor's degrees (1=BSW, 2=Non-social work Bachelors degree) were combined into a single category and all Master's degrees (3=MSW/MSSW, 4=Non-social work Masters degree) were combined into a single category. Since there were so few respondents that obtained a PhD, all respondents that indicated that their highest degree is a PhD (5=PhD in social work, 6=Non-social work PhD) were also combined into the same category as those that hold a Master's degree. Therefore *Education Level* was measured by the following dichotomous categories: 1=Bachelors degree, 2=Masters degree or higher.

School Social Work Experience

Description. School social work experience was used as a covariate in this analysis to account for any differences in policy perceptions based on the amount of time spent working as a school social worker. The Likert items that measure perceptions about

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the TAKS test on the TSSWS are worded in the present tense to assess any current impact that school social workers perceive it having on their job tasks. These items do not ask school social workers to compare their practice before and after implementation of the TAKS test, which ensures that all school social workers can respond to the items regardless of the amount of time they have spent employed as school social workers. However, it was important to explore any differences between respondents based on their school social work experience because some of the differences in their perspectives about the TAKS test may have been explained by their experiences with policy changes, priority shifts, or changes in school culture and dynamics over time.

Scoring. *School Social Work Experience* is measured by a single continuous variable on the TSSWS. Respondents are asked to write in a response to the question: "How long have you practiced school social work?" A review of these responses indicated that respondents typically described their school social work experiences in terms of the number of years and months that they had practiced school social work. The written responses from the TSSWS were given numeric values when they were entered into the statistical database with the number of years represented with a whole number and the number of additional months rounded to the nearest quarter year and expressed after the decimal place (i.e. 10 years, 2 months = 10.25 years).

Preparation

Description. *Preparation* was used as the final covariate in this analysis. Social work education often utilizes a holistic, systems perspective rather than providing training specific to a particular practice setting or population. Practicum and internship

experiences provide more setting specific experience, but these experiences do not always match with the setting that social workers pursue after graduation. Consequently, it is difficult to determine how often school social workers receive training in education policies or techniques specific to a school setting and how well prepared they feel for employment in a school. This variable was included in the analysis to account for any differences that this might cause in school social worker perceptions about the TAKS test due to varying levels of preparation for the school environment (i.e. prior expectations about job tasks and confidence in their professional ability to complete them).

Scoring. This variable is measured by a single positively worded Likert scale item on the TSSWS: "I feel that that the social work training I received adequately prepared me to be a school social worker" (1 = Strongly agree, 2 =Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree). These items were directionally re-coded so that higher values indicated more positive perceptions about preparation for school social work job tasks. Therefore, the response categories that were used for this analysis were: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 =Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Table 9. Measures of Covariates for Hypothesis 2.2 and 3.2

Covariates Name	Values	Range	Frequency or Mean (SD)
Social Worker Race/Ethnicity			
African American	1 = African American	0 – 1	11.7%
	0 = Other		88.3%
Latino	1 = Latino	0 – 1	33.1%
	0 = Other		66.9%
Other	1 = Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Bi-racial, or Other	0 – 1	1.8%
	0 = Any other race/ethnicity		98.2%
Education level	1 = Bachelors degree	1 – 2	31.1%
	2 = Masters degree or higher		68.9%
School social work experience	Number of years of school social work practice	Less than 7 months – 25 years	8.44(5.77)
Preparation	1 = Strongly disagree	1 – 5	3.75(.97)
	2 = Disagree		
	3 = Neither agree nor disagree		
	4 = Agree		
	5 = Strongly agree		

Variables for Hypothesis 3.1

Research Question 3: Do perceptions about TEA ratings in schools where they work and performance on the TAKS test among students on their caseloads predict school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems?

Hypothesis 3.1: *School social workers who perceive that their students are less successful on the TAKS test and those that work in schools with lower TEA ratings will be more likely to report negative perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.*

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The research literature presented in chapters one and two show that schools with higher populations of disadvantaged students and schools with fewer resources are more likely to have lower accountability ratings and higher consequences for students (Hursh, 2005; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; McCarthey, 2008). Since social workers are often trained to recognize these types of disparities for vulnerable populations and to try to alleviate them, it is likely that school social workers practicing at schools with lower ratings may have more negative views about high-stakes testing than those working at more affluent schools with higher ratings. Similarly, school social workers that predominantly serve at-risk students who are more likely to perform poorly on and have consequences attached to the TAKS test, may be more likely to view the impact that testing has on school systems in a negative manner. Hypothesis 3.1 sought to test these relationships by examining whether school ratings and perceptions of student performance on the TAKS test (independent or exogenous variables) influence school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems (latent dependent or endogenous variable). Covariates were not included in this analysis. Table 11 displays the dependent and independent variables that were used in the analysis of Hypothesis 3.1 at the end of the section.

Calculating TEA Ratings

In order to understand the importance of TEA ratings, one must first understand how they are calculated. Beginning in 1993, the Texas legislature required that schools be evaluated under an accountability system. TEA assigns one of four rating levels to each school and school district in Texas on a yearly basis. These ratings, organized from

lowest rating to highest rating, include: Academically Unacceptable, Academically Acceptable, Recognized, and Exemplary. These ratings are state-level accountability ratings that are separate from AYP. Similar to AYP, these ratings are based on TAKS test results, but also on dropout and completion rates. Scores are calculated for all students, as well as for subgroups of students from ethnic minority backgrounds and low-income families (Texas Education Agency, 2008). School TEA accountability ratings are publically available at http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/.

In 2008 (the year of TSSWS data collection), TEA accountability ratings were determined by examining the following indicators: TAKS test results in all subjects (reading/ELA, writing, social studies, mathematics, and science) for applicable grades, completion rates, and dropout rates. TAKS test results were calculated as the percentage of students who scored high enough to pass the test in each subject area. Test participation rates did not factor into this rating. Completion rates were calculated for each graduating class based on rates of entry for their ninth grade cohort. To be counted as a "completer," students from this cohort must have either received a diploma or re-enrolled for the following year as a continuing student four years after beginning ninth grade. The annual dropout rate was calculated only for seventh and eighth grade students. The dropout rate was determined by dividing the number of dropouts by the number of students in grades seven or eight who were in attendance at any time during the school year. The standard for this dropout rate was the same for all rating categories.

Table 10 displays the TAKS test, completion rate, and dropout rate requirements to achieve each of the TEA ratings.

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Table 10. TEA accountability rating requirements

Indicator	Population	Exemplary	Recognized	Academically Acceptable	Academically Unacceptable
TAKS test	Reading: 3-9 ELA: 10, 11 Writing: 4, 7 Social studies: 8, 10, 11 Mathematics: 3-11 Science: 5, 8, 10, 11	At least 90% of tested students pass the test for every subject	At least 75% of tested students pass the test for every subject	Reading /ELA – at least 70% pass Writing – at least 65% pass Social Studies – at least 65% pass Mathematics – at least 50% pass Science – at least 45% pass	Students fall below the standards for Academically Acceptable in any subject
Completion rate	For each graduating class based on their 9th grade cohort	Completion rate of 95% or more	Completion rate of 85% or more	Completion rate of 75% or more	Completion rate below 75%
Dropout rate	7th and 8th grade students	7th and 8th grade dropout rate of 2% or less	7th and 8th grade dropout rate of 2% or less	7th and 8th grade dropout rate of 2% or less	7th and 8th grade dropout rate of more than 2%

Adapted from: Texas Education Agency. (2008). *2008 accountability manual* (GE08 602 02). Austin, TX: Texas Education Agency; Department of Assessment, Accountability, and Data Quality; Division of Performance Reporting.

Although these were the absolute baseline standards for achieving each TEA rating, schools and districts could achieve a higher rating by showing designated levels of improvement on any of the standards or by using an exceptions clause. More detailed information about TEA rating calculation, including information about levels of improvement and exceptions clauses can be found at http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2008/manual/index.html.

Independent Variable 1: School TEA Ratings

       Description. When school names are known, the best measure of school level TEA ratings is to retrieve them directly from the Texas Education Agency website. This is the best measure of school TEA ratings because it is objective and comes directly from the source that calculates the ratings. The TSSWS contains an item that asks respondents who work at individual schools to disclose the name of the school where they work. However, it does not ask respondents who work at multiple schools to list the names of all of the schools where they practice. For this reason, school TEA scores could not be obtained from the TEA website for all respondents. The TSSWS does, however, have self-report measures of school TEA ratings that can be used for school social workers practicing at single and multiple schools even if they do not disclose school names. Therefore, the first independent (exogenous) variable that was used for the analysis of Hypothesis 3.1 was school social worker *perceptions* or self-report about the 2008 TEA Rating(s) for the school(s) where they worked at the time of the survey. This variable was tested for accuracy of perception among participants who worked at a single school and gave the name of their school by comparing their perceived TEA rating to the rating reported on the TEA website. Of the 58 respondents who met this criterion, 53 accurately reported their TEA rating (91.38%) showing that self-reported TEA ratings seem to be an accurate approximation of actual TEA ratings. Of those who misreported their TEA rating, 3 respondents reported one category higher than their actual rating and 2 respondents reported one category lower than their actual rating.

Scoring. The TSSWS utilizes a skip pattern where school social workers who work in a single school and those who work in multiple schools are routed to separate questions about TEA ratings. Respondents who work in a single school are asked to respond to: "What was the most recent TEA rating for your school?" (1=Exemplary, 2=Recognized, 3=Academically acceptable, 4=Academically unacceptable, 97=Not applicable, 98=Don't know). This variable was originally coded as *TEA single*. Respondents who work at multiple schools are asked: "If you work in multiple schools, what was the most recent TEA rating for MOST of the schools where you worked?" This question has the same four response options noted above and an additional response option for those respondents that feel their school ratings vary greatly between schools (1=Exemplary, 2=Recognized, 3=Academically acceptable, 4=Academically unacceptable, 5=Ratings vary greatly from school to school, 97=Not applicable, 98=Don't know). This variable was originally coded as *TEA multiple.*

While the sample for this study was evenly split between school social workers who work at a single school (45.5%) and those who work for multiple schools (44.9%), there were fewer than 100 respondents in each group, which is the minimum sample size for some of the statistical analyses planned for this analysis. For this reason, single and multiple school responses were re-coded into a single composite variable, *TEA Ratings,* so that these groups of respondents could be analyzed together rather than being analyzed as two distinct groups. This composite variable had the same response categories as the original variables (1=Exemplary, 2=Recognized, 3=Academically acceptable,

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4=Academically unacceptable, 5=Ratings vary greatly from school to school, 97=Not applicable, 98=Don't know).

To further prepare this variable for analysis, responses that were originally coded 97 or 98 were re-coded as "user missing." The "Ratings vary greatly from school to school" (5) category for multiple school respondents was also coded as "user missing" because this response did not apply to the full sample. The four final response categories for the composite variable measuring perceptions of TEA ratings were directionally re-coded so that higher values represented higher ratings, for ease of analytic interpretation. Final response categories for the variable *TEA Ratings* were: 1 = Academically unacceptable, 2 = Academically acceptable, 3 = Recognized, and 4 = Exemplary. This variable helped to test Hypothesis 3.1 by distinguishing between school social workers who predominantly serve students in schools with lower accountability ratings and those who do not.

Independent Variable 2: Student Performance on TAKS

Description. The second independent (exogenous) variable that was used for the analysis of Hypothesis 3.1 was *Student Performance on TAKS.* This variable measured respondent perceptions about how the students they serve generally perform on the TAKS test. The TSSWS does not have a mechanism for directly measuring individual student test scores for students on the respondents' caseloads. However, school social workers are likely to know how their students are performing on the TAKS test since this information may be used to identify at-risk students who are in need of social work services (Aguilar & Lagana-Riordan, 2008). To tap into this knowledge, the TSSWS has

a single Likert scale item that can be used to measure school social worker *perceptions* about student performance on the TAKS test. This item asks participants to respond to the statement: "In general, the students I provide services to have excelled on the TAKS test."

Scoring. The original Likert item measuring student performance on the TAKS test was scored as follows: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree. For ease of interpretation, these items were directionally re-coded so that higher values indicated more positive perceptions about student performance on the TAKS test. Therefore, the final response categories that were used for this analysis were 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree. This variable sought to test Hypothesis 3.1 by distinguishing between school social workers who believe that the students on their caseloads tend to perform well on the TAKS test and those that believe that their students tend to struggle with the TAKS test.

Dependent Variable: TAKS Impact on School Systems

Description. The dependent variable that was used for the analysis of Hypothesis 3.1 was *TAKS Impact on School Systems*. The 12 Likert items that were used to measure *TAKS Impact on School Systems* in the analysis of Hypothesis 1 were also used to measure this construct in Hypothesis 3.1 (see Table 7). The reliability of these items was good (Cronbach's α = 0.89) indicating that they are a good measure of school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems in general.

Scoring. Response options for each of the 12 Likert items that represented *TAKS Impact on School Systems* on the TSSWS were originally coded as follows: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree. All of these items are positively worded. For ease of interpretation, these items were directionally re-coded so that higher values indicated more positive perceptions of the impact on school systems. Therefore, the response categories that were used for this analysis were 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

In the analysis of Hypothesis 1, the scores on each of the 12 Likert items related to *TAKS Impact on School Systems* were summed and averaged to provide a single score representing perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. However, for the analysis of Hypothesis 3.1, the researcher utilized structural equation modeling (SEM), which allowed for more advanced analysis with latent variables. For this reason, these 12 Likert items were treated as indicators that represented the construct or factor *TAKS Impact on School Systems*. Analysis of *TAKS Impact on School Systems* among school social workers that serve students who perform well on the TAKS test or who practice at schools with higher TEA ratings and those who do not allowed the researcher to determine if there were any perceptual differences among these groups of social workers. Table 11 displays all variables used in the analysis of Hypothesis 3.1.

Table 11. Measures of Independent and Dependent Variables for Hypothesis 3.1

| **Independent Variables** | | | |
Name	Values	Range	Mean (SD)
School TEA ratings	1 = Academically unacceptable 2 = Academically acceptable 3 = Recognized 4 = Exemplary	1 – 4	2.5(.80)
Student Performance on TAKS	1 = Strongly disagree 2 =Disagree 3 = Neither agree nor disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly agree	1 – 5	2.56 (1.05)

Dependent Variable *TAKS Impact on School Systems*	Values	Range	Mean (SD)
Fairness		1 – 5	2.38 (.90)
Gauge of teaching		1 – 4	2.41 (.93)
School measure		1 – 5	2.17 (.88)
Relevance to classes		1 – 5	2.48 (.77)
Impact on achievement gap	1 = Strongly disagree	1 – 5	2.21 (.92)
Gauge of learning	2 = Disagree	1 – 5	2.54 (.82)
School choice	3 = Neither agree nor disagree	1 – 5	2.58 (.89)
Uniform testing	4 = Agree	1 – 5	2.95 (.99)
Prevents overlooking students	5 = Strongly agree	1 – 4	2.50 (.92)
Underprivileged students		1 – 4	2.13 (.84)
Hard work by students		1 – 5	2.43 (.94)
School accountability		1 – 5	3.06 (1.08)

Covariates for Hypothesis 3.2

Hypothesis 3.2: *Adding ethnicity, education, years of school social work experience, and perceptions of preparation for job tasks to the structural model as covariates will improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the structural equation model showing that TEA ratings and perceptions of student performance on the TAKS test predict social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.*

To examine Hypothesis 3.2, it was necessary to explore the impact of covariates on the relationship between TEA ratings and perceptions of student TAKS performance on social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. Therefore, the same independent and dependent variables used in the analysis of Hypothesis 3.1 were used in the analysis of Hypothesis 3.2, but several covariates were added to the model. This sought to determine whether the addition of covariates would result in a more parsimonious model and explain more of the variance in the model.

The covariates that were used in the analysis of Hypothesis 2.2 were also used in the analysis of Hypothesis 3.2. See Hypothesis 2.2 for information about how these variables were measured. Table 9 displays the covariates that were used in the analysis of Hypothesis 3.2.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Overview of SEM

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is a family of statistical techniques, rather than a single statistical procedure. These techniques require the researcher to specify a particular model with relationships among independent and dependent variables in advance of the analysis, but can be used in exploratory or confirmatory analyses or combinations of the two (Kline, 2005). SEM can model complex relationships between combinations of independent and dependent variables. It is an extension of multiple regression and factor analysis that allows for more comprehensive analysis. The main characteristics of all SEM techniques are that they can estimate some number of multiple and interrelated relationships between variables and that they can include latent variables

that represent unobserved concepts (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). SEM uses some unique language. In SEM, independent variables (presumed causes) are dubbed exogenous variables, and dependent variables are dubbed endogenous variables (Kline, 2005). In this dissertation, these terms are used interchangeably.

While it is similar to multiple regression, SEM has some distinct advantages. One of the advantages of SEM is its ability to estimate many equations simultaneously, rather than estimating a single relationship or equation, as in multiple regression. This reduces the possibility of Type I error when compared to fitting a series of multiple regression models. Another advantage of SEM is that it has the ability to include both manifest (observed) and latent variables in the analysis. Latent variables are those that can be represented by a series of indicators, but cannot be measured directly (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). An example of a latent variable is personal attitudes toward a particular topic. Personal attitudes cannot be directly observed or measured, but by asking a series of questions about a topic, these attitudes can be represented. Another advantage is that SEM accounts for measurement error through the creation of a measurement model, which specifies how latent variables will load on the factors that represent them in the analysis and then estimates the reliability of those factors. This estimation is incorporated into the analysis of relationships between the independent and dependent variables, thus reducing measurement error (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black).

There are three major applications of SEM. The Confirmatory Modeling strategy tests the statistical significance of how a single model fits the data. This technique is not used as commonly as the other applications because it severely limits the purposes of

model testing (Kline, 2005). This technique also has a tendency toward confirmation bias because confirming model fit does not necessary mean that the researcher has ascertained the best model to fit the data, only that he or she has discovered one of many possible models that might fit the data (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). The second application of SEM is the Competing or Alternative Models strategy where more than one model is specified in advance of data analysis and all proposed models are tested to see which has the best fit (Kline, 2005). This is considered a stronger method because it tests different structural relationships rather than a single structure (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). The third application is Model Development where a single model is proposed, but the purpose of the analysis is to find the best fitting model. In this application, the researcher will repeatedly modify a model if the initial model does not adequately fit the data, though there must be strong theoretical support to do so (Kline, 2005).

