

School Social Workers and P. L. 94-142:
What are We Doing?

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Introduction

Children with learning disabilities and/or severe emotional problems have historically been in a marginal position in our society, and at risk of adult dependency for survival. With the passage of P.L. 94-142 (the Education of All Handicapped Children Act), it became the responsibility of public schools to respond to the unique learning needs of these children. In Illinois, school social workers are mandated to assist in determining the eligibility of students for special education services, through a Social Developmental Study and Adaptive Behavior Assessment. They are part of a multidisciplinary team consisting of classroom teacher(s), academic diagnostic specialists, school psychologist, Director of Special Education, school principal and the parents. They assist in determining specific remedial educational measures for the student experiencing academic difficulties.

The school social worker is the only member of the multidisciplinary team who sees the student and family outside the school environment. Other members of the team may see mainly deficit functioning, because their evaluations are based solely on academic functioning in a school setting. Family cultural values and family stress, which may be influencing academic achievement, can be addressed. Often a reduction in family stress leads to improved classroom functioning, academically or behaviorally, which helps both the student and teacher(s).

Not only is the school social worker in Illinois responsible for the Social Developmental Study, and the Adaptive Behavior Assessment, but, according to the "Pupil Personnel Services Recommended Practice and Procedures Manual" (1983) school social workers perform a multiplicity of tasks. "The roles and functions observed in (school social work practice) are multi-faceted varying from building to building...(pp. 27, 28)."

Previous Research

Earlier research shows that superintendents and school social workers share perceptions of the school social worker's role (Constable & Montgomery, 1985); that special education teachers expect the school social worker to provide liaison between parents, teachers and students and

provide direct services (Constien & Erickson, unpublished). Passage of P.L. 94-142 has resulted in an increase in the number of tasks associated with carrying out the mandates of P.L. 94-142, such as staff consultations, doing Social Developmental Studies and diagnostic assessments (Timberlake, Sabatino & Hooper, in Constable & Flynn, 1982).

These studies, however, do not directly address the importance of conducting Social Developmental Studies for school social workers. Lambert and Mullaly (in Constable & Flynn, 1982), studying school social workers in Toronto found that the greater the importance attached to a task, the greater the involvement of the worker in that task. However, these workers ranked special education placement 7th, last, in terms of their level of involvement. If this finding can be generalized to schools in the United States (and because it was done in Canada, it may not be generalizable), it is potentially disturbing. Although Constable and Montgomery (1985) found that school social workers were "highly involved" in placement and mainstreaming of students in special education, their involvement was not assessed in relation to other tasks.

Rationale for the Study

The process of declaring a student eligible for special education services is subject to many errors (Ysseldyke, Christenson, Pianta, Thurlow & Algozzine, Monograph No. 91, 1982). Because psychological tests used to assess specific learning disabilities by themselves do not adequately discriminate disabilities from other environmental factors which may be impairing performance, the school social worker's role in extending and enhancing the assessment procedure becomes critical in evaluating how the environments of school, home, and community interact with intellectual limitations of the student in assessing a student's unique learning needs.

Formal means (checklists, instruments developed for this purpose) and informal means (observing the student with peers in the hallways, at home) can be utilized to make this assessment. Standardized adaptive behavior instruments (such as the AAMD) are available for this purpose, but all have substantial limitations. The version of the AAMD standardized for schools requires that teachers rate the student's adaptive behavior, as well as the parent(s), who also rate behavior. Many teachers, feeling overburdened with paper and pencil tasks, are understandably reluctant to fill out more forms. It is easier for them to talk to the school social worker who, of course, can then ask the kinds of questions that are on the form in a more informal manner.

Checklists cannot substitute for an interview with the student and the student's teacher. During an interview the

student may disclose a fear of group ridicule which prevents the student from volunteering answers in class. The teacher, unaware of this fear, may think the student is "lazy" or "unmotivated" in the classroom. Many high school students hold demanding part-time jobs, oftentimes to help an economically distressed family. These students may appear to be unmotivated, uninterested, or unable to learn when, in fact, they are tired.

