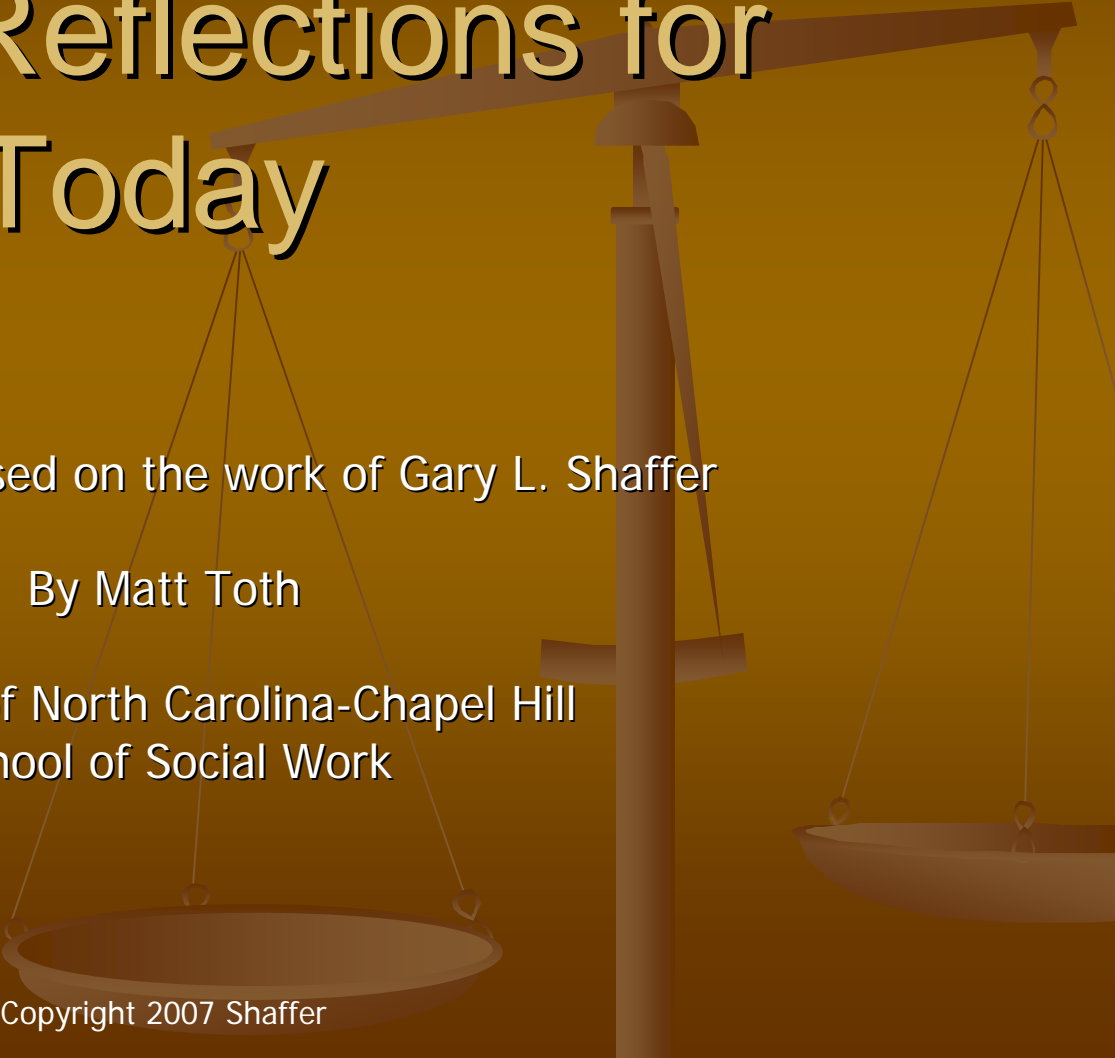


Promising School Social Work Practices of the 1920s: Reflections for Today



A presentation based on the work of Gary L. Shaffer

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Introduction

This presentation is an historical analysis of practice, training, and education in school social work from the early 1920's until today. It reflects upon ways in which current practice has advanced or digressed through the century.

