

BMJ Open Promoting psychosocial environments in Norwegian primary schools: a scoping review protocol exploring the roles and responsibilities of school social workers

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ABSTRACT

Introduction Early intervention by identifying children at risk and providing necessary support is vital to prevent stunted psychosocial development and mental health issues. In this regard, schools are important intervention arenas, reaching all students at a universal level. The need for enhanced efforts is well recognised in Norwegian policy documents, whereas school social workers can represent significant roles in supporting teachers with expanded knowledge on psychosocial factors, mental health and relevant interventions. Despite the clearly stated needs for interprofessional competence in school, limited research has been conducted, and there are no national standards or guidelines for school social workers' practice. Thus, this scoping review's overall objectives are to systematically map the existing research on social workers' roles and responsibilities in Norwegian primary schools.

Methods and analysis A scoping review will be conducted, using the methodological framework of Arksey and O'Malley. Four of their defined goals will be of significance: (1) examine the extent, range and nature of the research activity; (2) determine the value of undertaking a full systematic review; (3) summarise and disseminate research findings; (4) identify research gaps in the existing literature. Systematic searches will be conducted in relevant databases and search portals, including snowballing and manually searching reference lists. Publication language is restricted to English and Norwegian, the date range is from 1 January 2000 until 31 October 2022, and inclusion requires focus on social workers in a Norwegian primary school context. The data will be screened using the screening data extraction software Covidence. A thematic analysis of the literature will be carried out.

Ethics and dissemination Ethical approval is not considered necessary as the aim of this scoping review is to investigate already published materials. Findings will be submitted as scientific papers and at conferences as part of the main project.

INTRODUCTION

Providing healthy environments contributing to children's mental health and positive development is defined as a social responsibility beyond the children's primary caregivers. Inclusive communities and early intervention

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

- ⇒ Using a scoping review methodology allows us to systematically investigate a broad range of evidence on school social workers' roles and responsibilities in Norwegian primary schools and to accumulate knowledge about potential positive effects of such functions.
- ⇒ This study will be the first to systematically identify recommended practice for school social workers, thereby providing an important contribution for today's practice.
- ⇒ Limiting the actual research to the Norwegian context faces the risk of including a high percentage of literature that is not peer reviewed, such as master's theses or other documents representing grey literature.

are core elements in this regard.¹ To reveal children at risk of negative emotional and psychosocial development, early intervention in school settings is vital for the promotion of positive mental health and student well-being, and for the prevention of future drop-outs.² The school staff comprises frontline professionals who should identify emerging problems among the students and serve as gateway-providers for professional help.^{3 4} However, schools tend to be crisis driven in terms of directing their interprofessional work towards emerging and existing problem behaviours at selective and indicative levels rather than at universal levels.^{5 6} Existing research shows that only 17%–18% of students with emotional difficulties seek help for their problems, resulting in a negative cycle of poor academic achievement, low self-esteem and enhanced risk of mental health problems in secondary school.^{7 8} Thus, the school staff's capacity to identify emerging problems at an early stage and facilitate help-seeking behaviour is vital. However, success in early intervention approaches requires adults' attentive presence in students' daily



environments. Here, school social workers play a key role in observing and interacting with students in and outside the classroom setting as well as in establishing supportive relationships. Teachers are neither professionally prepared nor equipped with the necessary time resources to deal with the students' various and complex social and emotional needs.^{9 10} Thus, the impact of enhanced interprofessional collaboration in schools is highlighted and explored in a range of recent Norwegian policy documents.^{1 2 11} A common denominator is the recognition that teachers need more support and guidance from school social workers and health professionals to provide sufficient help and support for their students. As White Paper 19 (2009–2010)¹⁰ points out, teachers' time spent on behaviour management, pastoral care and conflict resolution in class encroach severely on their time devoted to instructional tasks. Mental health difficulties also present an increasing challenge to teachers' efficiency and are sources of professional stress.^{12 13} Research and literature reviews from other Nordic countries support the need of reducing teachers' administrative tasks and enhance teachers' opportunities for interprofessional collaboration. Such collaboration is thought to provide higher quality of the professional and pedagogical work and facilitate a holistic approach to students' individual needs. However, unclarity regarding the role and responsibilities of school social workers remains a key challenge.^{14 15} According to Borg *et al*⁹ there is a lack of systematic thinking and a joint strategy on how to use the existing interprofessional resources in school. In addition, Gjertsen *et al*¹⁶ state the important role of school social workers in their research; however, these professions' roles and status remain unclear in today's practice. Despite the clear evidence of school social workers' positive impacts on the learning environment and the school climate, the effects are mostly individual based instead of system based. To ensure more system-based effects, there is a need for role clarification and refinement of tasks and responsibilities for social workers in interprofessional collaboration in school.