Walberg (1985 a,b) reported "class morale" (cohesiveness, satisfaction, goal direction and related social-psychological properties of the classroom group) had a strong predictive effect on learning which was more than twice the effect of either peer groups or SES. What looks like a "learning disability" may sometimes be a mismatch of student and teacher or student and classroom peers, a situation that calls for changing the student's school environment, not special education services.

A thorough investigation of the student's adaptive behavior takes time as does an assessment of the student's home environment. Mercer (1973) found that that many students categorized by the schools as mentally retarded were, in fact, exhibiting adequate coping behaviors at home and in the community. Many had part-time jobs, were helping to care for younger siblings, and were viewed by their parents, relatives, and neighbors as responsible members of their homes and community. This study identified for the first time the importance of knowing about the student's life outside the classroom in order to understand the student's strengths, and clarified the fact that "mental retardation" could not be adequately assessed by academic or test performance scores. This study was instrumental in helping form federal policy, reflected in P.L. 94-142, which includes parents in educational planning and decision-making for their children and mandates an assessment of the student's adaptive behavior. Mercer's study also showed that the cultural milieu of the home may be different enough from that of the school so that adequate coping behavior in one setting (the home) may be viewed in another setting (the school) as impaired or below average or even contrary to the school's expectations.

Because the Illinois Office of Education (1983) understands the importance of assessment it requires an assessment of the student's adaptive behavior as part of the Social Developmental Study. Nadal's (1981) definition of adaptive behavior follows the federal intent:

...not a unitary construct, but rather an omnibus concept. It refers to a person's effectiveness in coping with the natural and social demands of his or her environment...it is essential that practitioners have criteria with which to define effective functioning...What is needed is

information on the person's strengths and weaknesses...the social worker must know how adaptive or impaired the client's behavior is as a student, as a member of a family, and in the community (pp. 20-23).

The Social Developmental Study is therefore a diagnostic tool of great importance, given the findings in the studies above, but only when it is done by one professionally trained to do so, the school social worker, and only when that professional recognizes the importance of the task as an integral part of professional practice and acts as a go-between, moving from teacher to teacher, from home to classroom, etc.

Statement of the Research Problem

What are school social workers doing throughout their assessment process during the full case study used to determine special education eligibility? There seems to be substantial uncertainty, at the present time, among school social workers about whether or not the Social Developmental Study is a professional task or a process of data-gathering that can be delegated to others in the educational system. Don't they see themselves as an integral part of the Special Education team? Do they believe that information from educational diagnostic procedures (such as the WISC-R or WRAT) is more reliable and/or valid than information from the Social Developmental Study? Because of the scarcity of information about how school social workers collect data for a Social Developmental Study, what information they actually obtain, how they collect it, and what they do with the data once it has been gathered, little is known about this process.

The present study was designed to provide a data base about actual school social work practice in Illinois, in an area which is relatively homogeneous due to its suburban structure. Because of the many tasks that school social workers perform and the time these varied tasks require, school social workers may well be perceiving the Social Developmental Study as yet another bureaucratic demand rather than an integral part of practice, with a powerful impact in helping students experiencing learning difficulties. Through studying the importance of this task of doing Social Developmental Studies for school social workers, I hoped to gain information which would provide a foundation for improved school social work practice.

Description of the Sample

Two hundred and ninety-five questionnaires were mailed to all school social workers in suburban Cook County,

Illinois. The mailing list was obtained from the State of Illinois, Office of Education. A total of 195 questionnaires was returned for a response rate of 66%. The districts in this study are divided into four geographical areas, and all these areas were equally represented in the final sample so that neither ethnicity or socio-economic status showed up as biasing factors.