Structural Equation Modeling was appropriate for use in this study because the analysis included multiple latent variables, as well as measured variables. School social worker perceptions are latent variables (*TAKS Impact on School Systems* and *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*) because they attempt to measure attitudes that cannot be directly observed. SEM also allows for systematic analysis of various theoretical models to determine the best model fit for the relationship between independent and dependent variables/factors. This was advantageous for this study because it allowed the author to explore multiple relationships between variables/factors that have not yet been explored in the research literature. For the same reason, this dissertation used a Competing Models

approach to SEM by running two models to answer each research question. For each research question, the first model represented and tested the direct effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The second model represented and tested the direct effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable after adding covariates (school social worker demographic variables). The purpose of the initial model was to begin with a simple model examining only the variables of interest because there is very little research literature that has explored these relationships. Then, a more complex model was examined to determine if the inclusion of covariates improved or worsened the fit of the model and if they had a confounding impact on the direct effects of the initial relationship.

All SEM analyses were conducted using Mplus version 5.21 statistical software (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2007). Model fit was analyzed through the use of the following indices: Model chi-square (χ^2), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). To have a good model fit, the model chi-square statistic should not be significant (Kline, 2005). For RMSEA, values less than 0.06 indicate a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999), values between 0.06 and 0.08 indicate a reasonable fit, and values over 0.10 indicate a poor fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Originally, a CFI over 0.90 was considered a good fit (Bentler, 1992), but the cutoff has been revised to 0.95 for a good fitting model (Hu & Bentler) so 0.90 is considered only adequate. A CFI of less than 0.90 is considered a poor fit. The TLI has the same cutoff points for good model fit as the CFI (Hu & Bentler). Finally, unstandardized and standardized estimates were examined to show the direction of the

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relationship and relative strength of association between the independent and dependent variables.

Missing Data

Missing data was handled using three different methods for this dataset. First, case deletion was used for individuals who responded to zero of the Likert items that comprised the variables *Impact on Job Tasks* and *Impact on School Systems* (dependent variables). Since these individuals did not respond to any of the items that were used to measure key variables in all of the hypotheses, imputation would have been difficult and unreliable. Case deletion was therefore the best option for dealing with this missing data. A total of 14 cases were deleted from the dataset (approximately 8% of the total sample). All other cases remained in the analysis.

The second method that was used to deal with missing data was the substitution of known values for missing values on the *School TEA Ratings* variable. This method was used for respondents who worked at a single school and provided their school name, but stated that they did not know their school rating (n=9). Since TEA ratings are publically available at the school level, these ratings were located on the TEA website and were used to replace the missing data. This method was chosen because replacing this missing data with known values was considered more reliable than using an imputation method that would only predict or estimate the missing values.

Of the remaining cases, missing data was minimal for all of the dependent variables (1.2%-4.9% for each indicator) and covariates (0%-1.8%). Missing data was also minimal for the independent variables (3%) with the exception of TEA ratings

(20.1%). When missing data comprises less than 5% of cases, it is considered small and there is not generally a need to address it (Graham, 2009). While this is true for most variables in the analysis, the variable *TEA Ratings* was more problematic and had to be addressed. By default, Mplus software handles missing data on all variables using Maximum Likelihood estimation (ML). ML does not impute missing values, but uses the full range of information available to calculate sufficient statistics (Kline, 2005). ML is generally considered an advanced and desirable method for dealing with missing data because it does not bias the results of the analysis by eliminating entire cases (Schafer & Graham, 2002). Since MPlus uses ML to deal with missing data by default during the SEM process, no additional steps were added to the analysis to deal with missing data.

Overview of Analytic Strategy

This section outlines the basic analytic strategies that were used to test each of the hypotheses in this dissertation study. Research Question 1 (Hypothesis 1) was assessed through the use of factor analysis, followed by the comparison of average summed scale scores on each set of variables. Research Questions 2 and 3 (Hypotheses 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, and 3.2) were assessed using Competing Models SEM. This section will first describe the analytic strategy for Research Question 1. It will then give an overview of the steps in the SEM process that were used in the analysis of Research Questions 2 and 3. Finally, it will present path diagrams for and describe the specific analytic strategies for each of the hypotheses for which SEM was used.

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Analytic Strategies for Research Question 1

      Research Question 1: How do school social workers perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems and on their ability to perform their job tasks?

      Hypothesis 1: Most Texas school social workers will perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on school systems and school social worker job tasks.

      The focus of this analysis was to determine how most school social workers in the sample felt about the TAKS test. The first step of this analysis was to perform two separate exploratory factor analyses: One on the Likert items that measure how social workers feel about the TAKS test in relation to school systems and one on the Likert items that measure how social workers feel about the impact of the TAKS test on their jobs. This sought to determine if the items intended to measure each construct did indeed load on that single construct. Both factor analyses were completed using Maximum Likelihood Estimation and Mplus version 5.21 software.

      The exploratory factor analysis performed for the TSSWS Likert items related to the impact of the TAKS test on school systems resulted in a factor structure of 12 items that loaded well on the factor *Impact on School Systems* (see Table 7). The second exploratory factor analysis included the TSSWS Likert items related to the impact of the TAKS test on school social worker job tasks. This analysis resulted in a factor structure of four items that loaded on a single factor, *Impact on Job Tasks* (see Table 7). The results of these exploratory factor analyses revealed that each set of selected items did load cleanly on a single factor. They also had adequate reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$ and 0.72 respectfully), confirming that these items could be used to measure the

constructs under study. Factor loadings and Eigenvalues for both factor analyses are available in the Explication and Measurement of Variables Section.

The next step of the analysis was to examine responses to the individual items that comprised each of the factors. The final step was to create an average summed score for each participant for the variable *Impact on School Systems*. To do so, individual responses for each of the 12 indicators that make up this variable were summed and then divided by the number of indicators. This resulted in an average score for each respondent. Trends in school social work responses were determined by examining average scores and by plotting them on a histogram with a normal curve in SPSS v.17 (SPSS, 2008) to determine if the majority of social workers felt more positively or negatively about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. This process was repeated for analysis of school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on social worker job tasks (*Impact on Job Tasks*).

SEM Analytic Strategies

Research Questions 2 and 3 utilized structural equation modeling. Analysis of each hypothesis involved five major steps: 1. Creation of a path diagram, 2. Development of the measurement model, 3. Development and testing of the initial structural model, 4. Development and testing of the competing structural model with covariates, 5. Comparison of the initial structural and competing models. The next section will give a brief description of each of the steps that were used in these analyses. This process was first conducted for Research Question 2 and then repeated for Research Question 3.

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Path Diagrams

Path diagrams help to depict interrelated relationships among variables and/or factors in picture form including predictive relationships and correlations. They specify hypothesized relationships between the independent variables, dependent variables, and covariates (Hair et al, 1998). In path diagrams, ovals indicate factors, boxes indicate measured or observed variables, single headed arrows represent one way or causal relationships, and double-headed arrows represent correlations (Hair et al). For this study, path diagrams were created to represent each of the hypothesized relationships in Research Question 2 and Research Question 3. Inspiration 9 Software (Helfgott & Westhaver, 1988-2010) was used to create the path diagrams. They are displayed in the next section.

Developing the Measurement Model

In SEM, the first step of analysis is to develop a measurement model. The measurement model specifies the rules of the relationships between measured and latent variables. The measurement model can assess the contribution of each indicator on each factor and how well the factors measure the intended construct. In other words, the reliability of each of the indicators and the overall construct is taken into account (Hair et al., 1998). In this study, the author constructed separate measurement models for each of the hypotheses. To achieve these measurement models, the author first conducted a series of factor analyses using the Maximum Likelihood estimation in Mplus to determine and confirm if assuming a single factor for each latent variable was reasonable. An Exploratory Factor Analysis was run to determine an Eigenvalue for each factor and to

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obtain factor loadings. Then, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to determine the overall model fit of the measurement model. Both an EFA and a CFA were necessary because the measurement model must achieve adequate fit in Mplus before attempting to fit the structural model.

Developing the Initial Structural Models

The next step of the SEM process was to develop an initial structural model to test each hypothesis by examining the relationships between the independent variables and dependent factor outlined in the measurement model. In this dissertation, the first structural model for each analysis tested only the direct effects of the independent and dependent variables with no covariates. Using SEM, relationships between the independent variables and the dependent factor were first tested by examining model fit indices and confirming that there was an adequate overall model fit. Individual relationships between the independent variables and dependent factor were then examined for significance.

Developing the Competing Structural Models

After the initial model was examined, the author tested a second model that included all of the variables from the initial model, but also selected covariates to determine if the inclusion of covariates improved the model fit. The author determined if any covariates were significant and whether any seemed to alter the relationships in the original model. Finally, the fit of the two models were statistically compared to see which represented a more parsimonious model of the tested relationships.

Analytic Strategies for Research Question 2

  Research Question 2: Do the characteristics of the students that school social

workers serve predict their perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability

to perform their job tasks?

  Hypothesis 2.1: School social workers who predominantly serve students of color

and students with low socioeconomic status will be significantly more likely to perceive

the TAKS test as having a negative impact on their ability to accomplish their job tasks.

  The purpose of this analysis was to determine the direct effects of the

characteristics of the students served, specifically students from ethnic minority

backgrounds and those with low socioeconomic status, on school social worker views

about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks. Figure 1

depicts the path diagram for this model.

Figure 1: Path Diagram for Hypothesis 2.1

In the path diagram above, thick arrows represent the direct effects of student characteristics on social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks. The thin single arrowed lines represent factor loadings on the latent variable *Impact of TAKS Test on Job Tasks*. The double arrowed line indicates correlation among the independent variables.

The next step of this analysis was to run a CFA on the factor *Impact of TAKS Test on Job Tasks* to confirm the factor structure found in the analysis of Research Question 1 and to ensure that the measurement model had adequate model fit. The final step of the analysis was to test the structural model and examine the resulting statistics including the model fit indices, chi square statistics, and the unstandardized and standardized estimates. This allowed the researcher to determine whether the overall model adequately explained the relationship between student characteristics and social worker attitudes about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks. It also tested the direct relationships between each student characteristic and social worker attitudes about the TAKS test including the strength and direction of these relationships. This allowed the researcher the ability to support or refute the hypothesis that school social workers who predominantly serve students of color or those with low socioeconomic status will be significantly more likely to perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on their ability to accomplish their job tasks

Hypothesis 2.2: Adding ethnicity, education, years of school social work experience, and perceptions of preparation for job tasks to the structural model as covariates will improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the structural

equation model showing that student characteristics predict social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks.

After obtaining the initial model, a more complex structural model including covariates was tested. The path diagram representing the hypothesized relationship for this SEM is displayed in Figure 2.
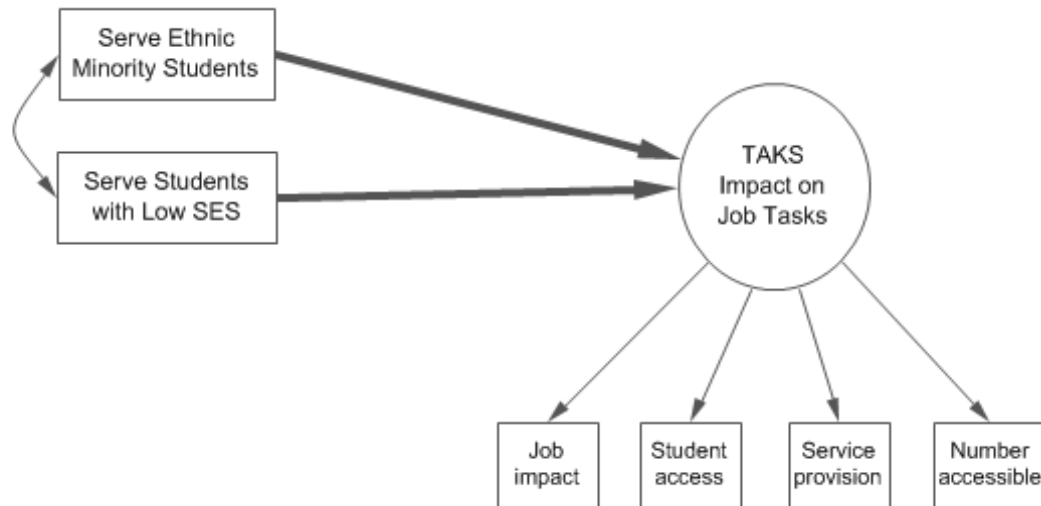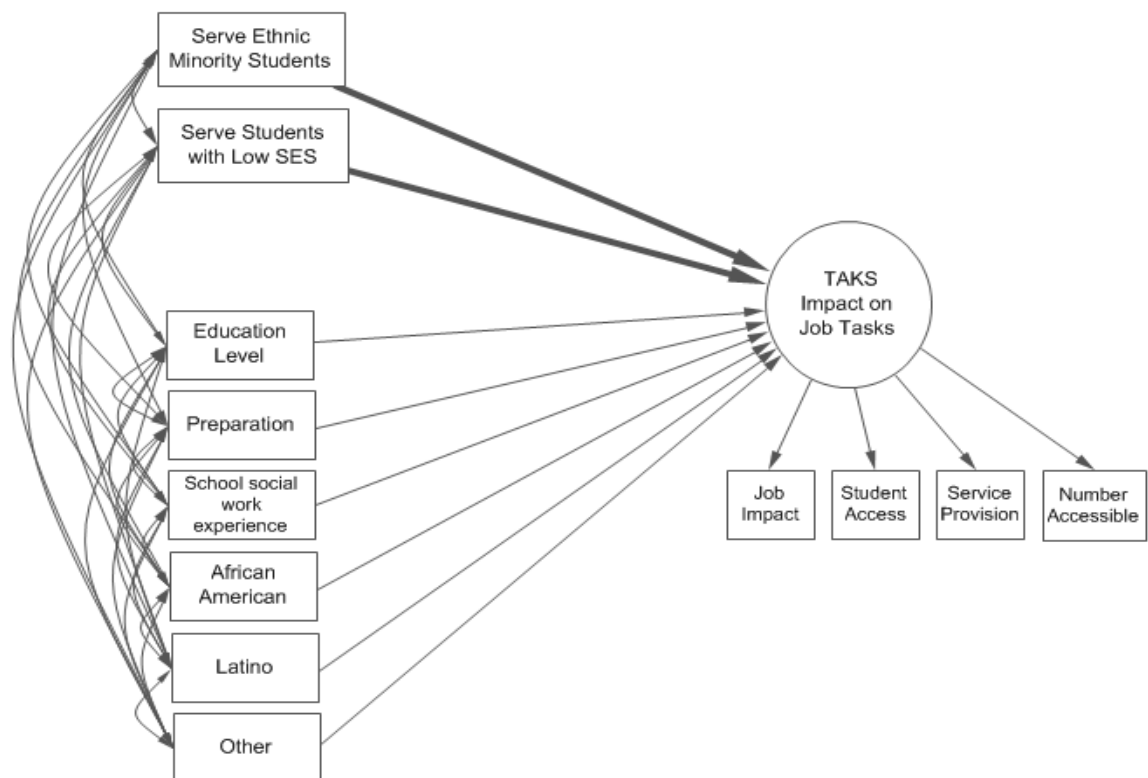

Figure 2. Path Diagram for Hypothesis 2.2

In the path diagram above, thick arrows once again represent the direct effects of the characteristics of the students on respondents' caseloads on their views about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks. The thin, single arrowed lines

represent factor loadings on the latent variable *Impact of TAKS Test on Job Tasks* and the effects of covariates. The double arrowed lines indicate correlations among the independent variables and covariates.

Since the measurement model for this research question was already created to test Hypothesis 2.1, it was not necessary to repeat this step. Instead, the next step of the analysis involved testing the new structural model with the covariates added and examining the resulting statistics including the model fit indices, chi square statistics, and the unstandardized and standardized estimates. This allowed the researcher to determine whether the new overall model adequately explained the relationship between student characteristics and social worker attitudes about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks. It tested the direct relationships between each student characteristic and social worker attitudes about the TAKS test, as well as the direct relationships between each covariate and social worker attitudes. These statistics also highlighted the strength and direction of these individual relationships. The final step of the analysis involved comparing the competing structural model to the initial structural model to determine if it better explained the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, thus supporting or refuting the hypothesis.

Analytic Strategies for Research Question 3

Research Question 3: Do perceptions about TEA ratings in schools where they work and performance on the TAKS test among students on their caseloads predict school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems?

Hypothesis 3.1: School social workers who perceive that their students are less successful on the TAKS test and those that work in schools with lower TEA ratings will be more likely to report negative perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.

The purpose of this analysis was to determine the direct effects of school TEA ratings and student performance on the TAKS test on school social worker views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. Figure 3 depicts the path diagram for this model.

Figure 3. Path Diagram for Hypothesis 3.1

In the path diagram above, thick arrows represent the direct effects of school TEA ratings and student performance on the TAKS test on school social worker views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. The thin single arrowed lines represent factor loadings on the latent variable *Impact of TAKS Test on School Systems*. The double arrowed lines indicate correlation among the independent variables.

The next step of this analysis was to run a CFA on the factor *Impact of TAKS Test on School Systems* to confirm the factor structure found in the analysis of Research Question 1 and to ensure that the measurement model had adequate model fit. The final step of the analysis was to test the structural model and examine the resulting statistics including the model fit indices, chi square statistics, and the unstandardized and standardized estimates. This allowed the researcher to determine whether the overall model adequately explained the relationship between school TEA ratings and student performance on the TAKS test, and school social worker views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. It tested the direct relationship between each independent variable (School TEA Ratings and Student Performance on the TAKS test) and social worker attitudes about the TAKS test including the strength and direction of these relationships. This allowed the researcher to support or refute the hypothesis that school social workers who perceive that their students are less successful on the TAKS test and those that work in schools with lower TEA ratings will be more likely to report negative perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.

Hypothesis 3.2: Adding ethnicity, education, years of school social work experience, and perceptions of preparation for job tasks to the structural model as

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covariates will improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the structural

equation model showing that TEA ratings and perceptions of student performance on the

TAKS test predict social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school

systems.