Study rationale and objectives

For this purpose, the current scoping review protocol aims to describe a planned scoping review that will contribute to a knowledge base of current practices of social workers in Norwegian primary schools. The scoping review will map existing knowledge of the roles and responsibilities, and political priorities, of school social workers in a Norwegian context. Thus, the planned scoping review represents the first part of a nationwide project with the overarching aim of providing a structured approach and a work description that clarifies school social workers' roles and responsibilities in their daily work in students' psychosocial environment. The suggested approaches will include different areas of investigation related to psychosocial environment in schools, encompassing conflict management, bullying prevention and mental health promotion and efforts to enhance students' relational

competence and life skills. The project also aims to investigate the potential positive effect of social workers' expertise on teachers' perceived efficacy and the overall quality of interprofessional collaboration in schools. The main project comprises three main components using a sequential multimethod design: (1) clarification of the knowledge base through the planned scoping review of evidence in the field, in addition to a survey covering the use and potential positive outcomes of social workers' services in primary schools in two Norwegian counties; (2) preparation of a structured approach for these professions based on the knowledge base and feedback from a selection of social workers in primary schools, and (3) implementation of the structured work approach in a sample of primary schools and investigation of its impacts on relevant factors concerning (1) students, (2) teachers and (3) interdisciplinary collaboration between school social workers and providers of relevant child services in the municipality. To prepare the main project with a research-based and experience-based approach, one of the strategies is to obtain an overview of existing research in this field, based on data from a Norwegian context. Surely, inclusion of content from other jurisdiction would have informed our research. However, we recognise the need to map the national status in the field of school social work, before taking on a broader perspective and include data from other geographical locations. Thus, the main objective of this scoping review is to map the existing research on the roles and responsibilities of social workers in Norwegian primary schools and learn more about the national political priorities related to social work in schools. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. What is the terminology used to describe social workers' roles?
2. What are the reported job tasks and responsibilities of school social workers?
3. What is the reported relevance of school social workers' roles?

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

A scoping review will be used as a research design for the proposed review protocol because it is a suitable method for obtaining an overview of the current state of knowledge in the research field. Moreover, a scoping review allows the inclusion of a wide range of materials and diverse research designs in disciplines with emerging evidence. The scoping review protocol will be based on the five-step framework and recommendations of Arksey and O'Malley (17, p22) and Levac *et al*,¹⁷ including (1) identifying the research questions, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selection studies, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarising and reporting the results. An optional step, consultation exercise, where practitioners, stakeholders and consumers contribute to the work, will also be included in the protocol.^{17 18} The initial literature search will be completed by 6 May 2022, whereas the final

search will be ended by 31 October 2022. The scoping review protocol and all available data from the study will be available on request when the study is completed and published.