Data Analysis

All information, except the open-ended questions, was computer analyzed using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) program. As a first step in analysis, frequency counts were obtained on all data. Interval level data were run on the univariate procedure, which provided detail on the distributions of numerical variables. This procedure also provided a quick method of checking for "outliers" which could either be entry errors or aberrant cases. For ordinal level data a nonparametric procedure (NPAR1WAY) was used to perform an analysis of variance of the effect of the individual variables. A Chi-Square analysis was then performed on categorical variables found significant in the NPAR1WAY procedure. A General Linear Model (GLM) was used for interval level variables and to analyze the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variables through regression analysis.

Research Questions

The final questionnaire consisted of 23 questions, designed to answer the research questions posed in this study, and to provide basic quantitative information about the respondents, such as the number of students on caseloads, their job experience, and job satisfaction. The research questions were:

- 1 What tasks do school social workers consider most important and least important in their school social work practice?
- 1A Compared to other school social work tasks, what importance does the Social Developmental Study have for school social workers?
- 2 What kinds of information and what methods are used to assess a student's social functioning for the purposes of the Social Developmental Study?
- 3 What kinds of information and what methods are used to assess a student's family for the purposes of the Social Developmental Study?

- 4 Are there differences among school social workers at the elementary and high school levels in terms of task importance, the importance of the Social Developmental Study, the methods used, and the kinds of information collected for student's social functioning and the assessment of the student's family?
- 5 What variables are associated with a school social worker's ranking of the Social Developmental Study as having high or low importance?

General Findings

In the final combined sample of elementary and high school social workers, the ratio of workers to students was 1 to 845 students. This ratio was much higher than for the total state, where the ratio was 1 school social worker for every 1,507 students (V. Morrison, personal communication, May, 1986). In downstate Illinois, the ratio of school social workers was 1 to every 1,584 students (IOE, Profile of Downstate PPS Staff, 1984).

Males in the sample were outnumbered by females. Sixty-six percent ($N=110$) were female and 34% ($N=57$) were male. In the elementary sample, 30% ($N=40$) of the respondents were male and 70% ($N=94$) were female. In the high school sample 45% ($N=15$) were male and 55% ($N=18$) were female. These differences were not significant.

The distribution of respondents across grade levels was consistent with the ratio of elementary and high school districts for the sampling area.

Almost all respondents belonged to at least one professional organization, and over half of them belonged to both the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Illinois Association of School Social Workers (IASSW).

This was a group with substantial experience. For the group as a whole, the mean number of years in their current school district was a little over 8.5 years, the median 7 years and the SD was 6.5. The range was from 1 to 26 years. They had high job satisfaction. Seventy-one percent ($N=99$) ranked their job satisfaction as high and only 9% ($N=14$) of the sample ranked their job satisfaction as low.

This was also a hardworking group. The mean number of cases on their caseload the month prior to the study was 42, the median was 40, and the SD was 22.07. There were no appreciable differences between the elementary and high school group. Three respondents reported 99 students on their caseload the previous month, and three reported five students. The number of students seen individually varied

from 1 to 75, with a mean of 24.8, a median of 24 and a SD of 13.05. Again, there was little difference between the high school and elementary groups. The number of students seen in groups varied from 8 to 48. Fifty-eight percent of these respondents saw students in groups ($N=87$). The mean number of students seen in groups was 16.9, the median was 14, and the SD was 15.95 with no differences between the elementary and high school groups.

Home visits made during the past month by respondents were uniformly low. Forty-six percent ($N=77$) had not made any home visits during the previous month. The mean for all respondents was 2.5, the median was 1 and the SD was 7.78.

Perhaps because of their relatively large caseloads, most respondents referred to agencies outside school. Over 90% ($N=150$) had made a referral during the past month to a community mental health agency. Some significant differences were found among the high school and elementary sample, as would be expected. High school social workers referred more frequently to personnel at Juvenile or Family Court, private psychiatric hospitals, pregnancy related agencies, truant officers, and vocational schools. Surprisingly, high school social workers referred significantly more frequently than did the elementary sample to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS). This is the agency in Illinois which is responsible for all cases of child abuse and neglect, and to which school personnel are mandated to report. Higher frequencies of reporting such cases to IDCFS may be reflecting the greater ability of older students to verbalize difficulties such as child abuse and neglect, leading to more IDCFS referrals among the high school sample.