After obtaining the initial model, a more complex structural model including

covariates was tested for Hypothesis 3.2. The path diagram representing the hypothesized

relationships for this SEM is displayed in Figure 4.
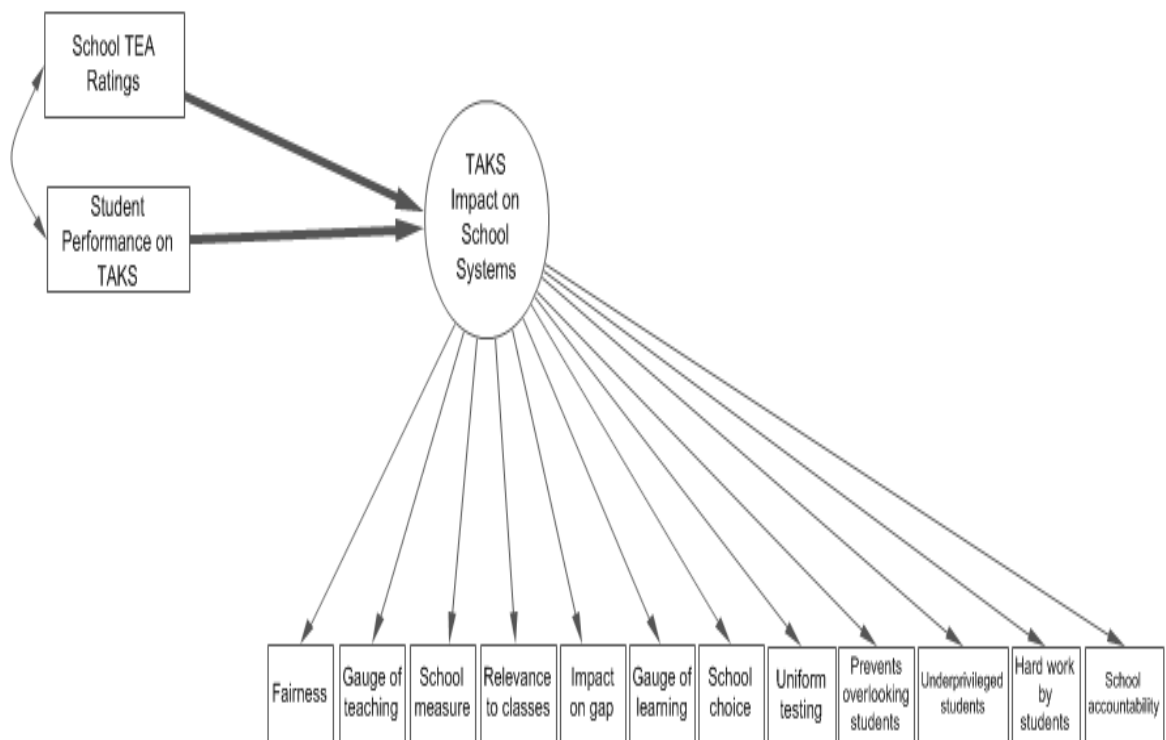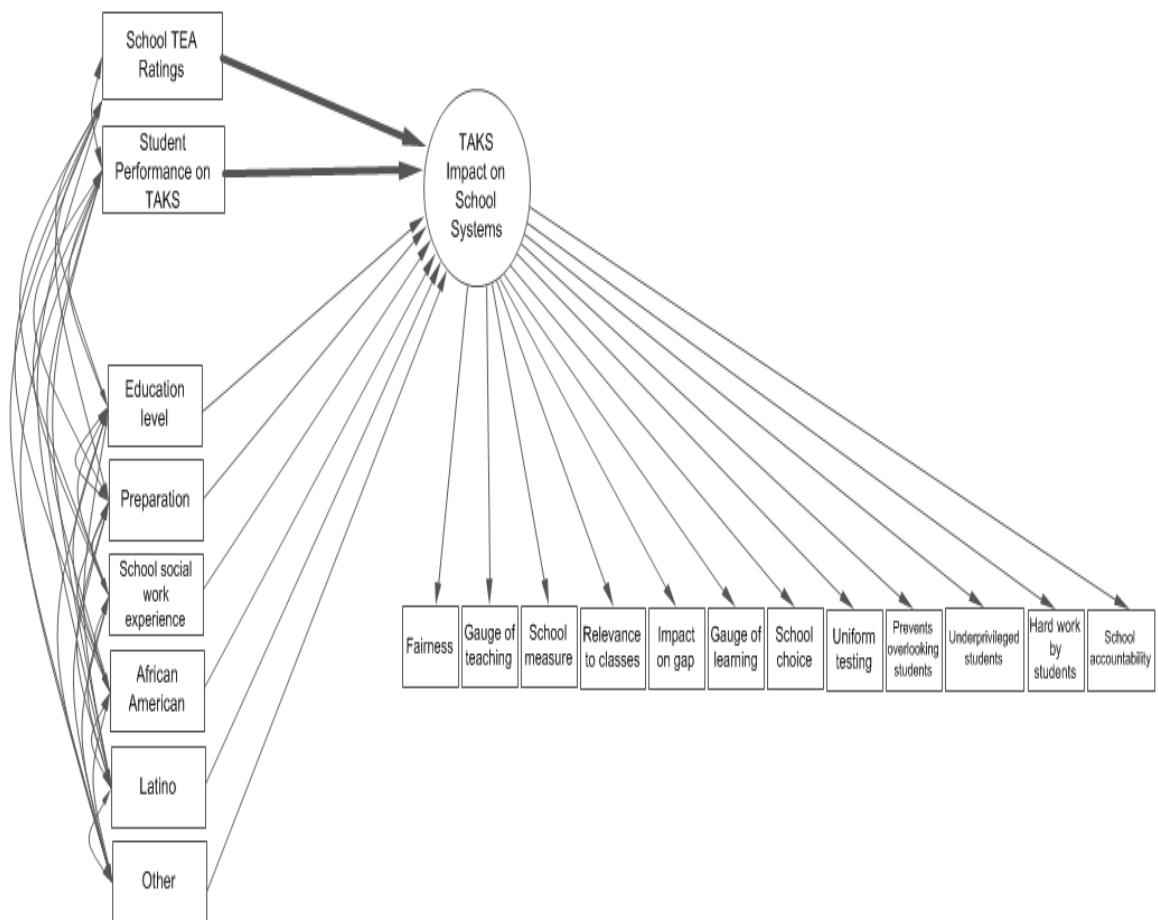

Figure 4. Path Diagram for Hypothesis 3.2

In the path diagram above, thick arrows once again represent the direct effects of f school TEA ratings and student performance on the TAKS test on school social worker views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. The thin, single arrowed lines represent factor loadings on the latent variable *Impact of TAKS on School Systems* and the effects of covariates. The double arrowed lines indicate correlations among the independent variables and covariates.

Since the measurement model for this research question was already created to test Hypothesis 3.1, it was not necessary to repeat this step. Instead, the next step of the analysis was to test the competing structural model with the covariates added and examine the resulting statistics including the model fit indices, chi square statistics, and the unstandardized and standardized estimates. This allowed the researcher to determine whether the new overall model adequately explained the relationship between school TEA ratings and student performance on the TAKS test on school social worker views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. It also tested the direct relationships between each independent variables (School TEA Ratings and Student Performance on the TAKS test) and social worker attitudes about the TAKS test, as well as the direct relationships between each covariate and social worker attitudes. These statistics highlighted the strength and direction of these individual relationships. The final step was to compare this competing structural model to the initial structural model to determine if it better explained the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, thus supporting or refuting the hypothesis.

Additional Hypotheses

The author was interested in the possibility of building a more complex model examining the effect of all of the independent variables from Research Question 2 and Research Question 3 (*School TEA Rating*, *Student Performance on TAKS*, *Serve Ethnic Minority Students*, and *Serve Students with Low SES*) on all of the latent factors used as dependent variables in both research questions (*TAKS Impact on School Systems* and *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*). For this reason, the correlation between *TAKS Impact on School Systems* and *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* was examined to determine if they could be used together in a more complex structural model. This measurement model was tested with a Confirmatory Factor Analysis in MPlus. The measurement model showed that the two factors were correlated (β=0.23, p=0.03) indicating that it may not be appropriate to include them as dependent variables in the same model. The model fit indices did not indicate a good fit to the data [χ^2 (103, n=163) = 164.34, p = <0.01], with most indicating only an adequate fit [comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.93, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.92]. Consequently, the two factors were not included in a single model.

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CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The TSSWS collected a variety of background information from survey participants including demographic and professional characteristics. Table 12 displays demographic information for the sample used in this dissertation. The sample identified as primarily Caucasian (53.4%), Latino/Chicano/Hispanic (33.1%), and African American/Black (11.7%). The median age for participants was approximately 42-years-old and most participants were female (89%).

Table 12. Sample Demographic Characteristics

Demographic variable	Sample characteristics	
Race/Ethnicity	African American/Black	11.7%
	Caucasian	53.4%
	Latino/Chicano/Hispanic	33.1%
	Other	1.8%
Age	Mean	42.47
	Standard Deviation	11.11
	Range	42
Gender	Male	11%
	Female	89%

Table 13 shows the professional characteristics of the study sample. All participants in the study had a least a Bachelor's Degree, with the majority of participants reporting a Master's Degree or higher (68.9%) as the highest degree they had obtained. Approximately one-third of the sample reported having an active LMSW license (33.5%), with the remainder of the sample fairly evenly split between those with no social work license (22%), a LBSW license (24.4%), and a LCSW license (20.1%).

Table 13. Sample Professional Characteristics

Professional variable	Sample characteristics	
Education	Bachelor's degree	31.1%
	Master's degree or higher	68.9%
Social Work Licensure	No license/Inactive license	22%
	LBSW	24.4%
	LMSW	33.5%
	LCSW	20.1%
Practice location	One school	46%
	Multiple schools	46%
	Other	8%
District type	Urban	47.5%
	Rural	25.6%
	Suburban	21.9%
	Other	5%
Employer	School	5.5%
	District	73.6%
	Non-profit	17.8%
	Government agency	0%
	Other	3.1%
Supervised by	School principal	33.1%
	Social worker	15.3%
	District administrator	30.1%
	No supervisor	3%
	Other supervisor	18.4%
Population served	Elementary	58.9%
(multiple response options)	Middle	48.5%
	High	50.3%
	Other	11.2%
Caseload size	Dot not directly serve students	6.7%
	1-25 students	1.2%
	26-50 students	5.5%
	51-100 students	11%
	101-150 students	20.2%
	151-200 students	9.2%
	201-300 students	12.9%
	More than 300 students	33.1%
Years of social work experience	Mean	13.71
	Standard Deviation	9.77
	Range	38
Years of school social work experience	Mean	8.44
	Standard Deviation	5.77
	Range	25

Approximately half of the sample reported that they worked in a single school and half reported working in multiple schools. Most participants were employed by their school district (73.6%) and were directly supervised by a school principal (33.1%) or district administrator (30.1%). The school social workers in this sample represented 95 school districts in Texas. Nearly half of the sample population considered their school district to be predominantly urban (47.5%) rather than rural (25.6%) or suburban (21.9%). When asked to select all of the populations that they served, participants most frequently reported that they served elementary school students (58.9%), followed by high school (50.3%), middle school (48.5%), and others such as Pre-Kindergarten or Head Start (11.2%). When asked how many students the participants "directly serve in the course of one year," most participants indicated that they served more than 100 students (75.4%).

Finally, participants were asked how long they had practiced social work and how long they had practiced school social work. The mean number of years that participants had practiced social work was 13.71 years (SD = 9.77) and the mean number of years of school social work practice was 8.44 years (SD = 5.77). Since the standard deviations associated with these characteristics were large, each was examined more closely. Table 14 depicts the distribution of responses regarding social work and school social work experience.

Table 14. Social Work Experience and School Social Work Experience

Years	Years of SW Practice n=162	Years of SSW Practice n=163
	Freq (%)	Freq (%)
0-5	41 (25.3)	66 (40.48)
6-10	32 (19.75)	42 (25.77)
11-15	27 (16.67)	33 (20.25)
16-20	24 (14.81)	17 (10.43)
21-25	20 (12.35)	5 (3.07)
26-30	6 (3.7)	
31-35	8 (4.94)	
36-40	4 (2.47)	

This table shows that participants most frequently reported less than five years of social work experience (25.3%), though a large portion of the sample population was fairly evenly distributed between six and 25 years of experience (63.58%). Participants were most likely to report less than five years of school social work experience (40.48%). It is also important to note that more than half of the school social workers who participated in this study had been school social workers for eight years or less (n=95, 58.28%), indicating that they had always worked under the No Child Left Behind accountability requirements enacted in 2001.

FINDINGS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 1

Research Question 1 sought to determine how school social workers perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems and on their ability to perform their job tasks. The research question and hypothesis were as follows:

Research Question 1: How do school social workers perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems and on their ability to perform their job tasks?

Hypothesis 1: Most Texas school social workers will perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on school systems and school social worker job tasks.

To test Hypothesis 1, responses to individual Likert items related to the impact of the TAKS test were first analyzed by examining means and standard deviations. Since the five point Likert scale utilized in this study included a neutral category (3 = neither agree nor disagree"), the researcher was interested in directly comparing the proportion of participants who had more negative responses to those who had more positive responses to each statement about the impact of the TAKS test. Therefore, each Likert item was also examined by comparing the percent of participants who responded with a negative view regarding the impact of the TAKS test (1 or 2 on the Likert scale) and those who responded with a positive view (4 or 5 on the Likert scale). Table 15 displays the results of this descriptive analysis when applied to the items used to measure the *TAKS Impact on School Systems* variable.

Table 15. Likert Scale Results for TAKS Impact on School Systems Items

Variable	Values	Range	Mean (SD)	% Negative View	% Positive View
TAKS Impact on School Systems					
Fairness	1 = Strongly	1 – 5	2.38 (.90)	52.5%	8.6%
Gauge of teaching	disagree	1 – 4	2.41 (.93)	54.3%	13%
School measure	2 = Disagree	1 – 5	2.17 (.88)	68.7%	7.5%
Relevance to classes	3 = Neither agree	1 – 5	2.48 (.77)	50.7%	6.8%
Impact on achievement gap	nor disagree	1 – 5	2.21 (.92)	69.6%	7.4%
	4 = Agree				
Gauge of learning	5 = Strongly agree	1 – 5	2.54 (.82)	47.5%	10.1%
School choice		1 – 5	2.58 (.89)	44.8%	14.1%
Uniform testing		1 – 5	2.95 (.99)	28.3%	32.1%
Prevents overlooking students		1 – 4	2.50 (.92)	48.4%	14.3%
Underprivileged students		1 – 4	2.13 (.84)	65.5%	3.8%
Hard work by students		1 – 5	2.43 (.94)	54.1%	13.6%
School accountability		1 – 5	3.06 (1.08)	28.3%	39%

Most items measuring *TAKS Impact on School Systems* had a mean score of less than 3, indicating more negative views about the TAKS test among school social workers. Views were the most negative for the items measuring school social worker's perceptions about the TAKS test as a good measure of overall school performance (2.17), the impact of the TAKS test on closing the achievement gap (2.21), and the ability of the TAKS test to help underprivileged students to succeed in school (2.13). These items also had the largest discrepancies in the proportion of participants who responded with negative views when compared to those who responded with positive views. For instance, while 69.6% did not agree that the TAKS test is having an impact on the achievement gap, only 7.4% agreed that it was helping to close the gap. Similarly, 65.5% of social workers did not agree that the TAKS test was helping underprivileged student to succeed in school, while 3.8% agreed that it was helping these students. It is also important to

note that large portions of the study sample chose "neither agree nor disagree" on each of the Likert items (between 23% and 42.5%). This may indicate that school social workers do not feel that they are informed about accountability policies or testing or that they do not feel equipped to gauge the impact that these policies are having on school systems.

School social workers had slightly more positive than negative views in response to the item regarding school accountability and more evenly mixed views about the item on uniform testing. The mean score for school accountability was neutral (3.06), with 39% of the sample agreeing that the TAKS test keeps schools accountable for student learning, while 28.3% did not agree. Similarly, the mean score for the item on uniform testing was 2.95 with 32.1% of school social workers reporting that they felt the TAKS test ensures that all students are tested uniformly, while 28.3% did not believe this to be the case. Based on this descriptive analysis, in general school social workers responded to the Likert items comprising *TAKS Impact on School Systems* in a predominantly negative manner.

After comparing the individual means for each item comprising the variable *TAKS Impact on School Systems*, item scores were summed and averaged to derive an overall average sum score for the sample population. The average sum score for *TAKS Impact on School Systems* (*AvSum_TAKS Impact School*) was 2.48 with a standard deviation of 0.62. Consequently, 95% of the scores on this summed scale fell between two standard deviations (2.42 – 3.10) on the five point Likert scale), indicating that very few scores fell in the range of positive views about the TAKS test (4 and above). Figure

5 shows sum scale scores plotted on a histogram with a normal curve and a negative skew (-0.41).

Mean =2.48
Std. Dev. =0.619
N =164

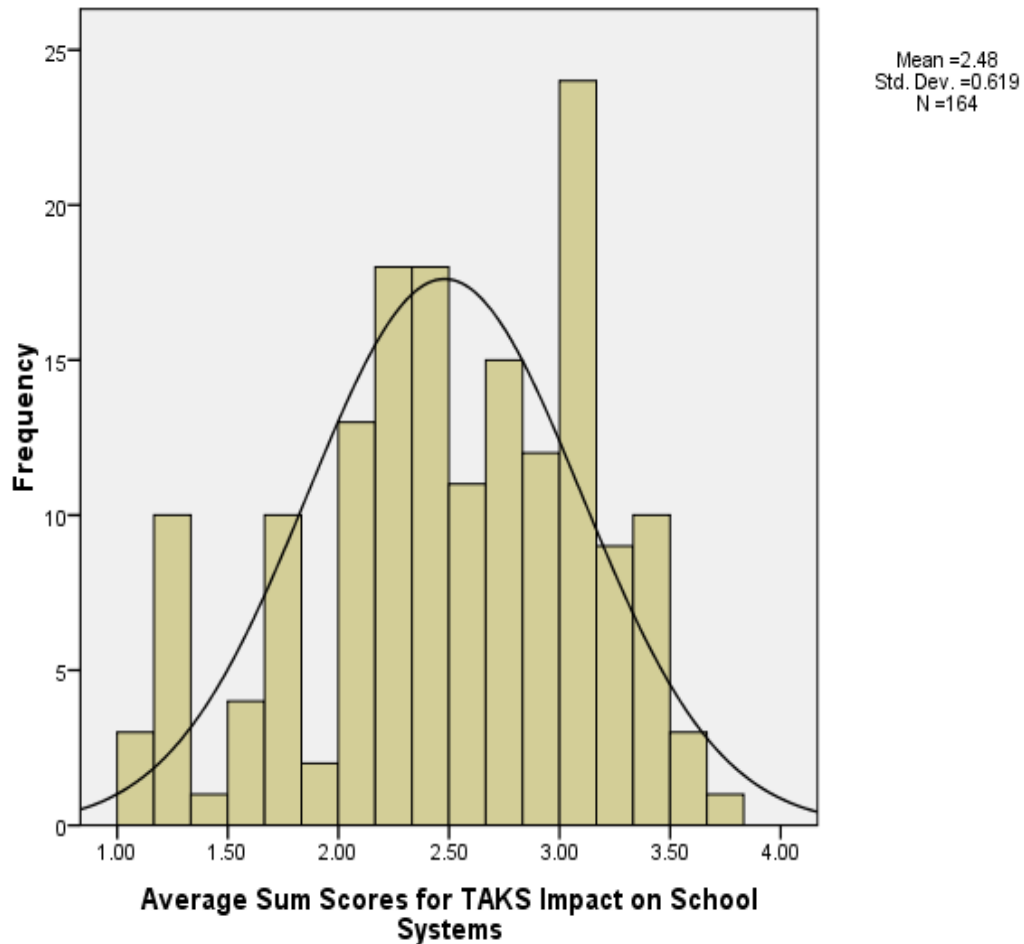Figure 5. Histogram of Average Sum Scores for TAKS Impact on School Systems

Analysis of scores on the individual Likert items comprising *TAKS Impact on School Systems* and analysis of the average sum score for this variable (*AvSum_TAKS Impact School*) reveal that school social workers have more negative than positive views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. This result supports the hypothesis

that school social workers perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on school systems.

