Effectiveness of school social work from a risk and resilience perspective
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Authors' objectives
To assess the effectiveness of school social work in producing mental health-related outcomes, interpreted within a risk and resilience framework.

Searching
PsycINFO, ERIC, and a social work database were searched using the keywords ‘school social work’ and ‘evaluation’ or ‘outcome’. The references in reviews were also searched.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
Studies that used a control group or used multiple baseline or single-system designs were eligible. Studies with the following designs were included: randomised controlled trials (RCTs); pre-test, post-test studies with a control group; multiple baseline single-subject design with matched pairs; multiple baseline single-subject design with analysis of trends; post-test only control group studies; ABCD single-subject study design; and B-BC-B-BC single-subject design.

Specific interventions included in the review
School social work, or interventions that involved one or more social workers (including social work students) and took place in a school, were eligible. The following types of interventions were included: cognitive-behavioural therapy with and without relaxation training; in-class operant conditioning; peer mediation; problem-solving; assertiveness training; case management; incentive training; daily monitoring of behaviour by parent and teachers; anger control; and emotional education.

Participants included in the review
Individuals or groups in school settings were eligible. School was defined as a public or a private school, or a day treatment programme that included schooling. The participants were: primary and secondary schoolchildren; schoolchildren referred for interpersonal conflict; pregnant or parenting teenagers; schoolgirls identified with violence in dating relationship; underachievers; children with learning disabilities; and an autistic special education student.

Outcomes assessed in the review
The inclusion criteria were not defined in terms of the outcomes. The following mental health outcomes were assessed.

Intrapersonal outcomes, including degree of stress, coping skills, relaxation, understanding of child abuse, locus of control, self-control, negative behaviours, positive behaviours, rational beliefs, acting out behaviour, and aggressive episodes.

Academic outcomes, such as grades, behaviour ratings with peers and adults, absences, tardiness, and self-esteem.

Interpersonal outcomes, including incidence of abuse, assertiveness, self-esteem, peer acceptance, social competence, positive peer interactions, locus of control, social skills, problem-solving, unprotected intercourse, use of birth control, and referrals for discipline problems.

Systems outcomes, i.e. delinquency rates, number of self-referrals to social work services, perception of relatedness to school adult, ability to confront problem, sense of control over performance, and improved school motivation.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The authors do not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many of the reviewers performed the selection.
Assessment of study quality
No formal validity assessment was conducted though some aspects of validity were briefly mentioned.

Data extraction
The authors do not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many of the reviewers performed the data extraction.

The following information were tabulated: the author and year of publication; study aims; study design; sample characteristics; type of intervention; dependent variables; and main results.

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
The studies were grouped according to outcome and were combined in the narrative.

How were differences between studies investigated?
Studies within each group were discussed separately.

Results of the review
Twenty-one studies were included. It was not possible to calculate the exact number of participants included in the review but it appears that there were at least 3,533 participants.

The studies examined a wide variety of populations, target problems and intended outcomes. There were weaknesses in the methodology; for example, many interventions were of a relatively short duration, and only a few studies documented the follow-up.

Intrapersonal outcomes (6 studies): there were 4 pre-test post-test studies with a control group, 1 multiple baseline single-subject design with matched pairs, and 1 ABCD single-subject design. The studies supported the short-term effectiveness of school social work interventions aimed towards intrapersonal change.

Academic outcomes (3 studies): there were 2 pre-test post-test studies with a control group and 1 multiple baseline single-subject design with analysis of trends. All 3 studies indicated that social work interventions were effective in the short-term, but the only study to include follow-up (1 year) raised questions about the durability of change.

Interpersonal outcomes (9 studies): there were 2 RCTs, 4 pre-test post-test studies with a control group, 2 post-test only control group studies, and 1 B-BC-B-BC single-subject design. Both RCTs found a significant improvement as a result of social skills training and interpersonal cognitive problem-solving, but there was no significant difference between social skills training and interpersonal cognitive problem-solving therapy. Acquisition of problem-solving skills (one pre-test post-test study with control group): the combination of social problem-solving with social skills appeared to produce greater gains than actually learning problem-solving skills.

Acquisition of social skills (3 studies): social skills training was superior to problem-solving training alone in producing a change in social skills. Peer acceptance (5 studies): the results were mixed.

Systems outcomes (3 studies): the results were mixed. One pre-test post-test study with a comparison group reported decreases in theft, bullying, truancy, fighting, hard-drug use, and exclusion in children receiving social work input. One multiple-baseline, single-subject study reported an increase in self-referral to social workers as a result of a 30-minute programme about social work service. One pre-test post-test study with a comparison group reported no change between groups, or from pre-test to post-test, for a daily ‘advisory group’ intervention.

Authors’ conclusions
Schools social work interventions were, overall, effective in helping children and adolescents obtain the skills to solve problems, improve peer relations, and improve intrapersonal functioning.
CRD commentary
The aims were clearly stated and the inclusion criteria were broadly defined in terms of the interventions, study setting and study design. Several relevant sources were searched, but the dates for which the search was conducted were not reported. It was not stated whether any language restrictions were applied, and no attempt was made to locate unpublished material. The methods used to select the studies were not described and detailed results were not presented. No formal validity assessment was undertaken, although some aspects of study design were briefly mentioned in the text. Relevant data on the included studies were tabulated, but the methods used to extract the data were not described. A narrative synthesis was appropriate given the diversity of the interventions, participants and outcomes. However, in the synthesis, attention was not drawn to results from higher quality studies. Very few studies compared similar interventions in comparable groups of schoolchildren, thus it is not possible to state how generalisable the results are.

The evidence presented appears to support the authors’ conclusions. However, the review could have been strengthened by including a description of the methods used to conduct the review, a formal validity assessment, and a discussion of the results in relation to the study validity.

Implications of the review for practice and research
Practice: The authors state that social work services have a positive effect on mental health-related outcomes, and that the review supports an expanded role for the school social worker.

Research: The authors state that future research should attempt to determine the optimal length of intervention needed to maintain gains over time, and that research on interventions involving children’s families should be conducted.

Bibliographic details

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Record Status
This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.