Research Question Results

The most important practice task (Research Question 1) for these respondents was working with individual students. Seventy-seven percent ($N=128$) ranked this as having high importance. Lowest ranked tasks were policy development and participation in Special Education meetings. Most respondents ranked doing Social Developmental Studies as having medium importance (Research Question 1A). But, only 7% ($N=12$) ranked making home visits for this purpose as having high importance, and 79% ($N=129$) ranked this task as having low importance. This was a surprising finding given the fact that in Illinois only school social workers conduct Social Developmental Studies because of their professional training. Participation in Special Education Meetings, where the findings of the Multi-Disciplinary team (the school psychologist, the testing diagnostician, classroom teachers, parents of the student and the social worker) are

presented, was ranked by these respondents as having low importance, compared to such tasks as individual and/or group work with students and parents. These rankings implied that the task of doing Social Developmental Studies and presenting their results at Multi-Disciplinary meetings was not viewed by these respondents as a cornerstone of their school social work practice but as an adjunctive task. In fact, over 33% (N=56) of these respondents reported that specific tasks connected with the mandated part of their jobs were the worst parts of their job. The rankings of all ten practice tasks by respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
School Social Work Task Rankings
(1 is most important; 10 least important)

Tasks	Most Important 1 to 3		Least Important 8 to 10	
	Number of Respondents	Percent of Sample	Number of Respondents	Percent of Sample
All Respondents (N=167)				
Staff Consultation	85	51	6	4
Working with Individual Students	128	77	6	4
Working with Groups of Students	77	48	18	11
Working with Parents	73	45	13	7
Doing Social Developmental Studies	31	19	43	26
Crisis Intervention	76	47	13	8
Policy/Program Development	12	7	99	60
Home Visits-Social Developmental Studies	14	8	129	79
Participation in Special Education Meetings	12	7	82	49
Referrals to Agencies Outside School	20	12	56	34

How respondents assessed a student and their family for the purposes of the Social Developmental Study (Research Questions 2 and 3) was consistent with the rankings above. Instead of using more informal and direct observations of the student and family, respondents collected their information by consulting with others in the school, a task they ranked high in importance.

Because students who come from "educationally deprived" or bi-lingual households are ineligible for P.L. 94-142 funding on that basis alone, the assessment of the effect of the student's culture and home environment is an important part of the Social Developmental Study. Without visiting the home and observing the student outside the classroom, assessing a student's home and its possible effect on academic achievement is difficult. However, only 28% (N=46) of these respondents thought it necessary to observe the student in the halls, at recess, or at home compared to the 49% (N=82) who thought it necessary to observe the student

in the classroom. Only 15% ($N=24$) of these respondents considered a home visit necessary for the Social Developmental Study. In contrast, 86% ($N=143$) considered reviewing the student's records necessary, 68% ($N=113$) considered consulting with the school psychologist necessary, and 73% ($N=123$) considered consulting with special education personnel necessary. There was substantial uniformity in the kinds of information respondents collected and how they collected it when assessing the student's family.

Surprisingly, high school social workers considered doing Social Developmental Studies and attending special education meetings significantly more important than did their elementary school counterparts ($p < .01$). Perhaps they have found that the formal structure of special education services is more useful in obtaining help for students experiencing difficulties in school than the elementary group.

Most of the differences among the high school and elementary sample (Research Question 4) would be expected given the age differences of the students, and the different structures of the elementary and high school. For example, the elementary sample considered working with parents significantly more important than did the high school sample ($p < .05$). Crisis intervention was significantly more important to the high school sample ($p < .05$), as was referring to agencies outside school.