Individual scores on the Likert items comprising the *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* variable were analyzed in a similar manner. Table 16 displays the results of this descriptive analysis. Similar to the results for *TAKS Impact on School Systems*, most of the items measuring *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* had a mean score of less than 3, indicating predominantly negative views about the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks. Participants had the most negative views about the item regarding access to students with 73.9% agreeing that the TAKS test makes it more difficult to pull students from academic classes and only 8% disagreeing with this statement (mean = 2.04). Many school social workers also felt that the TAKS test makes it more difficult to provide social work services to students (52.1%), compared to those who felt that it did not make it more difficult (19.8%) (mean = 2.59).

Table 16. Likert Scale Results for TAKS Impact on Job Tasks Items

Variable	Values	Range	Mean (SD)	% Negative View	% Positive View
TAKS Impact on Job Tasks					
Job impact	1 = Strongly agree	1 – 5	2.85 (1.0)	37.4%	28.2%
Student access	2 = Agree	1 – 5	2.04 (.94)	73.9%	8.0%
Service provision	3 = Neither agree nor disagree	1 – 5	2.59 (.95)	52.1%	19.8%
Number accessible	4 = Disagree 5 = Strongly disagree	1 – 5	3.14 (1.01)	28.5%	41.1%

School social workers had more positive than negative views in response to the item that asked them to rate their level of agreement with a statement indicating that the

TAKS test has limited the number of students with whom they work. This item had a neutral mean score of 3.14 with 41.1% of the sample feeling that the TAKS test had not limited the number of students that they work with and 28.5% agreeing that it has limited their access to these students. With the exception of this item, school social workers had more negative views about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks than they did positive views. Large portions of the sample population, ranging from 18.1% to 34.4%, also choose the "neither agree nor disagree" option on the Likert scale for items relating to *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*.

After comparing the individual means for each item comprising the variable *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*, item scores were summed and averaged to derive an overall average sum score for the sample population (*AvSum_TAKS Job Tasks*). The average sum score for *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* was 2.65 with a standard deviation of 0.72. Consequently, 68% of the scores on this summed scale fell within one standard deviation of the mean (between 1.93 – 3.37 on the five point scale), which indicates that fewer scores fell in the range of positive views about the TAKS test (4 and above). Figure 6 shows sum scale scores plotted on a histogram with a normal curve (skew =.01).
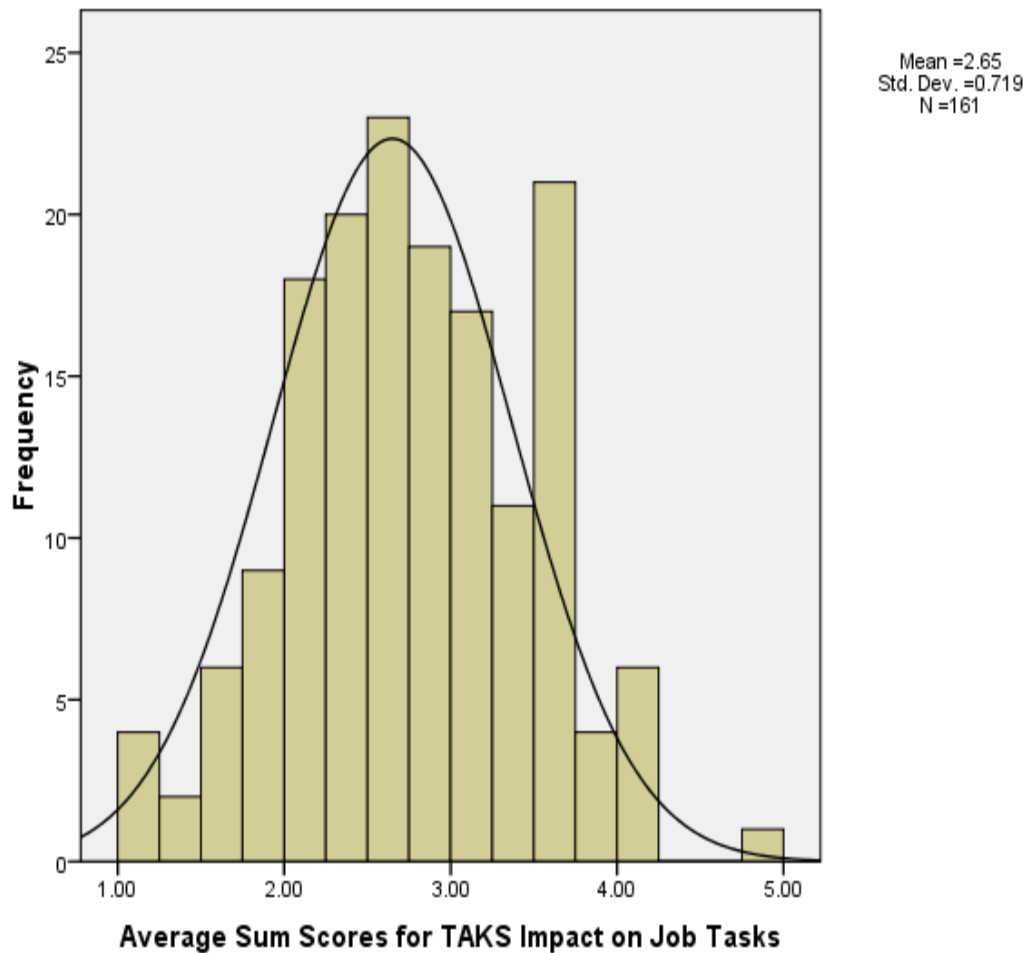
Figure 6. Histogram of Average Sum Scores for TAKS Impact on Job Tasks

Analysis of scores on the individual Likert items comprising *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* (*AvSum_TAKS Impact School*) and analysis of the sum scale score for this variable reveal that school social workers have more negative than positive views about the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks. This result supports the hypothesis that school social workers perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on job tasks. The average sum score for *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* was higher than that of *TAKS Impact*

on School Systems, which may indicate that school social workers do not feel as negatively about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks as they do about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems in general.

ANALYSIS OF ALTERNATE COVARIATES

The average sum score variables used in Research Question 1 (*AvSum_TAKS Impact School* and *AvSum_TAKS Impact Job*) were not used for subsequent multivariate analyses. Instead, the items that comprised each of these variables were used to create the dependent latent factors for Research Question 2 and Research Question 3 to facilitate more complex analysis using SEM. Covariates used in these analyses were chosen based on the school social worker characteristics that could theoretically impact their perceptions about the TAKS test. The TSSWS survey also collected other professional information about school social workers, as well as information about the schools where they work that were not chosen as covariates (largely due to concerns about sample size). Before modeling in SEM, correlations between the independent variables used in subsequent models, the average sum score variables (*AvSum_TAKS Impact School* and *AvSum_TAKS Impact Job*), and the covariates not chosen for inclusion were examined using SPSS (See Table 17 and 18). The purpose of this analysis was to identify any other covariates that might impact the relationship between the independent and dependent variables and could indicate the need for further exploration in future studies.

The correlations between average sum scores for *TAKS Impact on School Systems* (*AvSum_TAKS impact schools*), the independent variables, and the alternate covariates are presented in Table 17. Results show that there is a significant but small, positive

correlation between *AvSum_TAKS impact schools* and both of the independent variables (*TEA Rating* and *Student Performance on TAKS*) whereby school social workers who reported higher TEA ratings and more positive perceptions about student performance on the TAKS test were more likely to have positive perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. These relationships will be further explored using SEM to answer Research Question 2. None of the alternate covariates had significant correlations with *AvSum_TAKS impact schools*.

Table 17. Correlations of *AvSum_TAKS impact schools*, independent variables, and
alternate covariates

	AvSum_TAKS impact school	TEA rating	Student performance on TAKS
AvSum_TAKS impact school	1.000		
TEA rating	.187*	1.000	
Student performance	.254**	.387**	1.000
Caseload size	.002	.036	.219**
Age	.111	.100	.072
Suburban district	-.016	-.080	-.005
Urban district	-.049	-.045	-.020
Rural district	.090	.092	.049
Work in single school	-.090	-.174*	-.015
Work in multiple schools	.110	.155	.041
Level of license	-.095	-.021	-.178*
Years of social work experience	-.016	.126	.062
Serve elementary school	.058	.288**	.094
Serve middle school	.043	-.121	-.040
Serve high school	-.050	-.246**	-.299**
Serve other populations	.059	.102	-.079
Gender	.098	-.032	.030
Employed by school	.001	.063	.102
Employed by district	.136	.175*	.103
Employed by non-profit	-.102	-.210*	-.150
Employed by other	-.123	-.057	-.064
Supervised by principal	-.124	.055	.196*
Supervised by district administrator	-.124	.055	-.090
Supervised by other	-.007	-.027	-.074
No supervisor	-.124	.055	.041

Note. **Significant at p<0.01, *Significant at p<0.05

The correlations of average sum scores for *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* (*AvSum_TAKS impact job*), the independent variables, and the alternate covariates are presented in Table 18. Results show that there is a significant and moderate, negative correlation between *AvSum_TAKS impact job* and the independent variable *Serve Students of Color* whereby school social workers who responded that students of color made up the majority of their caseload were more likely to have negative perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks. The other independent variable, *Serve Students with Low SES*, also had a negative correlation with *AvSum_TAKS impact job*, but it was not significant. These relationships will be further explored using SEM to answer Research Question 3.

Several of the alternate covariates had significant correlations with *AvSum_TAKS impact job* including *Years of Social Work Experience* and *Serve Other Populations*, which both had small positive correlations. Although school social workers who were more experienced had more positive views about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks, this covariate was very similar to a covariate that was chosen for the analysis *Years of School Social Work Experience* and therefore may not warrant exploration in future studies. Similarly, respondents who responded that they *Serve Other Populations* were more likely to have positive perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks, but since many respondents chose not to identify which "other population" that they served besides elementary, middle, or high school students, it is difficult to determine the clinical significance of this difference in views.

Table 18. Correlations of AvSum_TAKS impact job, independent variables, and alternate covariates

	AvSum_TAKS impact job	Serve students of color	Serve students with low SES
AvSum_TAKS impact job	1.000		
Serve students of color	-.317**	1.000	
Serve students with low SES	-.038	.292**	1.000
Caseload size	-.062	.079	.040
Age	.118	-.167*	-.015
Suburban district	.024	.103	.097
Urban district	-.070	.198*	.070
Rural district	.056	-.290**	-.202*
Work in single school	-.107	.177*	.096
Work in multiple schools	.060	-.128	-.089
Level of license	-.019	.130	.063
Years of social work experience	.180*	-.160*	-.005
Serve elementary school	-.051	-.046	-.081
Serve middle school	.008	-.107	-.084
Serve high school	.131	-.118	-.046
Serve other populations	.164*	-.138	.053
Gender	-.055	.104	.067
Employed by school	-.003	.133	.067
Employed by district	.186*	-.162*	-.042
Employed by non-profit	-.260**	.176*	.043
Employed by other	.101	-.150	-.077
Supervised by principal	-.029	-.002	-.115
Supervised by district administrator	.112	-.092	.033
Supervised by other	-.051	-.001	.072
No supervisor	.038	.000	.013

Note. **Significant at $p<0.01$, *Significant at $p<0.05$

Finally, school social workers who were employed by the school district were more likely to have more positive views about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks, while school social workers who were employed by non-profits were more likely to have more negative views about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks. Both of these correlations were significant, but small. This difference should be explored in future studies because it lends evidence that school social workers' employing entity may be associated with how they perceive education policy implementation. It should be considered for inclusion as a covariate in future studies.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS 2 AND 3

Research Questions 2 and 3 were analyzed through structural equation modeling techniques through five distinct steps: 1. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA), 2. Creation and testing of the measurement model, 3. Creation and testing of the initial structural model, 4. Creation and testing of the competing structural model, and 5. Comparison of competing models. EFA was used to determine the factor structure for the latent dependent variables used in Research Questions 2 and 3. EFA results for *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* (Research Question 2) are presented in Table 5 and results of the EFA for *TAKS Impact on School Systems* (Research Question 3) are presented in Table 3 in previous sections. The following section presents the remainder of the results for Research Questions 2 and 3 and is organized according to the remaining steps of analysis: *Measurement Model*, *Initial Structural Model*, *Competing Structural Model*, and *Comparing Models*.

Findings for Hypothesis 2.1

Research Question 2 sought to determine what impact, if any, student characteristics have on school social workers' perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks. The research question and Hypothesis 2.1 were as follows:

Research Question 2: Do the characteristics of the students that school social workers serve predict their perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks?

Hypothesis 2.1: School social workers who predominantly serve students of color and students with low socioeconomic status will be significantly more likely to perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on their ability to accomplish their job tasks.

Measurement Model

The measurement model specifies the rules of the relationships between measured and latent variables. The measurement model must achieve adequate fit with the data to be used in the structural model. To test this hypothesis, a measurement model was first constructed to confirm that the four indicators identified in the Exploratory Factor Analysis as loading adequately on the latent dependent factor (*TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*) also produced good model fit. The measurement model was tested with a Confirmatory Factor Analysis in MPlus and was assessed through examination of model fit indices (χ^2, CFI, RMSEA, and TLI). All tests of model fit were within acceptable levels and the overall model fit was excellent, χ^2 (2, n=160) = 0.13, p = 0.90, with comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) =

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0, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 1.04. Consequently, the latent factor structure was determined to be sufficient for including in the initial structural model.

Initial Structural Model

Once the measurement model was confirmed, the initial structural model, which hypothesized the relationships between the independent and dependent variables only, was tested. In analyzing the initial structural model, model fit indices were first examined to determine if the hypothesized relationship had an overall good fit with the data. If the model was a reasonable approximation of the data and thus had good model fit, unstandardized (b) and standardized (β) parameter estimates were examined to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between individual variables in the model. If the model was not a reasonable approximation of the data and thus did not have good model fit, parameter estimates are not considered accurate and were not examined.

In structural equation modeling, unstandardized estimates are similar to regression weights in multiple regression and represent the variance in the construct. They can be interpreted as for every one unit change in x, y changes by b units. Unstandardized estimates can be compared across samples, but cannot be compared for relative importance. Standardized parameter estimates have equal variances and are similar to beta weights in regression. They are interpreted as for every one unit change in x, y changes by β standard deviations. They have a maximum value of 1.0 and can be used to determine relative importance of direct effects in a single sample (Hair et al., 1998).

To test Hypothesis 2.1, an initial structural model (see Figure 7) was specified with only the two independent variables (*Serve Ethnic Minority Students* and *Serve*

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Students with Low Socioeconomic Status) and the dependent factor (*TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*) and no covariates.

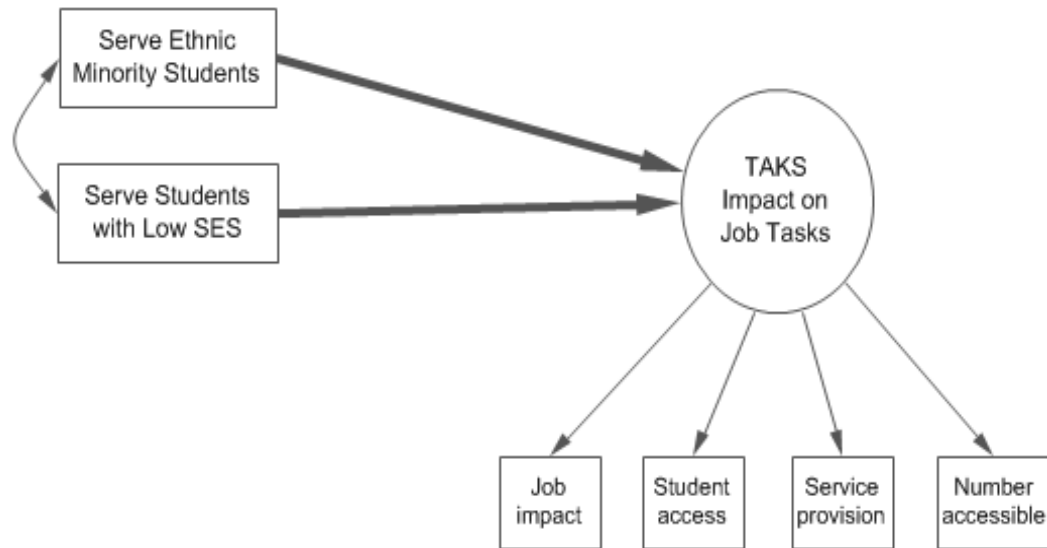Figure 7. Specified Model for Hypothesis 2.1

The hypothesized structural model showed tests of model fit within acceptable levels [χ^2 (8, n=162) = 7.58, p = 0.48] and the overall model fit was excellent with comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 1.00. Standardized (β) and unstandardized effects (*b*) are shown in Table 19.