In the Beginning

- School Social Work was publicly recognized as a benefit to students in 1920 with a New York Times article "Visiting Teachers Meet".
- Visiting Teacher (School social workers) programs were becoming increasingly important in the 1920's due to expanding immigration and universal attendance laws.
- Currently, the field is faced with similar challenges and social situations encountered in the 1920's.

In the Beginning

- Therefore, an examination of best practices developed in the 1920's might serve to inform current practice by addressing:
 - 1) What successful practice standards were developed?
 - 2) How were early pioneers prepared for practice?
 - 3) Has current practice advanced or digressed with the passage of time?

Turn of the Century Developments

- The compulsory attendance law of 1918, coupled with vast amounts of immigration from Europe and migration of African Americans from the south, introduced to schools a large array of cultural and language diversity.
 - These changes incurred a backlash of Americanization assimilation programs and English-only efforts.
- Child labor laws limited working hours of youth and advances in psychology and mental hygiene helped change the paradigm of educational thought from “fit the child to the school” to “fit the school to the child”. (Trattner, 1970; Irwin & Marks, 1924)

Turn of the Century Developments

- Progressives like John Dewey and William H. Kilpatrick led educational movements that initiated child-centered schools with education and recreational facilities open to the public.
 - “In child-centered schools...pupils are alive, active, working hard, inventing, organizing...” (Rugg & Shumaker, p. 57, 1928)
- New recognition was given to the environmental influences on the child’s education, including family and community involvement.
- The school began to be seen as the intervention point for visiting teachers to work with “problem” children.
 - ‘Maladjusted’ behavior could easily be detected in poor school work, erratic behavior, and indifference. A visiting teacher is more likely to pick up on possible neglect at home, or exposure to risky neighborhoods.
- Visiting teachers were expected to use their skills as educators³ and social workers to remove barriers to learning.

Expansion of the Visiting Teacher Program

- In 1921 the Commonwealth Fund in New York City established Visiting Teacher program demonstrations in 30 communities.
 - Training and implementation was carried out by the Public Education Association of New York
- The Fund published program reports and provided courses to teachers and staff to educate individuals on the purpose and value of visiting teachers.
- By 1930, the movement had grown to 244 visiting teachers in 31 states, from 140 visiting teachers in 26 states in 1923.

Guidelines for Promising Practice

- Through interviews, student case records, and a broad survey, Oppenheimer (1925) conducted research that detailed visiting teacher practice and administration during this time period.

Working Conditions

- Despite having to split time between the school and the community, it was thought that visiting teachers need their own office at the school.
- Records were recorded by hand, sometimes a typewriter. Rarely did visiting teachers have access to secretarial support.
- Hours had to be flexible due to the time constraints of the parents.
- Salaries were paid by the Board of Education, or by private agencies—visiting teacher salaries were seen as equal to regular teachers.
- Supervision of visiting teachers was the responsibility of the superintendent or his delegate. At times, supervision would come from the principal, or from hired visiting teacher supervisors.

School and Community Scan

- The visiting teacher should become familiar with the regular grades, as well as the special education classes.
- Next, she ought to study the community to identify resources to help families in need, and then the city “as a whole”.