Research Question 5 asked what variables were associated with a school social worker's ranking of the Social Developmental Study as a practice task having high or low importance. There were surprisingly few differences between school social workers who ranked doing the Social Developmental Study as having high importance and those who ranked it as having low importance. Those who ranked this task high made more referrals to a greater variety of resources outside the school, consulted more frequently with parents, the school principal, the school nurse and school psychologist--and, they utilized the resources within their schools more frequently. They also collected more information about the developmental history of the student, and used an office interview (instead of a phone interview) to obtain information from the parents. Working with individuals or groups of students was ranked as more important by respondents who ranked the Social Developmental Study low in importance.

Implications of the Research

It is clear that for this sample at least, there was general agreement about school social work practice. Both the elementary and the high school sample tended to rank the importance of school social work tasks similarly. Both

collected the same kinds of information and used similar methods for obtaining information for the Social Developmental Study. Both groups belonged to professional organizations and were experienced in their profession.

It is also clear that both groups need further education about what an Adaptive Behavior Assessment is and why it is important to the full case study. Visiting the home to obtain information for the Social Developmental Study needs to be emphasized. If school social workers are reluctant to do home visits because of uncertainty about meeting parents from various ethnic groups, training in cross-cultural understanding needs to be offered to them both in the classroom and during the student's internship.

School social workers are in a position to structure their time without many external constraints. They are able to leave their buildings during the school day in order to visit parents of students unlike teachers or educational diagnosticians. In this researcher's practice experience, building principals and classroom teachers alike appreciate the school social worker's involvement with the parent(s).

What school social workers need to realize is that they alone have responsibility for conveying the importance of these home visits to schools. They are unlikely to do this if they themselves do not believe them to be important. As Walberg and Smith (in Constable & Flynn, 1982) note, in discussing Walberg's meta-analysis of education research,

In contrast to the weak, inconsistent, and questionable benefits of mainstreaming in practice, virtually all of the 92 correlations of educational stimulation in the home environment and outcomes in 18 studies of 5,831 school-age children in eight countries are positive; and 2 longitudinal intervention studies that linked the efforts of parents and educators in disadvantaged neighborhoods to raise educational stimulation in the home consistently showed an approximate 100 percent improvement in educational outcomes (p. 148).

School social workers may rationalize their lack of home visits by citing the number of working parents and the fact that they must abide by school hours, which end long before most parents are home from work. However, arrangements can be made for scheduling home visits during evening hours or on Saturdays. It is the worker's responsibility to convey to administration the importance of this task as an integral part of the job. School social workers may also need to make adjustments for scheduling home visits if their job descriptions are "lumped in" with teachers as part of union contracts.

The fact that there was a small subsample in this study who considered home visits for the purpose of the Social Developmental Study as highly important means that

differences among this group should be examined carefully. Although some significant differences did exist, the size of this subsample was small ($N=32$) and generalizations must be made with caution. As a group, these school social workers had a different emphasis in their practice. Working with individual students, or groups of students, tasks so important to most other respondents, was not ranked as highly. Only forty-seven percent ($N=15$) of this subgroup ranked working with individual students a task with high importance. In contrast, seventy-seven percent ($N=128$) of the total sample ranked this as a task with high importance. Only seven percent ($N=12$) of the total sample ranked participation in special education meetings as highly important. But twenty-five percent ($N=8$) of the subgroup ranked this task as highly important. These findings are displayed in Table 2, on the next page.

Suggestions for Further Research

The next research areas should be with city, urban, and rural school social workers to see what, if any, practice differences exist in other geographical areas. Interviewing school social workers in order to clarify models of practice would also expand this research. For example, in this study, ranking tasks and performing them may not be related (i.e. working with individuals was considered an important task, but given the myriad of other tasks school social workers perform, not likely to be the sole focus of practice).

Further investigation needs to be made of why home visits are so rarely a part of the Social Development Study. Questions should be asked about the kind of relationships school social workers have with their teaching colleagues, principals, special education personnel and administrators. Answers to these questions may help explain why some school social workers rarely leave their buildings.