Table 19. Effects of Serve Ethnic Minority Students and Serve Students with Low SES
        on TAKS Impact on Job Tasks

Independent variables†	*TAKS Impact on Job Tasks*			
	B	*B*	*S.E.*	*p*
Serve Ethnic Minority Students	-0.33	-0.27	0.09	<0.01**
Serve Students with Low SES	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.31

β = standardized coefficient, *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient, S.E. = Standard Error, *p* = significance level †Correlation of IVs: $\beta = 0.29$, p = <0.01
**Significant at p<0.01

While serving students with low socioeconomic status was not significant (b=0.08, p=0.31), serving ethnic minority students did have a significant effect (b= -0.27, p<0.01) on school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks. The proportion of variance explained in *TAKS Impact on Job Tasks* by this model was approximately 10% (r^2=.10). The negative standardized and unstandardized effects indicate an inverse relationship where school social workers who predominantly serve students of ethnic minority background are more likely to report negative perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks. Figure 8 depicts the significant paths and standardized effects reported in Table 19. Significant paths are highlighted with bold arrows.
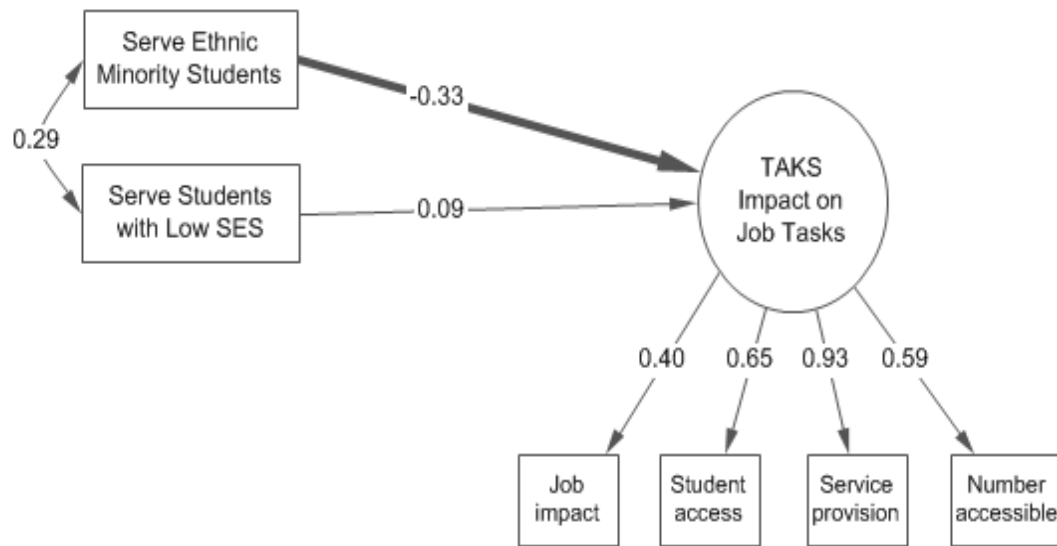
Figure 8. Standardized Effects for Serve Ethnic Minority Students and Serve Students with Low SES on TAKS Impact on Job Tasks without Covariates

The results of the SEM for the initial model supported the hypothesis that school social workers who predominantly serve students of color are significantly more likely to perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on their ability to accomplish their job tasks. It did not support the hypothesis that social workers who predominantly serve students with low socioeconomic status are more likely to perceive the TAKS test as having a negative impact on their ability to accomplish their job tasks.

Findings for Hypothesis 2.2

The purpose of Hypothesis 2.2 was to determine whether the addition of various characteristics of school social workers as covariates would improve the fit of the structural model and thereby explain additional variance in the model. Hypothesis 2.2 is stated as:

Hypothesis 2.2: Adding ethnicity, education, years of school social work experience, and perceptions of preparation for job tasks to the structural model as covariates will improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the structural equation model showing that student characteristics predict social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks.

Competing Structural Model

To test this hypothesis, the following variables were added to the initial structural model as covariates: Ethnicity of social worker (dummy coded variables: *African American, Latino, Other*), *Education Level*, *School Social Work Experience*, and *Preparation*, creating a competing structural model (see Figure 9).
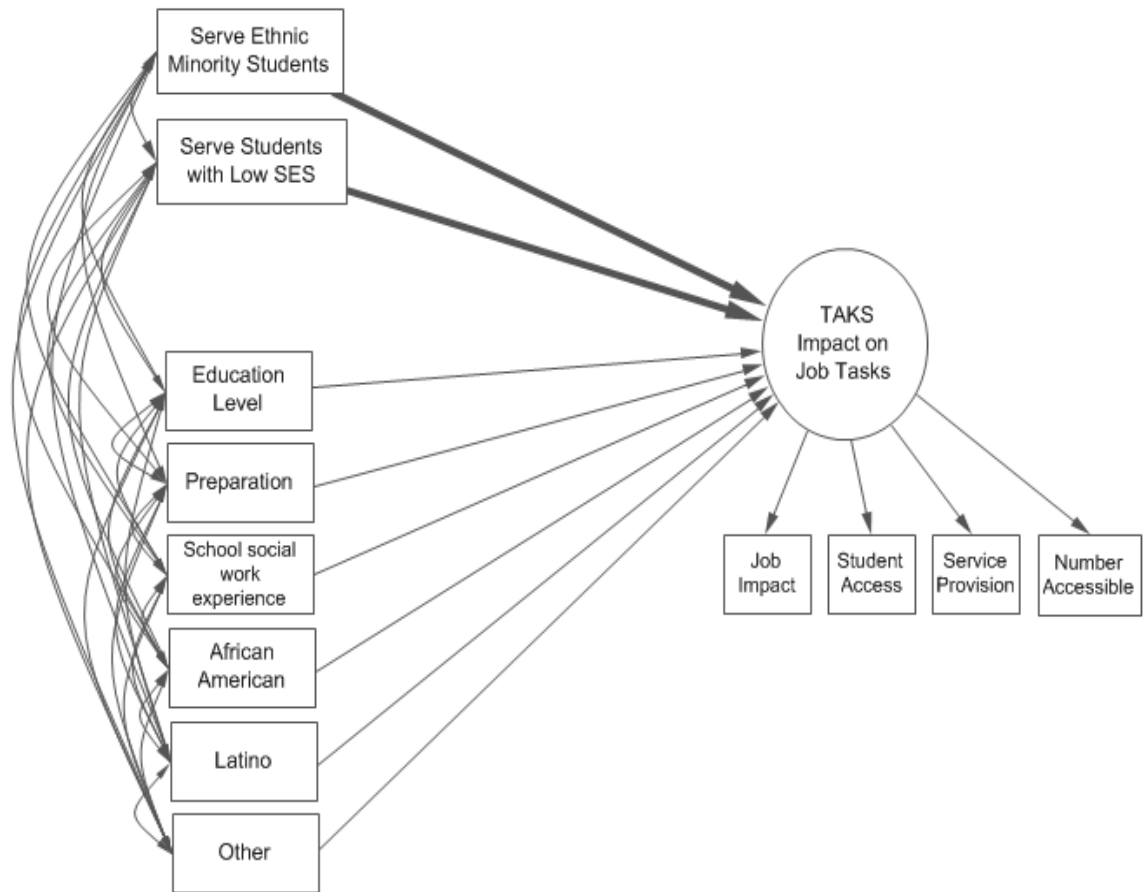
Figure 9. Specified Model for Hypothesis 2.2

The competing model was evaluated first for model fit and then for parameter estimates, if appropriate, in the same manner as the initial structural model. For this model, all tests of model fit were within acceptable levels and the overall model fit was good, χ^2 (26, n=163) = 30.57, p = 0.24, with comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.97, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.03, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.96. Standardized (β) and unstandardized effects (b) are shown in Table 20.

Table 20. Effects of Serve Ethnic Minority Students and Serve Students with Low SES
on TAKS Impact on Job Tasks with Covariates

	TAKS Impact on Job Tasks			
Independent variables†	B	B	S.E.	p
Serve Ethnic Minority Students	-0.33	-0.27	0.09	<0.01**
Serve Students with Low SES	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.40
Covariates	B	B	S.E.	p
Level of Education	-0.29	-0.12	0.06	0.06
Preparation for job tasks	-0.20	-0.07	0.04	0.05
School Social Work Experience	0.02	<0.01	<0.01	0.81
Social Worker – African American	0.45	0.18	0.11	0.10
Social Worker – Latino	0.03	0.01	0.07	0.86
Social Worker - Other	0.90	0.36	0.20	0.07

β = standardized coefficient, b = unstandardized regression coefficient, S.E. = Standard Error, p = significance level
†Correlation of IVs: β = 0.29, p = <0.01
**Significant at p<0.01, *Significant at p<0.05

It is important to note that *Serve Ethnic Minority Students* continues to be significant in the competing model (b=-0.27, p=<0.01), but that none of the covariates reach significance. However, three of the covariates, *Level of Education* (b= -0.12, p=0.06), *Preparation for Job Tasks* (b= -0.07, p=0.05), and *Social Worker Ethnicity – Other* (b=0.36, p=0.07) approach significance. Figure 10 depicts the significant paths and standardized effects reported in Table 20. Significant paths are highlighted with bold arrows.
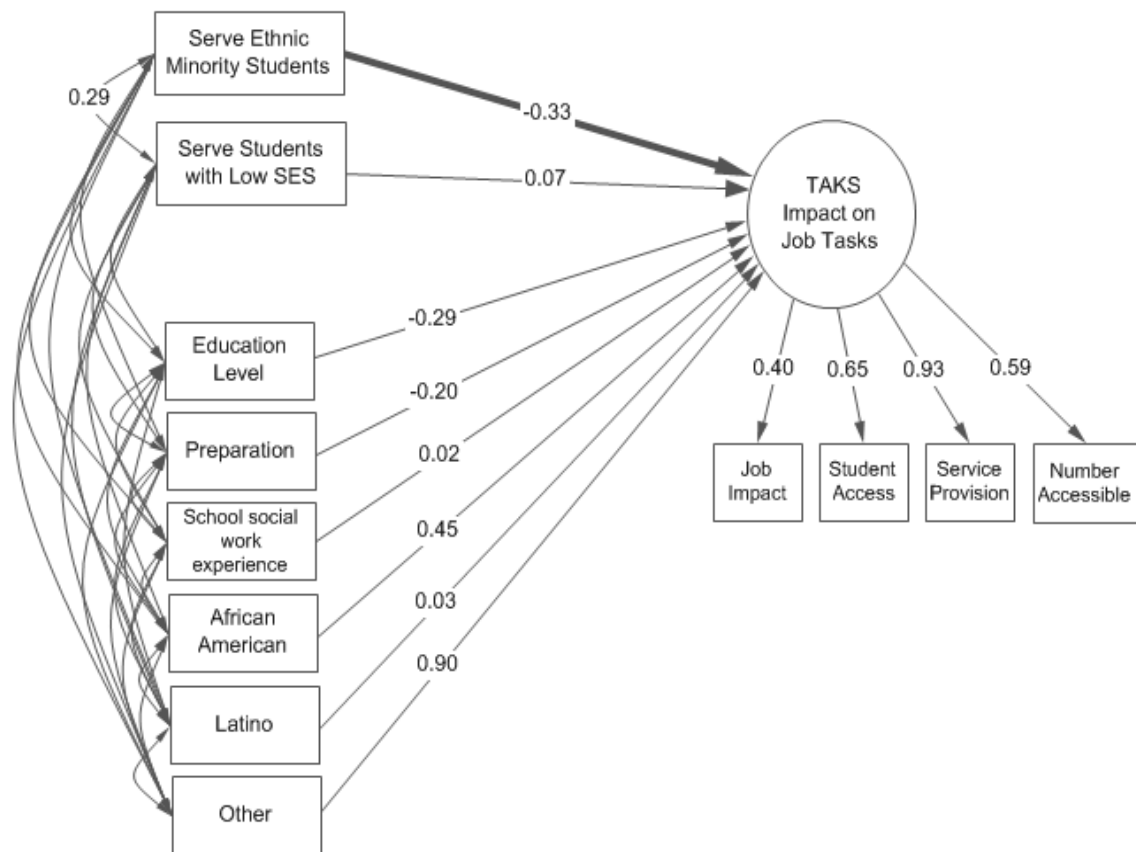
Figure 10. Standardized Effects for Serve Ethnic Minority Students and Serve Students
with Low SES on TAKS Impact on Job Tasks with Covariates

Comparing Models

The final step of the analysis was to compare the models to determine the best

fitting model or the model that best represented the data and explained the most variance.

When the initial model has adequate model fit, as indicated by the model fit indices, and

the competing model does not, the initial model is considered the most parsimonious

model and further comparison is not needed. When the initial model and competing

model both have adequate fit, it is not sufficient to simply compare fit indices. Instead,

the models must be compared through the use of a predictive fit index such as the Bayes Information Criterion (BIC), which can be used to select the best fitting model among competing models fit to the same data (Kline, 2005). The BIC can be used for non-nested models that have different variables. It is interpreted such that the smaller BIC indicates a better fit to the data (Raferty, 1995).

For Research Question 2, both the initial structural model without covariates and the competing structural model with covariates had adequate model fit. Therefore, the models were compared using the BIC given for each model by Mplus. The initial structural model had a BIC of 2081.94 and the competing structural model had a BIC of 4126.06, indicating that the initial model without covariates was a better fit for the data. The results of the competing models analysis do not support the hypothesis that the competing structural model with covariates would improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the structural equation model showing that student characteristics predict social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks.

Findings for Hypothesis 3.1

Research Question 3 sought to determine what impact, if any, perceptions about school TEA ratings and student performance on the TAKS test have on school social workers' perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. The research question and Hypothesis 3.1 were as follows:

Research Question 3: Do perceptions about TEA ratings in schools where they work and performance on the TAKS test among students on their caseloads predict school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems?

Hypothesis 3.1: School social workers who perceive that their students are less successful on the TAKS test and those that work in schools with lower TEA ratings will be more likely to report negative perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.

Measurement Model

To test this hypothesis, a measurement model was first constructed to confirm that the 13 indicators identified in the Exploratory Factor Analysis as loading adequately on the latent dependent factor (*TAKS Impact on School Systems*) also produced good model fit. The measurement model was tested with a Confirmatory Factor Analysis in MPlus. Upon testing, the model fit indices did not indicate a good fit [χ^2 (65, n=163) = 112.99, p = <0.01], with most indicating only acceptable levels [comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.94, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.07, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.93]. Consequently, the latent factor structure was determined to be insufficient for including in the initial structural model and needed to be revised.

To revise the measurement model, geomin rotated factor loadings were examined for each indicator in the exploratory factor analysis to identify those that loaded least well on the factor (see Table 5). The indicator *Social Services Resources* had the lowest loading (0.47) and was therefore eliminated as an indicator of the latent factor. Table 21 displays the results of a subsequent Exploratory Factor Analysis on the 12 remaining

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items comprising *TAKS Impact on School Systems.* The reliability for the revised *TAKS Impact on School Systems* factor was good (α=.89).

Table 21. Exploratory Factor Loadings on Revised TAKS Impact on School Systems

	TAKS Impact on School Systems	
Indicators	Geomin Rotated Loadings	Eigenvalue
Fairness	0.61	5.64
Gauge of teaching	0.68	
School measure	0.68	
Relevance to classes	0.57	
Impact on achievement gap	0.65	
Gauge of learning	0.66	
School choice	0.50	
Uniform testing	0.49	
Prevents overlooking students	0.70	
Underprivileged students	0.77	
Hard work by students	0.77	
School accountability	0.67	

The revised measurement model was tested with a Confirmatory Factor Analysis in MPlus. Upon testing, most model fit indices indicated a good fit with comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.96, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.05, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.96. The χ^2 indicated an imperfect fit [χ^2 (54, n=163) = 80.26, p = 0.01] because it was significant. However, χ^2 is very sensitive to small or large sample sizes and can often indicate an imperfect fit even when other fit indices indicate a good fit. Due to this sensitivity, the measurement model can generally be considered a good fit when the χ^2 indicates an imperfect fit, but all other measures of model fit are adequate (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Consequently, the latent factor structure was determined to be sufficient for including in the initial structural model.

Initial Structural Model

The next step of the SEM process involved developing an initial structural model (see Figure 11) to test the hypothesis with only the two independent variables (*TEA Rating* and *Student Performance on TAKS*) and the dependent factor (*TAKS Impact on School Systems*) and no covariates.
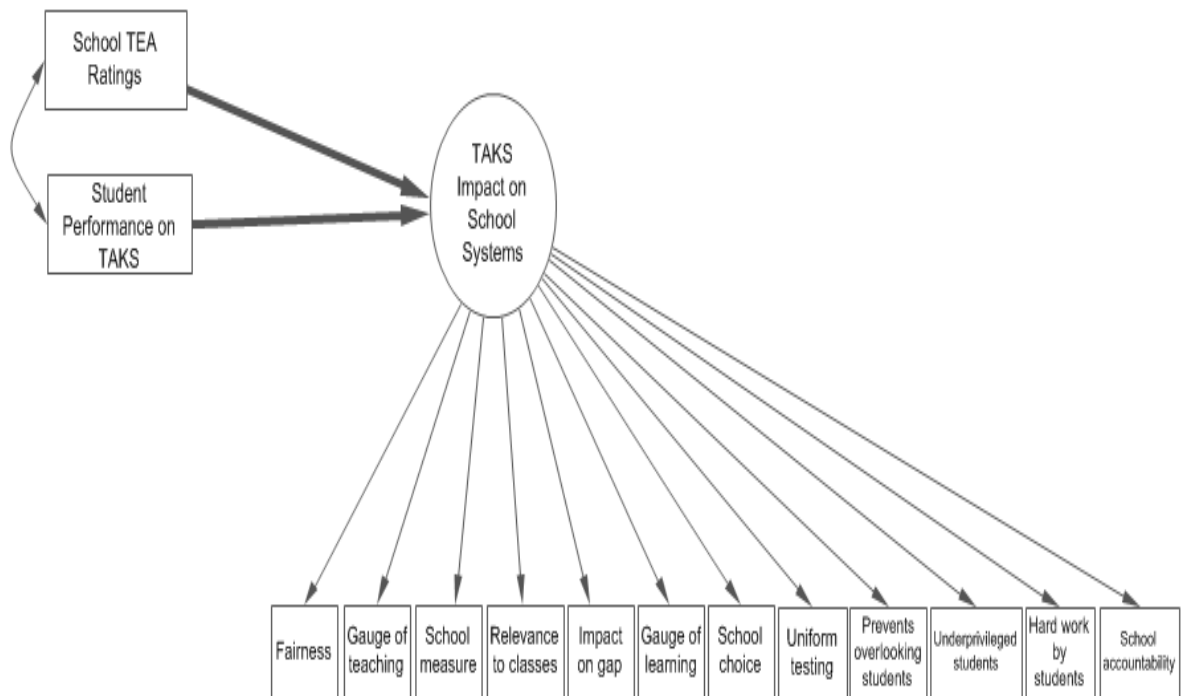
Figure 11. Specified Model for Hypothesis 3.1

In analyzing the initial structural model, model fit indices are first examined. Tests of model fit indicated a good fit despite the χ^2 once again indicating an imperfect fit [χ^2 (76, n=163) = 108.14, p = 0.01]. Model fit indices for this structural model were: comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.96, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.05, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.95. Since the model showed good fit, the unique

effects of each independent variable on the dependent variable were examined. Standardized (β) and unstandardized effects (*b*) are shown in Table 22.