Problems and Interventions

- Challenges facing visiting teachers:
 - Poor scholarship
 - Lack of parent cooperation
 - Lack of cultural understanding
 - Language barriers
 - Poverty and unemployment
 - Mental and physical disabilities
 - Poor housing conditions
 - Misconduct in the classroom

Problems and Interventions

- Barriers to service delivery:
 - Large caseloads
 - Lack of teacher support
 - Deficit of resources
 - Overcrowding in schools and classrooms

Problems and Interventions

- Visiting teachers were to be the link between the home, school, and community.
- Types of interventions found in Oppenheimer's study (1925)
 - Interview parents in regard to the children's personal history, habits, temperament and interests
 - Analyze the child's social environment, home and neighborhood
 - Enlist parent cooperation
 - Adjust home conditions with regard to school work, conduct, attendance, and interests
 - Interpret the school's purposes and ideals
 - Communicate with parents and principals on the needs of the children
 - Represent school in dealing with special agencies
 - Investigate causes of intermittent attendance (pp. 121-126)
- Visiting teachers were to avoid direct social relief.

Problems and Interventions

- Oppenheimer found the following interventions most effective (1925)
 - Providing supervision and establishing relationships
 - Collaborating with community agencies to address needs
 - Remedying physical defects
 - Gaining family cooperation to address school concerns
 - Changing student's class
 - Cooperating with teachers to obtain extra tutoring
 - Changing the student's school

Record Keeping

- Professional groups attempted to streamline the process of record keeping.
 - In addition to school and family information, the record was to include a diagnostic summary and a “tentative plan for treatment”.
 - Oppenheimer (1925) maintained that good record keeping was essential to better service.

Visiting Teacher-Student Ratio

- Visiting teachers were asked to serve a large number of students. Gaps in service began to emerge because of this.
 - In some communities, the ratio was 1 visiting teacher to 1,500 to 3,000 students
- Nudd noted (1923) that visiting teachers ought to be assigned to a single school or collection of communities, making it possible for the visiting teacher to be aware of the interests of the school and the community
- The 1930 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection (1931) recommended a ratio of 1:500

Training and Qualifications

- Trial and error frequently guided intervention guidelines.
- Many visiting teachers and settlement house workers were college educated and implemented techniques and methods that emphasized individual and family interventions (Levine & Levine, 1970).
- Organizations, such as the National Association of Visiting Teachers, began establishing high standards for visiting teachers.
 - College education and experience
- Yet, it was not easy to find qualified individuals willing to work at the salary paid to visiting teachers.

Social Work Orientation and Training for Teachers

- As student numbers increased, teacher relationships with the child, family and community decreased.
 - It was beginning to be understood that teacher-student relationships were more critical to student success than teacher 'styles and methods'.
 - An understanding of child development and environmental influences were necessary.
- Visiting teachers recommended that social work courses be taught in the teacher curriculum to increase teacher knowledge and awareness of social and psychological conditions that influence student learning.

A Shift in Emphasis



- In the early part of the 20th century, visiting teachers had the important function of aiding in the reorganization of school administration and of school practice (Oppenheimer, 1925).
 - In addition, to addressing student and school needs, they organized clubs, community centers, and groups.
 - Visiting teachers become increasingly “professional” over the years (Levine & Levine, 1970; Tynack, 1992).
- Emphasis shifted from social action and community organization, to the school and to maladjusted children.

Contemporary Practice



- School social workers continue to be an important link among the home, school, and community.
 - Pay and status reflect a low regard for teachers
 - Tradition clinical practice remain primary form of intervention
- Similar to the 1920's, schools remain primarily bureaucratic, inflexible, and slow to accept innovation.
 - An increase in the immigrant population presents similar challenges.

Contemporary Practice

- Community scan and efficient record keeping continues to be an important aspect of school social work.
- A difference in practice environment
 - Visiting teachers had access to the superintendent, principal and shared in school management
 - Today, school social worker have very little influence in the management of schools
- Teachers are still not trained in ways that help them better understand the social and environmental aspects of student success.
- Ratios continue to be problem, many school social workers are overwhelmed with too many students.

Contemporary Practice

- What remains true today is that a school social worker must be a “skilled craftsman who can analyze thoroughly the problems which confront her and can marshal social and educative forces inside and outside the school for clear and specific purposes”

(Sayles & Nudd, p. 257, 1925)

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