Finally, more information is needed about how school social workers structure their time and what kinds of services require what kinds of time. The monthly caseload questionnaire item provided minimal information about the kinds of services offered to students, the amount of time spent with them, and time spent consulting with parents, teachers and other school personnel.

Policy Implications

Recent budget cuts at the Federal level in all areas of human services (including education and money to support P.L. 94-142) have made the findings of this study timely. According to a recent survey by NASW (Staff, "Data Bank," 1985) only 3.3% of NASW members are school social workers. In Illinois, however, approximately 20% of all social workers

Table 2
The Importance of Other School Social Work Tasks
Compared to High and Low Ranking of the
Social Developmental Study

Tasks	Task- High Ranking		Task-All Other Rankings	
	Number of Respondents	Percent of Sub- Sample	Number of Respondents	Percent of Total Sample
Staff Consultation				
High Ranking SDS ^a	14	43	128	78 (165)
Low Ranking SDS	23	53		
Working With Individual Students				
High Ranking SDS	15	47**	116	70 (165)
Low Ranking SDS	34	79		
Working With Groups				
High Ranking SDS	6	19**	138	84 (165)
Low Ranking SDS	21	49		
Working With Parents				
High Ranking SDS	16	50	135	82 (165)
Low Ranking SDS	14	33		
Crisis Intervention				
High Ranking SDS	20	62	120	74 (164)
Low Ranking SDS	22	51		
Policy Development				
High Ranking	2	6	154	95 (162)
Low Ranking SDS	6	14		
Home Visit for the Social Developmental Study				
High Ranking SDS	8	9	150	93 (161)
Low Ranking SDS	3	7		
Attending Special Education Meetings				
High Ranking SDS	8	25	155	95 (163)
Low Ranking SDS	0	0		
Referrals to Outside Agencies				
High Ranking SDS	4	13	154	94 (163)
Low Ranking SDS	5	12		

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are total number of respondents. All high (N=32) and low (N=43) ranking SDS respondents answered each question.

^aSDS Means Social Developmental Study

*p < .05 **p < .01

are school social workers (R. Constable, personal communication, June, 1986). The school districts and their students in this study have perhaps the greatest amount of school social work services available in the country. These school social workers are providing services for children and their parents that no other agency can. For instance, social welfare agencies can only work with a specific group of clients (such as those experiencing child abuse or seeking disability claims). Schools serve all children in their community, and school social workers potentially work with all families in a District. School social workers can and do provide linkage services between the client and other services (i.e. obtaining emergency assistance from townships). At least in this study, they were knowledgeable about a multiplicity of services available in their areas and referred parents and children to appropriate agencies.

However, school social workers are neglecting (albeit inadvertently) their richest resource --the involvement of the parent(s) in the educational process. If they are not visiting the homes of parents, how can they know enough to utilize the resources of the home?

Most respondents ranked working with individual students high in task importance (77%, N=128). Assuming students are seen weekly for one hour with an average caseload of 24 students (per month), over 80% of these respondents' time was spent on individual students. It is not surprising that this group had little time to do home visits.

However, Walberg (1984 a,b) found in his analysis of over 2,500 studies of factors affecting educational achievement, that "home interventions" had more than twice the effect on school achievement of either SES or peer group influence. And, these home interventions can be as simple as parents talking to their child about school, encouraging reading and monitoring homework. According to Walberg (1986), "...American mothers on (the) average spend less than half an hour a day talking, explaining or reading with their children. Fathers spend less than 15 minutes (p. 7)."

Clearly, the time school social workers invest in helping parents help their child(ren) can and does "pay off" in terms of academic achievement. How little time this would take compared to other school social work tasks! A family whose child is undergoing a full case study for special education eligibility is usually ready and anxious for input. The Social Developmental Study offers a "prime time" to meet with parent(s) in the more secure setting of their home and present them with concrete steps they can take to help their child(ren). In this era of ever-decreasing funding for human services for those most at risk, school social workers are in a position to improve school performance for some of our least-favored and at-risk children. They can do this by

simply re-ordering their priorities--as no other school or community professional can.

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