Table 22. Effects of TEA Rating and Student Performance on TAKS Impact on School Systems without Covariates

Independent variables†	*B*	*b*	*S.E.*	*p*
		TAKS Impact on School Systems		
School TEA Rating	0.20	<0.01	<0.01	0.03*
Student Performance on TAKS	0.28	0.15	0.05	<0.01**

β = standardized coefficient, *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient, S.E. = Standard Error, *p* = significance level
†Correlation of IVs: Estimate = -0.05, p = 0.57
*Significant at <0.05; p**Significant at p<0.01

Both school *TEA Rating* (*b*=<0.01, p=0.03) and *Student Performance on TAKS* (*b*=0.15, <0.01) had significant effects on school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. The proportion of variance explained in *TAKS Impact on School Systems* by this model was approximately 11% (r^2=.11). The positive standardized and unstandardized effects indicate positive relationships with both variables, whereby school social workers who reported higher school TEA ratings or more positive perceptions about student performance on the TAKS test were more likely to perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems as positive. Consequently, school social workers who perceive their student as performing more poorly on the TAKS test are more likely to perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems as negative, as are those working in schools with lower TEA ratings. Figure 9 depicts the significant paths and standardized effects reported in Table 22. All significant paths are highlighted with bold arrows.
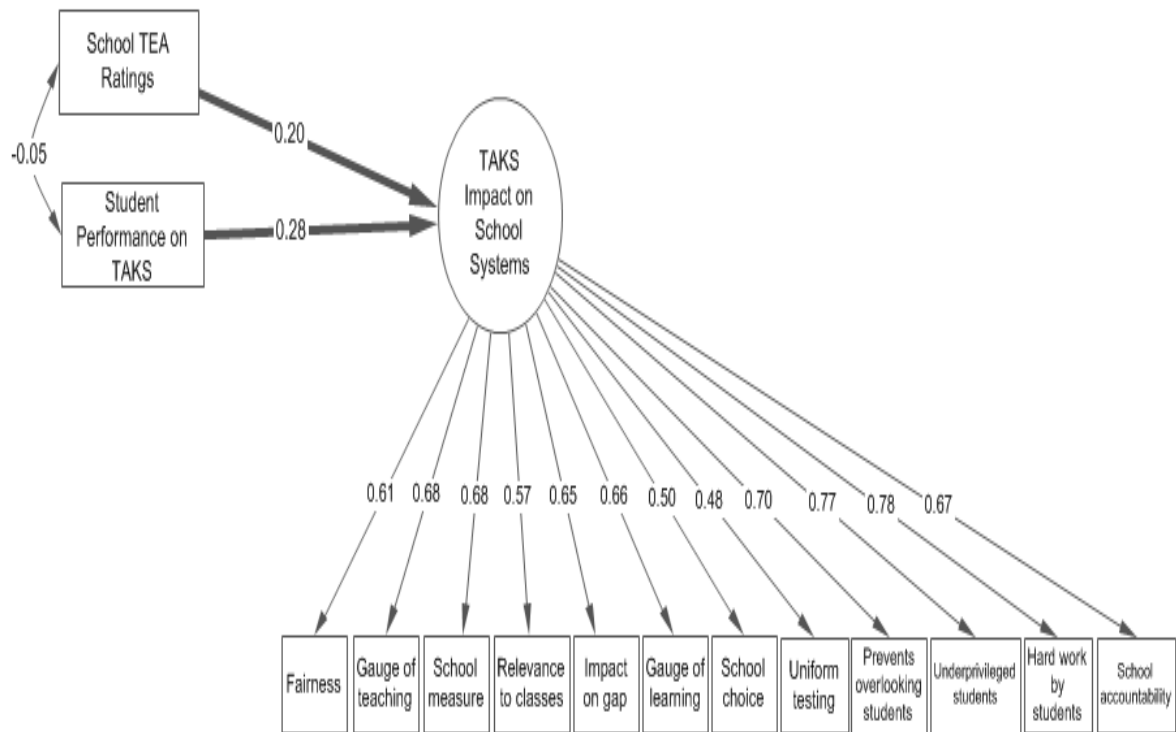
Figure 12. Standardized Effects for School TEA Ratings and Student Performance on
TAKS on TAKS Impact on School Systems

The results of the SEM for the initial model supported the hypothesis that school

social workers who perceive that their students are less successful on the TAKS test and

those that work in schools with lower TEA ratings will be more likely to report negative

perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.

Findings for Hypothesis 3.2

The purpose of Hypothesis 3.2 was to determine whether the addition of various

characteristics of school social workers as covariates would improve the fit of the

structural model and thereby explain additional variance in the model. Hypothesis 3.2 is stated as:

Hypothesis 3.2: Adding ethnicity, education, years of school social work experience, and perceptions of preparation for job tasks to the structural model as covariates will improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the structural equation model showing that TEA ratings and perceptions of student performance on the TAKS test predict social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.

Competing Structural Model

To test this hypothesis, the same covariates were added to the initial structural model as in Hypothesis 2.2: Ethnicity of social worker (dummy coded variables: *African American, Latino, Other*), *Education Level*, *School Social Work Experience*, and *Preparation*, creating a competing structural model (see Figure 13).
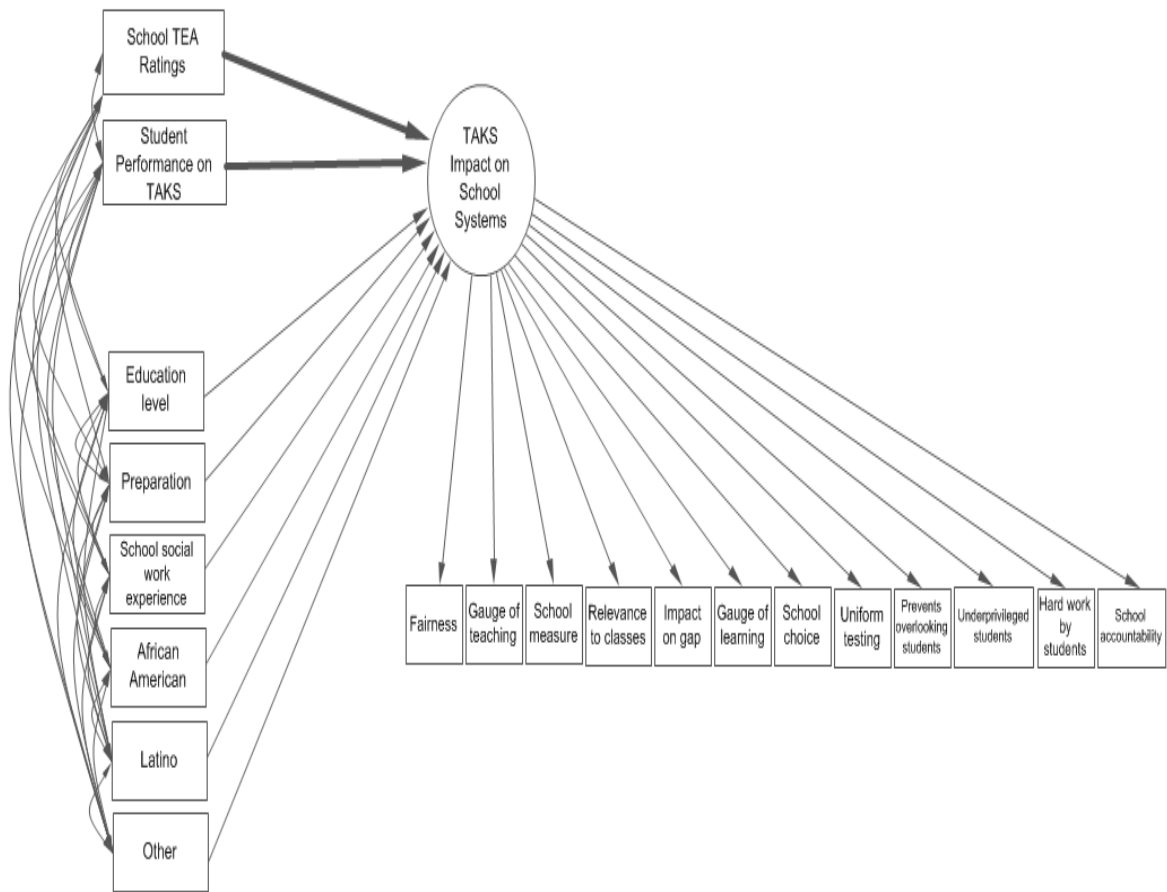
Figure 13. Specified Model for Hypothesis 3.2

The competing model was evaluated first for model fit and then for parameter estimates in the same manner as the initial structural model. Tests of model fit indicated an adequate fit despite the χ^2 once again indicating an imperfect fit, χ^2 (142, n=163) = 207.03, p<0.01, with comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.92, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.05, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.90. Standardized (β) and unstandardized effects (*b*) are shown in Table 23.

Table 23. Standardized Effects for School TEA Ratings and Student Performance on
TAKS on TAKS Impact on School Systems with Covariates

	TAKS Impact on School Systems			
Independent variables	B	b	S.E.	p
School TEA Rating	0.39	<0.01	<0.01	0.02*
Student Performance on TAKS	0.30	0.16	0.05	<0.01**
Covariates†	B	b	S.E.	p
Level of Education	-0.20	-0.11	0.10	0.26
Preparation for job tasks	-0.11	-0.05	0.05	0.29
School Social Work Experience	0.06	<0.01	<0.01	0.43
Social Worker – African American	-0.57	-0.31	0.15	0.03*
Social Worker – Latino	-0.08	-0.05	0.10	0.64
Social Worker - Other	-0.46	-0.25	0.31	0.42

β = standardized coefficient, b = unstandardized regression coefficient, S.E. = Standard Error, p =
significance level
†Correlation of IVs: β = -0.03, p = 0.69
**Significant at p<0.01, *Significant at p<0.05

It is important to note that *School TEA Ratings* (*b*<0.01, p=0.02) and *Student*
Performance on TAKS (*b*=0.16, p=0.01) continue to be significant in the competing
model. One covariate, *Social Worker Ethnicity – African American* is also significant (*b*=
-0.05, p=0.03), such that school social workers who are African American are more likely
to perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems as negative, when compared
to school social workers who are white. Figure 14 depicts the significant paths and
standardized effects reported in Table 20. Significant paths are highlighted with bold
arrows.
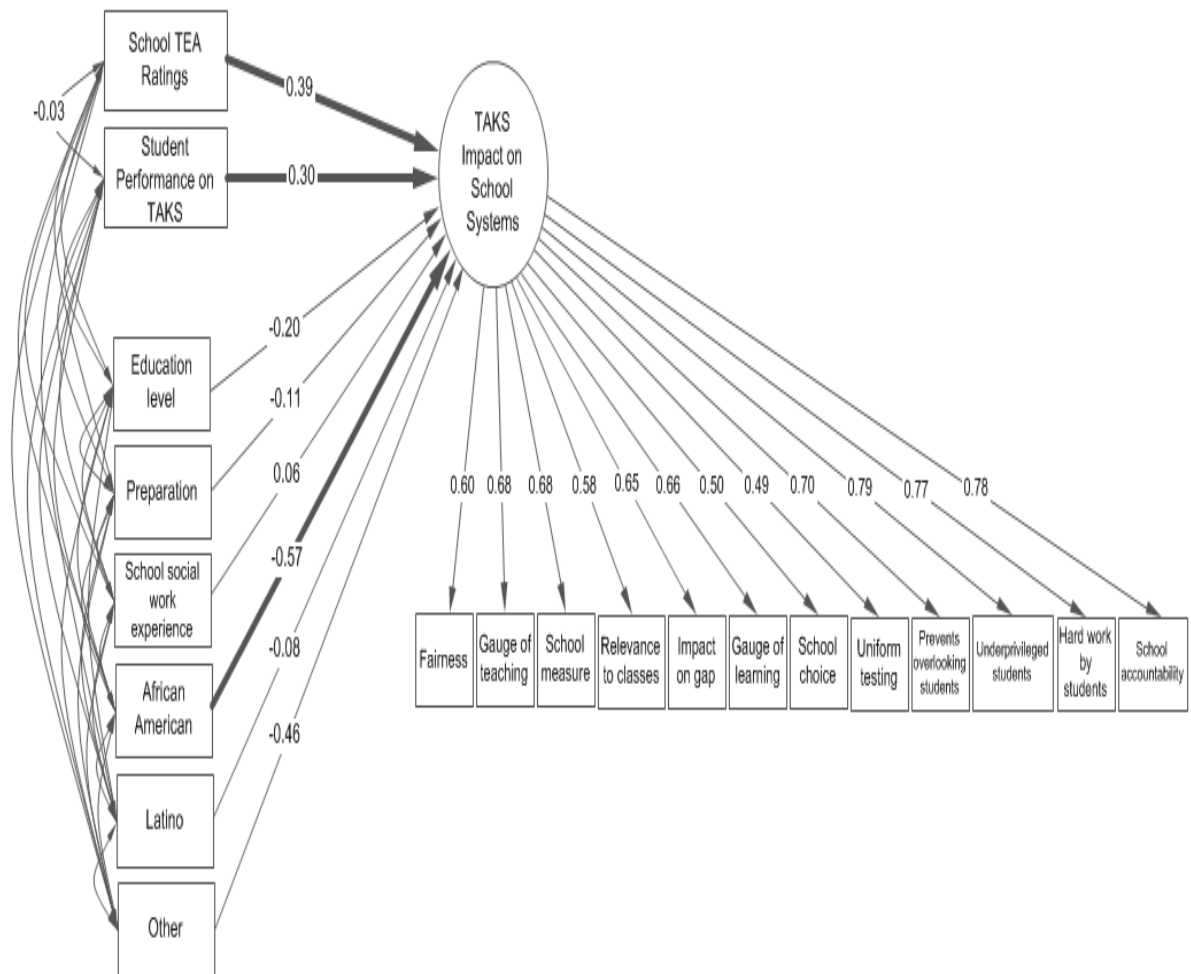
Figure 14. Standardized Effects for Serve Ethnic Minority Students and Serve Students with Low SES on TAKS Impact on Job Tasks with Covariates

Comparing Models

For Research Question 3, both the initial structural model without covariates and the competing structural model with covariates had adequate model fit. Therefore, the models were compared using the BIC given for each model by Mplus. The initial structural model had a BIC of 6709.27 and the competing structural model had a BIC of 8576.18, indicating that the initial model without covariates was a better fit for the data.

The results of the competing models analysis did not support the hypothesis that the competing structural model with covariates would improve the model fit and explain additional variance in the structural equation model showing that TEA ratings and perceptions of student performance on the TAKS test predict social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The following section is organized into three parts. First, it will provide a detailed interpretation of the findings for each research question and will compare these findings to previous literature. Then, it will discuss the implications of the findings for social work practice and education policy. Finally, it will outline the limitations of the study and the implications for future research.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

Research Question 1 sought to determine how school social workers perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems and on their ability to perform their job tasks. The following section will discuss the findings of this study related to 1) Impact on school systems and 2) Impact on job tasks.

Impact on School Systems

School social worker views about the impact of high-stakes accountability testing on school systems was explored first by examining scores on individual Likert statements about the impact of the TAKS test. They were then explored by examining average scores on a summed scale of scores all Likert statements regarding the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. Analysis of both methods revealed that school social workers have more negative opinions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems than positive opinions.

The purpose of the accountability movement in schools has been to improve academic performance among at-risk student subgroups and to close the achievement gap

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between these subgroups and their white, affluent peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). School social workers in this sample had particularly negative views about the impact of the TAKS test on closing the achievement gap and the ability of the TAKS test to help underprivileged students to succeed in school. These findings are especially important because they assess the purpose of accountability policies and high-stakes testing in schools. In this sample, school social workers overwhelmingly disagreed with the ability of the TAKS test to accomplish the policy goal of improving academic achievement for disadvantaged students.

In Texas, TAKS test results are used as one of the primary indicators of school performance and are the largest contributor to school and district ratings at the state and federal level (Texas Education Agency, 2008). Consequently, TAKS test results often determine whether a school receives rewards or sanctions. However, similar to teachers (Flores & Clark, 2003), school social workers in this sample most often believed that the TAKS test is not a good measure of school performance. They also tended to feel that the TAKS test is unfair, does not have good relevance to classes, and is not a good gauge of teaching or learning. These findings further support previous research that indicates that high-stakes tests are often misleading and poor measures of teaching, learning, and school performance (Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Hursh, 2005; Jones, 2004; Lane, 2004; Linn, 2003; Raywid, 2002; Russell, Higgins, & Raczek, 2004). These results may indicate that school performance indicators and the high-stakes that are attached to them in the form of school sanctions and rewards, may be based on a school measure that is believed to be inadequate by school social workers. Similarly, if school social workers

believe that the TAKS test is not a good, fair measure of teaching or learning, this puts into question the high-stakes that are attached to individual student scores, such as grade retention or the inability to graduate high school. This is especially concerning for at-risk students, who continue to perform more poorly on high-stakes tests and with whom school social workers have daily access in schools.

Similar to previous research on teachers, school social workers had more mixed or positive views about the ability of high-stakes tests to hold schools accountable for student learning and to ensure that students are tested uniformly (Flores & Clark, 2003). These findings suggest that there are some positive aspects to high-stakes testing and accountability policies. Given the previous findings that the TAKS test is not believed to be a good school measure, this may indicate that school social workers believe that schools should be held accountable, perhaps even through some form of testing or assessment, but that they do not feel that the TAKS test fairly accomplishes this goal. School social workers likely approve of the intent of accountability policies and testing because closing the achievement gap and improving achievement for disadvantaged students are goals that are closely aligned with core social work values. The intent of these policies is also well matched with school social worker goals of improving academic and social outcomes for at-risk students. However, it is clear that school social workers are unhappy with the unintended consequences posed by accountability policies. Overall, much like teachers (Craig, 2004; Flores & Clark, 2003; International Reading Association, 2003; Pedulla et al., 2003), school social workers in this study most often had negative perceptions about the impact of accountability testing on school systems.

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Impact on Job Tasks

      School social worker views about the impact of accountability testing on job tasks was also explored in this study by examining scores on individual Likert statements and by examining average scores on a summed scale with all Likert statements. Analysis of both methods revealed that school social workers have more negative opinions about the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks than positive opinions. There is very little existing research available regarding the impact that accountability testing has had on school social workers' abilities to accomplish their job tasks. Consequently, the results of this study have the potential to lend much needed insight into how the implementation of high-stakes testing, such as the TAKS test, has impacted school social workers' access to students and school social work service provision.