Stage 1: identifying the research questions

Due to the preliminary investigations presented in public documents and statements from a variety of professionals working in Norwegian primary schools, the current roles of school social workers in this context lack structured approaches. In combination with the increased focus on early intervention, including expertise and competence in children's mental health, such professionals' attentive presence among the children in primary schools is required. Thus, targeted and evidence-based approaches should be developed to ensure positive outcomes. Therefore, the previously mentioned objectives have been defined, with the overall aim of building a knowledge base for use in the development of an evidence-based intervention for school social workers. With these factors in mind, we explore the following research question in the scoping review: *What is the current state of knowledge on the roles and responsibilities of social workers in Norwegian primary schools?*

Stage 2: identifying relevant studies

The second stage of the chosen framework aims to identify studies that are relevant for the scoping review. Although such an approach attempts to cover a wide range of publications, there might be a broad spectrum of literature that addresses some of the included thematic fields but not the main objective of this review. Therefore, the following criteria will be significant in guiding the literature search.

The scoping review will include studies and scientific papers published in international and national peer-reviewed journals, in addition to grey literature, such as public national documents and reports, PhD dissertations and MA theses. The following electronic databases will be searched: CINAHL, ERIC, Idunn, MEDLINE, PsychInfo, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science and WorldCat, in addition to the search portals Google Scholar and Oria. Databases linked to Norwegian universities that offer professional health-related educational programmes will be searched for grey literature, such as PhD dissertations and MA theses. Experts and stakeholders will also be consulted. Snowballing and manual searching will be used as additional methods to capture as many relevant publications as possible. The included year span from 2000 to 2022 was set due to a marked shift in national policy at the turn of the millennium, regarding interprofessional collaboration in schools. In 2000, a Norwegian White Paper¹⁹ addressing teacher attrition and future teacher roles identified a marked need for social workers in school to support teachers in dealing with students' expanding social and emotional needs. This interprofessional collaboration is necessary for teachers to maintain their primary pedagogical role.

The following eligibility criteria will also be applied:

- ▶ Language: English and Norwegian.
- ▶ Publication years: 2000–2022.
- ▶ Included literature: international and national peer-reviewed journals, public national documents and reports, PhD dissertations, MA theses.
- ▶ Context: Norwegian context, primary school (6–12-year-old students), social workers with specified areas of intervention related to students' psychosocial health and development at universal and selected levels. Exclusion criteria will be social workers with Special Education Needs responsibilities.
- ▶ Study population: school social workers, milieu-therapeutic staff, psychosocial counsellor, social counsellor, school counsellor, 6–12-year-old students.
- ▶ Intervention: work descriptions and performance outcomes of social workers in primary schools.
- ▶ Key search terms (in English): primary school, elementary school, middle school, school social worker, milieu therapist, interprofessional collaboration, interdisciplinary collaboration.
- ▶ Key search terms (nøkkelord) (in Norwegian): barne-skole, sosialveileder, sosialarbeider, miljøterapeut, tverrfaglig samarbeid, tverretatlig samarbeid, fler-faglig samarbeid.

English

Step 1: (“elementary school” OR “primary school” OR “middle school”) AND (“school social worker” OR “milieu therapist” OR “social worker” OR “social teacher”).

Step 2: AND (“interprofessional collaboration” OR “interdisciplinary collaboration” OR “cross-disciplinary collaboration” OR “multi-professional collaboration” OR “multi-disciplinary collaboration”).

Norwegian

Step 1: (“barneskole” ELLER “grunnskole”) OG (“sosialveileder” ELLER “miljøterapeut” ELLER “miljøarbeider” ELLER “sosiallærer” ELLER “sosialarbeider”).

Step 2: OG (“tverrfaglig samarbeid” ELLER “tverretatlig samarbeid” ELLER “flerfaglig samarbeid”).

Stage 3: selecting studies

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews Checklist will be used for reporting the results of the scoping review protocol.^{20 21} A flow diagram, as presented in figure 1, will be used to visualise and support the study selection process.

After completing the literature search, all references will be uploaded to the reference manager EndNote. Next, all documents will be exported to the online literature review software, Covidence, for removal of duplicates before screening all remaining documents by title and abstract (to be independently conducted by two of the authors) to sort out irrelevant materials. If uncertainties or disagreements occur in the screening process, such as whether a study should be included or excluded, the third author will act as the tiebreaker and establish consensus.