      Research on the relationship between teacher roles and high-stakes testing has found that high-stakes testing has changed the ways in which teachers provide services, often making their jobs more difficult (Abrams et al., 2003; Au, 2007; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Burroughs et al., 2005; Certo, 2006; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Costigan, 2002; Lamb, 2007; Massey, 2006; Olsen & Sexton, 2009). There is little research on the impact of high-stakes testing on social work services in schools, but there is evidence that high-stakes testing may leave little time for creative learning or supplemental services (Dorgan, 2004; Haney, 2000; Jacob, 2004; Jones et al., 1999; Mathison & Freeman, 2003; Pedulla et al, 2003; Sandholtz et al, 2004). This study supported these findings as most social workers agreed that the TAKS test had made it more difficult to access students by pulling them from academic classes. Similarly, the majority of social workers

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in the sample also agreed that the TAKS test made it more difficult to provide social work services to students.

These findings suggest that accountability policies and high-stakes accountability testing are indeed having an impact on school social work practice. Traditional methods of social work service provision, such as pulling students from academic classes to provide individual or group counseling, are being impeded by high-stakes testing in some manner. It is unclear from this study exactly how the TAKS test hinders school social workers' access to students or school social work service provision. It may be that school social workers are being asked to perform different duties during academic classes or that they are discouraged from pulling students away from academic classes. This is similar to the findings of a small qualitative study in Texas that found that the TAKS test can hinder school social worker access to students due to an increased focus on in-class time and a subsequent lack of support for supplemental services that pull students from their usual classes (Aguilar & Lagana-Riordan, 2008). These findings make it clear that school social workers, like teachers, are experiencing role intensification where they are expected to perform their job tasks in a policy context that makes it more difficult to do so (Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; Valli & Buese, 2007).

On a positive note, school social workers had mixed responses as to whether the TAKS test has limited the number of students with whom they can provide services with more social workers stating that they have not been limited (41.1%) than those stating that they have been limited (28.5%). A previous qualitative study had found that some school social workers were being limited to providing services only to those students who

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met "at-risk" criteria identified by state accountability systems (Aguilar & Lagana-Riordan, 2008). This finding could indicate that while many school social workers may have more difficulty providing services to students, the number of students that they can work with has not been limited in many cases. This may mean that school social workers feel that they are able to access the students who need their assistance or even that they are finding new ways to access students given the high-stakes atmosphere. While this is a positive finding, it is somewhat concerning that nearly 30% of school social workers did feel that the TAKS test had limited the number of students with whom they could work. This may mean that there are differences at the district or school level regarding who school social workers can provide services to or that the TAKS test is disproportionately limiting access to some students and not others. These possibilities will be further explored in Research Questions 2 and 3.

School social workers also had more mixed responses to the Likert item that stated that the TAKS test had impacted their jobs a "great deal," although a substantial portion of school social workers (nearly 40%) felt that the TAKS test was having a large impact on their jobs. Since the Likert scale item was worded only to identify a "great deal" of impact, it is unclear how many other school social workers may have felt that the TAKS test has had at least a moderate or small impact on their jobs. For this reason, it is likely that the impact of high-stakes testing is even more widespread than is identified by this study. Overall, this finding suggests that high-stakes testing is affecting the professional practice of social workers in schools.

School Social Workers and Policy Involvement

Previous research has found that while school social workers want to be involved in more macro level practice such as school decision-making and policy analysis, they are often absent from these tasks (Kelly et all, 2010). In this study, a rather large portion of social workers selected the neutral option of "neither agree nor disagree" for many of the Likert items regarding the impact of the TAKS test on school systems (between 23% and 42.5%) and on their job tasks (18.1% to 34.4%). Since all social workers in the sample were currently working at public schools subject to TAKS testing, this finding was somewhat surprising. Choosing a neutral category can indicate many things including ambiguity, irrelevance or indifference (Alexandrov, 2010). The fact that so many social workers in the sample chose the neutral category may show that school social workers do not feel that they are informed about accountability policies or high-stakes testing or that they do not feel equipped to gauge the impact that these policies are having on school systems.

A general lack of confidence in knowledge regarding accountability policies is also supported by the larger amount of missing data on the school TEA rating variable. Most variables in the study had very little missing data (0%-4.9%), but 14% of respondents chose "don't know" or "not applicable" for this variable. School ratings are often highly publicized and can drive school structure, policies, and decision-making. It is surprising that so many school social workers did not know their school rating or felt that it was not applicable. Overall, these results support previous literature that school social workers tend to lack involvement in macro practice such as policy creation and

analysis (Kelly et al., 2010). Nevertheless, it is clear from the results of this study that many school social workers are being impacted by education accountability policy implementation.

Summary of Findings for Research Question 1

Overall, the results of this study indicate that school social workers perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems and on their ability to perform their job tasks as largely negative. Most individual Likert items and the average sum scores for both the impact of the TAKS test on school systems and on job tasks highlighted more negative views about the TAKS test than positive views. School social workers tended to view the impact of the TAKS test on school systems more negatively than the impact on their own job tasks. Although the TAKS test is clearly having a negative impact on their job tasks, this finding reveals that school social workers perceive the overall impact on school systems as even more negative. Finally, the results of this study lend additional evidence to previous findings that school social workers are less involved in macro practice, including policy knowledge and involvement, than they are in direct practice with students.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Research Question 2 sought to determine what impact, if any, student characteristics have on school social workers' perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their ability to perform their job tasks. Specifically, it addressed whether school social workers who report that the majority of students on their caseload are ethnic minorities or have low socioeconomic status have different views about the impact of the

TAKS test on their jobs than school social workers who do not. The following section addresses these findings and then addresses the impact that school social worker characteristics such as ethnicity, level of education, years of school social work experience, and preparation for job tasks was found to have on this relationship.

There is little existing research regarding how views about accountability policy might differ for teachers who serve different student populations. One study found that teachers who taught at low-income schools had more negative views than those that taught at high-income schools (McCarthey, 2008). The current study found that school social workers who primarily serve students from ethnic minority groups are more likely to view the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks as negative than those who do not primarily serve students from ethnic minority backgrounds. However, there was no such difference between school social workers who predominantly serve students with low socioeconomic status (SES) when compared to school social workers who do not predominantly serve students with low SES. These results indicate that school social worker perceptions about accountability testing are influenced by some of the characteristics of the students that they serve.

Since the consequences of high-stakes testing are often greater for students of ethnic minority background, school social workers who most often serve these students may have observed these consequences more frequently. Previous research has found that schools with larger populations of low-income and minority students are less likely to make AYP and are at higher risk of school sanctions (Dworkin, 2005; Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Hursh, 2005; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Koski & Weis, 2004; McCarthey, 2008),

and that minority students are more likely to be retained or dropout of school due to accountability policies (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Wheelock, 2003). School social workers are often called upon to prevent school failure and dropout among at-risk students such as those from ethnic minority backgrounds (Allen-Meares, 2007). It is likely that school social workers who predominantly serve students from ethnic minority backgrounds have more negative views about the impact of high-stakes testing on their job tasks because they are more frequently asked to intervene on behalf of at-risk students by helping to keep them on grade level, in school, and eventually to help them overcome obstacles and graduate. Additional obstacles posed by high-stakes testing may be making this task even more difficult for school social workers.

For instance, school social workers who predominantly serve student from ethnic minority groups may have had more students on their caseloads who were retained a grade, chose to dropout, or did not graduate. As found in previous research (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Dworkin, 2005; Figlio & Getzer, 2002; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Lipman, 2002; Pedulla et al., 2003; Urrieta, 2004; Wheelock, 2003), they may have observed that the implementation of high-stakes testing pushed these students to dropout, rather than encouraging the achievement gap to close. It is also possible that school social workers who predominantly serve ethnic minority students have observed larger amounts of student stress tied to high-stakes testing than those who do not predominantly serve these populations. These factors may have had an impact on school social worker job tasks, as they may view high-stakes testing as an added obstacle that already at-risk minority students must overcome in order to achieve their educational goals.

Consequently, they may be asked to work harder to counteract these obstacles and conduct interventions that help students to stay in school. Overall, school social workers who serve students from ethnic minority backgrounds have more negative views of the TAKS test than school social workers who predominantly serve white students. It is unclear exactly why school social workers who predominantly serve ethnic minority students have more negative views of high-stakes tests, so this should be further investigated in future studies.

Surprisingly, although the consequences of high-stakes testing are also felt disproportionately among high-poverty schools (Harris, 2007), school social workers who predominantly serve students with low SES were no more likely to have negative views about the impact of the TAKS test. It is unclear why differences in school social worker attitudes about the impact of high-stakes testing would be more sensitive to ethnic differences in their students rather than socioeconomic differences. Since the majority of school social workers responded that they predominantly served students with low SES (approximately 77%), this type of "risk" may have been viewed as more widespread or pervasive among the students that they serve. It is possible that school social workers, therefore, could not compare student outcomes among those with and without low SES and so did not see any additional negative impact caused by accountability testing. Whatever the reason, school social workers who primarily served students with lower SES did not seem to feel that their job tasks were more negatively impacted by high-stakes testing than those who served more affluent students.

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After this initial analysis, the relationship between student characteristics and school social worker views about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks was further explored by examining the impact of several school social worker characteristics on this relationship. For this analysis, school social worker ethnicity, level of education, preparation for school social work job tasks, and years of school social work experience were added as covariates. It was hypothesized that adding these covariates would further explain the relationship between student characteristics and school social worker views about the impact of the TAKS test on job tasks. However, adding these covariates did not explain further variance in the model as the model fit was not as good and none of the school social worker characteristics were significantly correlated with school social worker perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks.

However, it is important to note that several school social worker characteristics did approach statistical significance at the $p<0.05$ level in the model that was tested. School social workers' level of education ($p=0.06$) and level of preparation for job tasks ($p=0.05$) approached significance. These nearly significant relationships were inverse relationships where school social workers who were more educated and those who felt that their social work training had adequately prepared them to be school social workers, were more likely to have negative views about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks. Had these findings reached significance, they may have indicated that school social workers who are more educated and prepared for school social work tasks also have better working knowledge about school policy issues and identifying barriers to student success. Therefore, they may be better able to identify the negative impact that

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policy implementation, such as high-stakes accountability testing, is having on students on their caseloads and on their job tasks. Since these findings only approached significance, school social worker characteristics should be further explored in future studies, as they might make a difference in school social worker attitudes about high-stakes testing, particularly in studies with larger sample sizes where significant findings are more easily obtained.

Summary of Findings for Research Question 2

        Overall, the results of this study indicate that school social workers who primarily serve students from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to perceive negative job impacts as a result of the TAKS test when compared to school social workers who primarily serve white students. On the other hand, there is little difference in these perceptions for school social workers who predominantly serve students with low SES when compared to those who serve more affluent students. When school social worker ethnicity and professional characteristics are taken into account, none of these characteristics make a significant difference in their perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on their job tasks. However, school social workers' level of education and preparation for school social work job tasks should be further explored in future studies.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

        Research Question 3 sought to determine what impact, if any, perceptions about school TEA ratings and student performance on the TAKS test have on school social workers perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. Specifically, it addressed whether school social workers who work at schools with lower TEA ratings

have more negative views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems than those who work at schools with higher TEA ratings. Similarly, it compared whether school social workers who feel their students excel on the TAKS test feel differently about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems than school social workers who did not feel that students on their caseload excelled on the TAKS test. The following section addresses these findings and then addresses the impact that school social worker characteristics such as ethnicity, level of education, years of school social work experience, and preparation for job tasks was found to have on this relationship.

Few previous studies have compared views about accountability policy for school staff members who work in schools with different accountability ratings. One study found that teacher perceptions about accountability policy did not vary greatly according to school rating (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2004). The current study did not support these findings and, in fact, found the opposite to be true for school social workers.

This study found that school social workers who work in schools with lower TEA ratings are more likely to view the impact of the TAKS test on school systems as more negative than those who work in schools with higher TEA ratings. Similarly, school social workers who reported that their students do not excel on the TAKS test were more likely to perceive a negative impact on school systems than those who reported that the students on their caseload tend to excel on the TAKS test. These results indicate that school social workers' perceptions about accountability testing are influenced by the characteristics of both the students that they serve and the overall accountability rating of their school(s).

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School social workers who work at schools with lower TEA ratings are more likely to have observed school sanctions as a result of accountability testing and policies. Therefore, they may have seen firsthand how poor student outcomes on high-stakes tests can negatively impact school systems through reductions in resources, school restructuring, or other sanctions. Schools that have lower accountability ratings are more likely to be under the threat of sanction and may therefore be more likely to begin using practices that are harmful to at-risk students such as teaching to the test, retaining students in their current grade, and pushing students to dropout of school. These practices conflict with school social worker goals of decreasing dropout rates and improving academic outcomes for students (Allen-Meares, 2007). Social workers often operate from a systems perspective where they identify not only individual factors leading to adverse outcomes, but also societal and structural factors (Ambrosino, Heffernan, Shuttlesworth, & Ambrosino, 2001). School social workers who work at lower ranked schools likely have contact with more at-risk students and may observe structural inequalities in their schools such as fewer qualified teachers, poorer material resources, and less funding. They may also have more of an insider's view into the additional inequalities that accountability systems impose on already overtaxed school systems. Therefore, they may be more likely to perceive accountability testing as unfairly or negatively impacting school systems. Use of the systems perspective and access to at-risk students may also account for the differences between the effect that school rating has on teachers' and school social workers' views about the impact of high-stakes testing.

School social workers' perceptions about the impact of the high-stakes testing are also influenced by student performance on these tests among students on their caseloads. This study found that school social workers who reported that their students did not excel on the TAKS test were more likely to have negative views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems than school social workers who felt that students on their caseload excelled on the tests. In fact, the strength of association between student performance and school social worker perceptions of the impact of the TAKS test on school systems was slightly stronger than the association between school rating and the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. This finding is likely the result of school social worker access to large populations of at-risk students. Since these school social workers identified that many of the students on their caseloads were struggling with high-stakes testing, this means that many of the students that they serve are at-risk for a variety of negative outcomes such as grade retention, dropout, and the inability to graduate as a result of high-stakes testing (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Dworkin, 2005; Figlio & Getzer, 2002; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Lipman, 2002; Pedulla et al., 2003; Urrieta, 2004; Wheelock, 2003). This makes school social workers more likely to witness negative outcomes associated with high-stakes testing and therefore view the TAKS test as having a negative impact on school systems. School social workers who primarily serve students who do well on the TAKS test may be less likely to see negative student outcomes as a direct result of high-stakes testing and may therefore be less likely to view the test as having a negative impact on school systems. These findings suggest that school social workers who work with students who struggle on high-stakes tests may have valuable

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insight into the impact of high-stakes testing on school systems since they are in contact with larger populations of students who feel the impact of these tests.

Similarly, school social workers who work with students who struggle on the TAKS test and those who work in lower rated schools may be more likely to experience professional consequences related to high-stakes testing. If school social workers are responsible for improving social and emotional functioning of at-risk students so that they can achieve better academic performance, they may be blamed or seen as ineffective if students continue to struggle on high-stakes test despite social work interventions. For this reason, school social workers may be at least partially blamed when a school fails to improve student test scores or school ratings. Consequently, school social workers who primarily work with students who struggle on the high-stakes tests and those who work in lower rated schools may have more negative views about high stakes testing not because of the act of testing itself, but because of a sense of professional failure when their students continue to struggle. They may feel disappointed that their schools have not been able to improve and frustrated by a system that makes it difficult for their students to achieve the goals that accountability policies have set.

These school social workers are also more likely to experience professional consequences tied to low school ratings such as school reorganization, school sanctions, and a reduction in supplemental services. They may feel the threat of job loss if they are viewed as ineffective or as a result of funding cuts due to sanctions. Finally, school social workers who primarily work at low performing schools may be in the best position to understand how accountability policies can sometimes work against their stated goals of

improving low performing schools because of the potential to strip struggling schools of resources, yet expect their students to perform at the same level as schools that have smaller populations of at-risk students and more resources.

After this initial analysis, the relationship between student performance on the TAKS test, school TEA ratings, and school social worker views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems was further explored by examining the impact of several school social worker characteristics on this relationship. For this analysis, school social worker ethnicity, level of education, preparation for school social work job tasks, and years of school social work experience were added as covariates. It was hypothesized that adding these covariates would further explain the relationship between student performance on the TAKS test, school TEA ratings, and school social worker views about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems. Results indicated that adding these covariates did not explain further variance in the model as the model with the covariates did not fit the data.

However, it is important to note that one school social worker characteristic was significant in this model. School social workers who identified as African American were more likely to view the impact of the TAKS test on school systems as more negative than school social workers who identified as white. Although this model did not provide a better fit than the initial model, inclusion of this demographic covariate should be further explored in future research.

Summary of Findings for Research Question 3

Overall, the results of this study indicate that school social workers who work at schools with lower TEA ratings and those who primarily serve students who struggle on the TAKS test are more likely to perceive the impact of the TAKS test on school systems as negative when compared to school social workers who work at schools with higher TEA ratings and those who primarily serve students who excel on the TAKS test. When school social worker ethnicity and professional characteristics are taken into account, these characteristics do not seem to further explain the difference in their perceptions about the impact of the TAKS test on school systems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Accountability policies and high-stakes testing are clearly having a large impact on schools and teachers, but until now little has been known about the impact that accountability policies are having on school social workers. The current findings suggest that the implementation of education accountability policies are indeed having a negative impact on school social workers and school social work service provision. One of the major findings of this study is that school social workers believe that high-stakes testing is having a negative impact on their job tasks, particularly for school social workers who work primarily with students from ethnic minority back grounds. One of the major obstacles that school social workers currently face is difficulty pulling students from their classes to provide social work services. Given these results, it is likely that school social workers will need to find new and creative ways to serve students in the current policy context.

Research has shown that high-stakes accountability policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 are putting pressure on schools to spend additional time on academic instruction, to the detriment of non-tested subjects and supplemental services (Dorgan, 2004; Haney, 2000; Jacob, 2004; Jones et al., 1999; Mathison & Freeman, 2003; Pedulla et al, 2003; Sandholtz et al, 2004). The length of the school day is limited, so school social workers often pull students from their regular academic classes to provide individual and group counseling. This study shows that school social workers are finding it increasingly difficult to do so. Therefore, it is likely that school social workers will need to find new ways to access students that do not interfere with the core classes that are assessed through high-stakes testing. For instance, school social workers may want to focus on pulling students for service provision during non-core class periods such as art, music, physical education, lunch, and electives. This way, they can provide the same services during the school day without interfering with academic instruction linked to high-stakes testing.