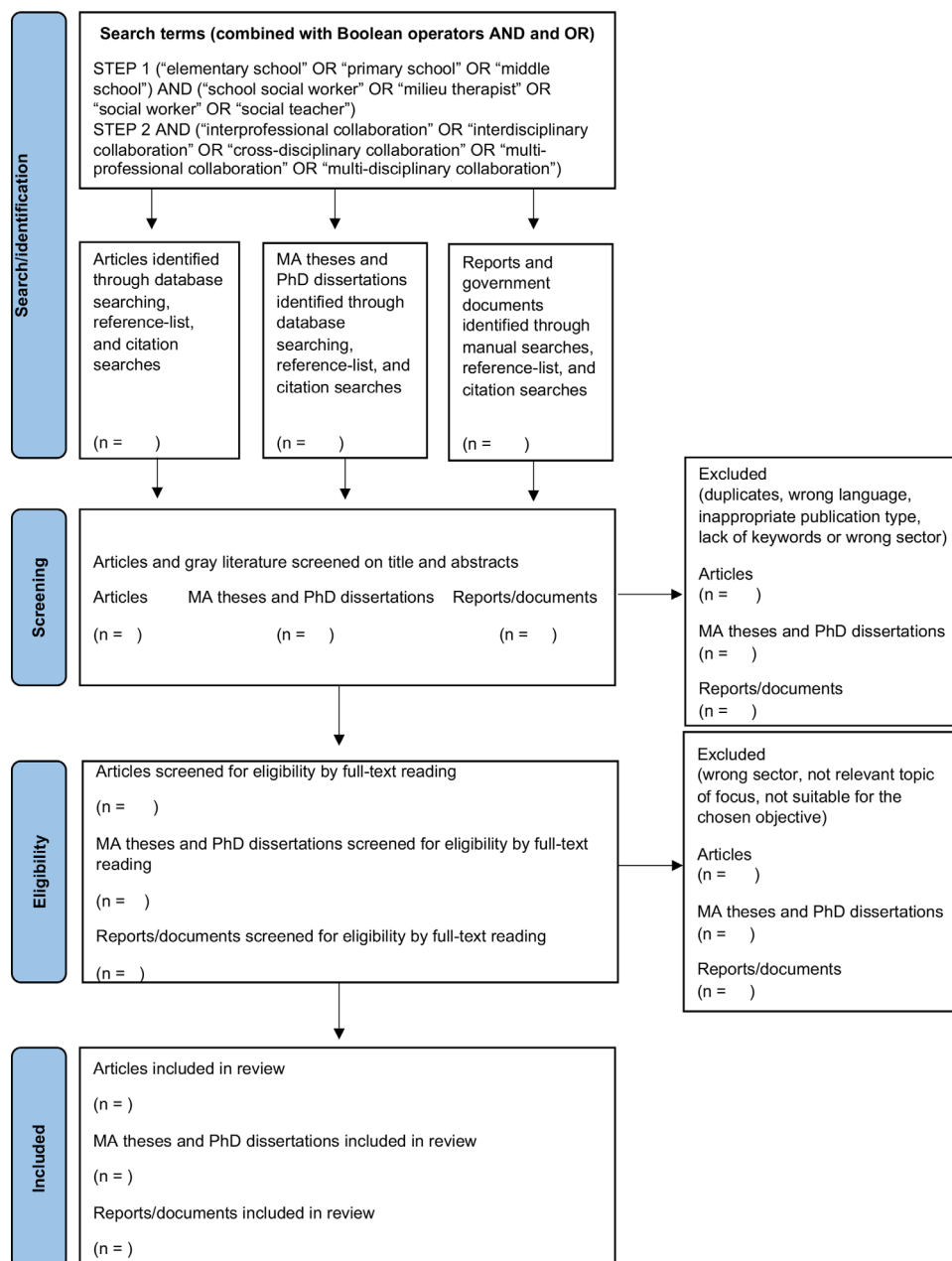


Figure 1 The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram of the study selection process.

In the final step, potentially relevant studies will undergo full-text retrieval and screening to determine which materials to include for the final analysis. The results of the search and the study inclusion process will be reported in full in the final scoping review.

Stage 4: Charting the data

A descriptive summary of each included source will be developed and plotted into a charting table to provide an overview of the material and to record key information about the source, such as author, year of publication, publication type, aim/purpose, context, population and sample size, methods, instruments for data collection and results or findings relevant to the scoping review questions. The data will also be presented visually, and

mapping of the field will be provided through charts and tables.

Stage 5: Collating, summarising, and reporting the results

In the final stage of the scoping review, the included materials will undergo thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, concepts, conflicts and knowledge gaps.²² A thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (22, p79), where the themes capture 'something important about the data in relation to the research question' (22, p82). This six-step process will be used to analyse the data: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) production

of the report. The themes will be reported in the final stage of the review. First, we will familiarise ourselves with the data by carefully examining the included literature. Second, we will create initial codes by systematically colour coding the data set in Microsoft Word for unique features, here by using the research question as a guide; we will use two orientations when it comes to the coding: a deductive approach, which we generated from theory, ideas, and concepts, and an inductive approach, which generated codes ‘bottom-up’ from the data²³ (p853). In the third step, we search the list of codes for themes by sorting, collating and refocusing the analysis of codes into constructing broad-level themes. The themes will be constructed on a semantic level, that is, close to the explicit texts in the gathered literature, and on a latent level that can help ‘focus on a deeper, more implicit or conceptual level of meaning, sometimes quite abstracted from the explicit content of the data’²³ (p853). Fourth, we will review and refine the themes by collapsing overlapping themes and removing those that lack enough data. Next, in the fifth step, the names and definitions of the themes will be further refined to capture the essence of what each theme is about. Finally, the final analysis will result in main themes, which will lead up to the paper’s discussion section.

OPTIONAL STAGE: CONSULTATION EXERCISE

The scoping review will include a consultation exercise where practitioners, stakeholders and consumers will contribute to the work through a discussion of the preliminary review findings. Contributors to the consultation exercise can provide additional references about potential materials to include in the review as well as valuable insights into issues relating to the phenomenon examined in the study that would potentially be missed in the scoping review. A reference group is already established for the main project, consisting of seven participants, including students, school social workers, a school principal, a school social worker coordinator, a representative from the practical-pedagogical service in primary schools and the leader of a national group working for a national legislation ensuring school social workers at all schools in Norway. The reference group will be participating in the current consultation exercise together with two researchers in the field. The manuscript will be sent to the consultants for feedback and evaluation.

Patient and public involvement

None.

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION

The planned scoping review aims to provide an overview of already published and publicly available research, documents and reports; thus, this investigation does not require a new ethical approval. However, at the optional stage of conducting this scoping review, stakeholders will

be introduced and included as research collaborators. Informed consent will be obtained before their involvement, and their anonymity will be maintained throughout the process. A consultation exercise will also be conducted to validate each stakeholder’s concise contributions. The researchers will also endeavour to communicate their findings as descriptively and neutrally as possible, and to the best of their ability, will avoid risks that might place the investigated groups in a vulnerable position.

The findings from the scoping review will be submitted as publications in both scientific and other relevant national journals. Furthermore, the results will be used as part of the knowledge base in a national project, with the aim of developing a structured approach with guidelines for the exercise of social worker positions in Norwegian primary schools. The protocol is registered in the Open Science Framework (OSF.io).

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Contributors MTS had the overall responsibility for the final manuscript and has been involved in all parts of the writing process, in the development of the search strings, in addition to being in charge of the final quality check, proofreading, and submission of the protocol. SME wrote the Introduction section, developed the search strings, and commented on and proofread the main text. FMMR wrote the Methodology section of the scoping review protocol, as well as commented on and proofread the main text.

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Competing interests None declared.

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