School social workers may also need to find times outside of the school day to provide services such as running counseling groups directly before or after school, much like an extracurricular club. School social workers may also be able to provide services to some students in the classroom without disrupting the academic environment. For example, a school social worker may be able to accompany an elementary student who struggles with classroom behavior to his class on a weekly basis to assist with behavior modification in his natural environment. This type of service benefits the teacher by

minimizing disruptions to academic instruction and provides immediate benefit to the student to help him to concentrate on the instruction being provided.

This study also lends evidence to previous literature suggesting that school social workers should begin connecting their services to improved academic outcomes for students (Franklin & Gerlach, 2006; Kelly et al., 2010; Raines, 2006) so that school social work services are viewed as vital rather than supplemental (Frey and Dupper, 2005). If school social workers are able to do so, they would likely encounter less resistance to service provision or even to pulling students from academic classrooms. If a school social worker can show that pulling a student once a week from her math class can improve her grades or high-stakes test scores significantly, it is likely that teachers and administrators would see the value in the social work service and agree to this method of service provision.

One way that school social workers can begin connecting their services to academic outcomes is to use simple data collection procedures before, during, and upon completion of services. For instance, when a school social worker decides to begin working with a student or group of students on a regular basis, he or she can record the student's current grades, attendance, test scores, and school behavior. These outcomes can then be tracked over time, as the student receives school social work services, to note any improvement in outcomes. This will also allow school social workers to adjust their interventions if they feel that they are not producing the desired student outcomes.

School social workers can also choose evidence-based interventions that have been shown most effective in improving academic outcomes. They can choose

interventions, such as solution-focused brief therapy, that focus on empowering students, helping them to set their own academic goals, and creating concrete steps to reach them. In a school context, the solution-focused model provides support to help students improve academic outcomes, while feeling responsible for their own education. These types of interventions are rapid, help to engage at-risk students in the school environment, and can help school social workers focus on improving academic outcomes (Kim & Franklin, 2009).

The current policy context makes it crucial for school social workers to show the importance of their services. Since services are most often provided to individual students and small groups of students, teachers and administrators may not realize the importance of social work services or the impact that they can have on students. Intervention methods that require a multidisciplinary team approach, such as Response to Intervention (RtI), may ensure that school social work services are recognized, valued, and facilitated by other school staff members. If school social work services are tied to improved academic performance among individual students, particularly at-risk students, they may eventually be associated with improved school ratings. This could ensure that school administrators, teachers, and school social workers are all working toward the common goal of improving academic outcomes for at-risk students in a holistic and cooperative manner, with the secondary gain of improving test scores and school ratings.

This study found that school social workers had the most negative views of high-stakes testing when they worked in schools with lower accountability ratings or and when they primarily worked with students from ethnic minority backgrounds or with students

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who struggle on high-stakes tests. These results indicate that school social workers in these environments are most in need of tools and techniques to help them mediate the impact of education policy implementation. One way that school social workers can respond to accountability policies is to educate teachers and school administrators about new ways to approach poor academic outcomes. Social workers are trained to view their clients within their social and ecological contexts and may be able to identify barriers to learning that occur outside of the school environment. Research has shown that mediating environmental, social, and emotional barriers to learning can be an effective way to improve academic achievement (Brooks, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Gerstl-Pepin, 2006; Reis et al., 2000). While teachers must focus their interventions on classroom techniques and instructional practices, school social workers can help their schools create programs and practices to improve academic performance through other means.

For instance, school social workers can target school climate by initiating school-wide character education and behavior supports such as Positive Behavioral Supports programs. They can seek out programs to ensure that students are not hungry during the school day or at home such as free breakfast programs and food take-home programs. School social workers can focus their interventions on whole families, rather than individual students, to encourage parental participation and seek services that will encourage positive family relationships and student support. They can create community initiatives and partnerships that seek to improve family functioning and access to resources. School social workers can help schools to directly address social problems, such as poverty and homelessness, that impact academic outcomes. For instance, school

social workers can educate teachers about the ways that poverty can manifest in student behavior. They can establish committees to address the resource needs of students (i.e. school supplies, appropriate clothing) and can develop partnerships with local social service agencies to help families in need of employment, healthcare, or housing.

By helping students to overcome environmental, social, and emotional barriers to learning, and by helping school staff and administrators to understand the relationship between these factors and academic achievement, school social workers can make great strides in helping students to improve on academic indicators. To achieve these goals, however, means that school social workers will likely need to step outside of their traditional tasks and move beyond the provision of individual, direct services to students and focus on family, school-wide, and community interventions.

Finally, the findings of this dissertation suggest that school social workers likely lack vital information about education policy and the impact that it has on schools and school social work services. School social workers who were unable to give their school rating(s) and those that were unsure how high-stakes testing was impacting school systems and their jobs seem to be out of the loop when it comes to the educational policy context in which they are practicing. Operating within a host site, it can be understandably difficult for school social workers to understand all of the policies that impact how schools are structured, how resources are allocated, and how classes are taught. However, social workers are taught to view the world and client problems from a systems perspective, which includes the role that structural inequalities and policy implications have on individual client problems (Ambrosino et al., 2001). Just as social

workers working in the child welfare system must understand how state child welfare laws may impact their clients, so too must school social workers understand how education policies may impact the students with whom they work. It is difficult to prevent negative school outcomes without a good working understanding of the policies that may contribute to or help mitigate these outcomes. Changes to social work education may help to improve school social workers' knowledge about education policies and their involvement in policy decisions.

Social work students are often required to take classes at the undergraduate and graduate level on social policies. These classes and textbooks typically have sections on medical, financial assistance and hunger, child welfare, mental health, housing, and job policies and programs aimed at helping vulnerable populations in the United States (see Blau, 2007; Popple & Leighninger, 2001). However, they often fail to address education policies, even though policies such as the NCLB are aimed at improving the lives of at-risk children, who are more likely to utilize the above programs if they have poor academic outcomes. So while newly educated social workers may be armed with policy education that prepares to work in foster care, homeless shelters, or hospitals, they are less equipped to work in schools. Adding education policy to social work policy courses will help school social workers to not only understand the impact that education policies might have on their clients before they begin their work in school settings, but may also give them the tools that they need to identify and assess the effectiveness of education policies in their work environment. Similarly, the results of the current research suggest the need for elective graduate classes in school social work. This is particularly important

since most mental health services received by children are provided in schools (Kelly et al., 2010).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

Consistent with Brain, Reid, and Comerford Boyes' (2006) typology of teacher adaptations to education policy and practice, school social workers must mediate the impact of education policies. Some school social workers, most likely those who chose neutral categories on the Likert scales, may not feel that they are impacted by education policy in a meaningful way. By operating within a host site, they may feel removed from policy implementation decisions and may not believe that they must alter their practices to achieve their work goals. Therefore, they may only need to mediate high-stakes testing policies in a minimal manner. Other school social workers, such as those who felt their jobs and job tasks were impacted a great deal by high-stakes testing, are likely to mediate education accountability policies to a larger extent. However, the mechanisms that school social workers are choosing to use to mediate education policies are still unclear. Future qualitative research should explore exactly how school social workers are dealing with high-stakes testing implementation and how they are mediating these policies in their daily practice.

This study found that school social workers, like teachers, are finding it more difficult to perform their job tasks in this high-stakes testing environment. They are likely experiencing role intensification, as they are required to perform their job tasks in a policy context that makes it more difficult to do so. The current study did not, however, expand upon our understanding of the degree of role increase or role expansion that

school social workers may be facing in their jobs. At this time, it is uncertain whether school social workers are taking on additional tasks or broadening their tasks outside of more traditional school social work roles. Future research should focus on the methods that school social workers use to effectively provide services in the current policy context. Explanatory research of this kind will help to further confirm the accuracy of teacher role theory as applied to other school professionals such as school social workers, or will help create new theories of school social worker role adaptation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and similar state policies shifted educational emphasis in the United States toward educational accountability. The rationale behind education accountability systems is that high-stakes testing can serve as motivation for students, teachers, and administrators to improve educational conditions and academic achievement. Testing requirements and the threat of sanctions are intended to stimulate schools to use the resources that they already have to improve test scores and promote academic advancement (Herman, Baker, & Linn, 2004). The overall goal of education accountability is to improve education for traditionally disadvantaged students and to reduce the achievement gap between these at-risk students and their peers. Previous studies with teachers and administrators have found that accountability policies are having unintended negative consequences on students, teachers, and school systems, but little research exists on school social worker perceptions about the impact of accountability policy. The results of this study support the education research in this area

and highlight similar perceptions among school social workers about the negative impact of high-stakes accountability testing on school systems and their job tasks.

Findings from this study suggest that school social workers see the need to hold schools accountable for student learning and assess all students uniformly, but that they do not believe that high-stakes testing adequately measures educational accountability. Like teachers, school social workers seem to feel that high-stakes testing and accountability policies are not accomplishing their stated goals of decreasing the achievement gap and improving education for at-risk students. There is a clear need for education policy change that supports at-risk students rather than further hindering their educational progress.

While educational accountability is important, so too is creating education policies that do more good than they do harm. Emphasis on high-stakes testing with results that are tied to sanctions for individual students and already resource depleted schools, do not take the holistic needs of at-risk students into account. Academic achievement is more likely to improve when social and emotional contexts, such as poverty, are addressed directly (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). To accomplish the goal of improving outcomes for at-risk students, education policy will likely need to focus on creative ways to help schools support at-risk students, rather than penalizing at-risk students for continuing to underperform when compared to their peers.

As the re-authorization of NCLB approaches, it is important for all education system stakeholders, including educators, administrators, students, parents, and related service providers to share what they have observed and learned about the impact of

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NCLB on students and schools. In the past, school social workers have largely been absent from education policy discussions (Allen-Meares, 1994; Costin, 1969; Kelly et al., 2010; Meares, 1977). This study has shown that school social workers do have unique insight into the impact of state and federal education accountability policies, particularly in light of their access to at-risk students. School social workers can contribute to policy discussions by advocating that education accountability policies focus not only on academic interventions to improve student outcomes, such as high-stakes testing and reporting, but also interventions that address social and emotional barriers to learning. They can suggest initiatives that take into account and directly address income and cultural differences and the impact that these factors have on students' abilities to perform in school. By stressing the need for schools to address issues such as poverty and racism head-on, school social workers can help schools improve both their test scores and the quality of life for students. School social workers can also add their voices to the many critics that point out that accountability policies do not account for the additional obstacles faced by schools that primarily serve at-risk students and that these schools require additional resources to address their unique obstacles.

It is important that school social workers take this opportunity to enter education policy discussions so that their voices can be heard alongside other school staff members. One of the roles of a school social worker is to advocate for the rights of vulnerable students (National Association of Social Workers, 2002). Advocating for improved education policy is one way that school social workers can advocate for large populations of at-risk students that extend beyond those that they touch on their caseloads.

LIMITATIONS

      This study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the study findings. The next section will outline some of the study limitations.

Generalizability

      These findings can only be generalized to school social workers in the state of Texas since each state is free to interpret the provisions of NCLB and many also have their own state accountability systems and testing policies. This can lead to large variations in how high-stakes accountability testing is implemented (Hess, 2005) and the impact that it may have on school systems and school social workers. However, Texas was one of the first states to have accountability policies in place, which became the model for NCLB (Texas Education Agency, 2008). Therefore, Texas is often considered to be at the forefront of education accountability policy and a model for other states wishing to strengthen their accountability systems. For this reason, Texas is an excellent state to begin assessing school social worker perspectives on education accountability policies.

Response rate

      The survey response rate for this study was a limitation. As discussed in Chapter 3, the response rate for this survey was very difficult to calculate since there are no accurate estimates of the number of school social workers currently working in Texas and no central state or national registry of school social workers. It is unclear what percentage of school social workers the survey was able to reach. However, the sample population for this study was very similar to the sample of school social workers from Texas

included in a recent national study of school social workers (Kelly et al., 2010). School social workers in the current study also represented a variety of school districts (n=95) from across the state of Texas, as well as a wide range of ages, ethnicities, levels of education, and years of social work experience. These factors increase confidence in the generalizability of the findings.

Sample Size

The sample size for this study was relatively small with approximately 161 participants that could be used in the analysis of all three research questions. Since this study is one of the first of its kind to explore school social worker perceptions of education policies, the findings should be viewed as an initial exploration for which a small sample size is expected and acceptable. Also, the sample size for this study was well within the minimum range for use with structural equation modeling and the number of parameters estimated for this study (Hair et al., 1998).

Measures

The measures used for the survey that was analyzed in the current study can be viewed as a limitation to the research. The survey was created by a social work research team at the University of Texas at Austin, which included the author, so it did not contain any previously validated scales. Unfortunately, since research on this topic is largely missing from the school social work literature, few existing scales would have been appropriate for use. The creation of new survey items was the best option for obtaining the desired information about school social worker views on education accountability policies. To help overcome this limitation, the research team enacted a rigorous survey

design including the use of qualitative data to design the initial version of the questionnaire, pilot testing on a large initial sample and subsequent questionnaire revisions, and expert review. These methods helped to ensure that the questionnaire contained items that were relevant to school social work practice and covered the full range of school social worker experiences in Texas, and that items were easy to understand and complete.

Similarly, survey items used to measure certain variables in this study had limitations. For instance, the survey relied on self-report to obtain each school social worker's most recent school rating(s), rather than existing data sources. Consequently, participants could misreport their school rating (which did not seem to be a major problem in this study) or state that they did not know their current school rating (which did occur frequently in this study). This is a difficult problem to overcome in this population since many school social workers work in multiple schools. To use existing data sources to obtain accurate school ratings, participants would need to list the names of every school where they currently provided services. This may be very difficult or impossible for some school social workers who are responsible for an entire region or district. Similarly, many participants may be unwilling to provide the name of the schools where they work to preserve their confidentiality. Innovative ways for using existing data sources to obtain school ratings should be explored in future studies.

Missing Data

Finally, the amount of missing data for the school rating variable (*TEA Rating*) and the large number of neutral responses on the Likert scale items measuring the impact

of the high-stakes testing on school systems and school social worker job tasks can be viewed as limitations to the study. This finding, however, lent a great deal of insight into the awareness of school social workers regarding education policy and its impact on school systems and their jobs. In light of previous research on school social workers and macro practice, this was interpreted as further evidence that school social workers tend to operate outside of more macro functions such as policy analysis.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should assess school social worker perceptions about education accountability policies and high-stakes testing in populations outside of the state of Texas. A body of literature that assesses the impact of high-stakes accountability testing on school social work practice and on school systems from the social work point of view would be most valuable. This would allow for comparisons between states and a national perspective on the impact of education policy on school social work practice.

Methodologically, future studies should utilize methods to locate hard-to-reach school social workers. Additional efforts should be made to create and maintain state and national registries of school social workers to better identify and access those who are working in the field of school social work. Unless school social workers are more easily identified and contacted, it will be difficult to measure their professional competencies and concerns.

To effectively continue to research the impact of education policies on school social workers, valid and reliable tools must be developed. The Likert items used in this survey were not intended for primary use as scales to measure a particular construct or

constructs. Instead, they were intended to measure a wide range of possible opinions that school social workers might have about high-stakes testing in schools. However, this study sought to analyze school social worker perceptions on two specific constructs that seemed to be represented by some of the Likert items in the TSSWS: the impact of high-stakes tests on school systems and the impact of high-stakes tests on school social worker job tasks. Therefore, the Likert items in the original survey were selected, analyzed, and pared down to create two unique scales for this secondary data analysis. Both of the scales that were created for the purpose of this secondary data analysis had good factor structure and internal consistency reliability, particularly the scale measuring the impact of the high-stakes test on school systems. For these reasons, the measures of school social workers' perceptions about high-stakes testing created in this study should be further tested in future research to validate their properties and extend their usefulness, perhaps creating a validated and reliable scale of social worker policy perceptions that can be extended to other education policies or related school staff populations.

Additional research should explore the hypotheses presented in this study with larger sample sizes and various populations. This study found that that school and student characteristics can make a difference in school social worker perceptions about policy implementation. Therefore, these differences should be further explored in a variety of contexts. Since school and student characteristics accounted for a relatively small proportion of the variance in the models examined, additional factors that influence school social workers' perceptions should be identified and explored. Most school social worker demographics did not seem to explain differences in their opinions about high-

stakes testing. However, school social worker ethnicity (African American) was significant in one of the models and level of education and preparation for job tasks were nearly significant, lending evidence that these characteristics should continue to be explored in future research. In future models, emphasis should also be placed on using school characteristics as covariates such as location (i.e. urban, rural), level served (i.e. elementary, middle, high), and number of schools served.

Finally, future research should also focus on the ways in which school social workers attempt to mediate the difficulties they face due to education accountability policies. This will help to inform school social workers about new and creative methods for providing services to students in this age of accountability. Most importantly, future research on education policy implementation should focus on not only school social workers' perceptions about the impact of these policies on their job tasks and school systems in general, but more specifically on the at-risk students that they serve.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine school social workers' perceptions about high-stakes testing and its impact on school systems and their work, using a sample of school social workers in the state of Texas. It examined school social worker perceptions about how implementation of high-stakes testing supported or hindered their ability to execute their job tasks and how the characteristics of the students that they served further influenced these perceptions. Finally, it examined the relationship between state accountability ratings for the schools where social workers in the sample worked,

their perceptions of student performance on high-stakes tests, and their perceptions about high-stakes testing.

Consistent with teacher literature on the impact of high-stakes testing, this study found that school social workers believe that high-stakes testing is having a largely negative impact on school systems and on their job tasks. School social workers who predominantly worked with students from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to have negative opinions about the impact of high-stakes testing on their job tasks, though the same did not hold true for those who worked predominantly with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. School rating and student performance also made a difference in school social workers' opinions about high-stakes testing. School social workers from schools with lower school ratings and those who felt that the students on their caseload tended to struggle on high-stakes tests, had more negative perceptions about the impact of high-stakes testing on school systems.

There is a large body of evidence suggesting that education accountability policies and high-stakes testing are having a negative impact on teachers and students, but school social worker perceptions on these issues have been largely absent. This study fills a significant gap in the school social work literature regarding how education policies impact school social work practice. Results of this study emphasized the impact that education policies can have on school social worker efforts to mediate the many obstacles faced by students at-risk of school failure. Future school social work research should build upon this study by extending understanding about the impact of education policies on school social work practice and on the at-risk students that they serve.

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