

2001

Report of the Education Working Group

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Recommended Citation

Naomi Lynch and Virginia Strand, *Report of the Education Working Group*, 70 Fordham L. Rev. 369 (2001).
Available at: <http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol70/iss2/8>

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REPORT OF THE EDUCATION WORKING GROUP¹

CHARGE

What should the Conference recommend to enhance graduate education, including continuing education, to help professionals better achieve justice for parents?

INTRODUCTION

The Education Working Group included social workers, a social work professor, and a social work director of field placement, clinical law professors, attorneys, a former Family Court judge, parents, and a psychiatrist. Most group members work with parents in the child welfare system either in direct service or through teaching and training students and/or workers to provide services to parents.

The group identified three main areas for graduate schools to target in order to better educate professionals to achieve justice for parents: (1) graduate education; (2) continuing education; and (3) systemic change. Each is discussed in more detail below.

A. Graduate Education

A major theme of the group discussion was the integral role of teaching an interdisciplinary approach to helping parents. The working group defined an interdisciplinary approach as the collaboration between, and among, disciplines. This is not usually supported in practice and is taught on a limited basis in graduate schools. Given its importance in effectively representing and delivering services to parents, all graduate schools should enhance, and/or increase exposure to, the practice of interdisciplinary collaboration. This could include team teaching (e.g., a team consisting of a law professor and a social work professor), interdisciplinary field placements, externships and clinics,

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interdisciplinary colloquiums, and cross-registration between graduate schools.

Another method for enhancing interdisciplinary cooperation is to increase students' exposure to substantive content and skills from other professions. Social work professionals identified the need for social work students to be knowledgeable about the legal framework within which child welfare practice is conducted. Lawyers identified the expert interviewing and assessment skills of social workers as practice skills that would benefit law students.

A second area of particular interest was that of ethical practice. Group members commented on the quality of the social services delivered to parents in the child welfare system, noting that professional practice skills such as respect for confidentiality and consideration of the right of self-determination are not always as rigorously ingrained as one would expect. While this may result in part from the fact that graduate-level social workers do not usually provide direct casework services, master's level social worker ("MSW") staff are increasingly providing supervision of caseworkers. Likewise, legal services, especially in the arena of parent representation, are woefully inadequate. Lack of resources allocated to legal counsel restricts the time an attorney for a parent spends on a case, thus denying the parent access to legal counseling and advocacy services. While remedies for these problems are specifically addressed below in the discussion on the need for systemic change, the working group did have one recommendation regarding curriculum. Of the four disciplines represented in the working group (i.e., law, social work, psychiatry, and psychology), only social work does not require an ethics course. It was recommended that social work educators consider requiring such a course to enhance the ability of workers to provide competent, ethical practices to parents in the child welfare system.

A third major theme of the working group discussion was to address the issues of class, race, culture, and gender. This theme sparked an animated discussion on the exact nature of the role of graduate education in addressing these issues. The discussion explored whether or not schools should examine the system and/or assist students in examining their own issues as they relate to race, class, culture, and gender. Some working group members believed that the issues of race, class, culture, and gender are intrinsic to all academic curricula. Others stated that, whether or not issues of race, class, culture, and gender are intrinsic to all curricula, these issues nevertheless need to be openly raised and discussed because they relate to conscious or unconscious thoughts and feelings about parents in the child welfare/protective system.

Schools of social work, by virtue of accreditation standards, emphasize the topics of race, gender, class, and culture in their

curricula, but they, like many other schools, can still do a better job in helping students specifically explore the ways in which these issues correspond to justice for parents in the child welfare system. The working group agreed that the curricula in all schools should integrate issues of class, race, culture, and gender. Beyond this, each school should develop mechanisms to enhance students' abilities to recognize and appreciate the impact of their own race, class, ethnicity, and gender on their work with clients.

The group recognized the importance of advocating for a diverse work force that is reflective of the population served. This will require graduate schools to make concerted efforts and specific plans to increase enrollment and retention of people of color.

A fourth theme was that of the strengths-based perspective. The current initiative toward family-centered, neighborhood-based child welfare practice in New York City is consistent with a strengths-based orientation to practice. For many years, social work, psychology, and psychiatry operated from a deficit model (i.e., identifying problems and focusing on how to ameliorate those problems). A strengths-based perspective brings the client's assets to the forefront of an analysis and attempts to be solution-focused. The working group agreed that the schools of social work, psychology, and psychiatry should support and extend the teaching of a strengths-based perspective (i.e., focusing on personal and interpersonal resources the family brings to the situation, which can be mobilized and built on).

A final area of discussion centered on the recruitment of students into the child welfare practice. The group noted, for example, that for the majority of front-line workers the highest degree achieved is a bachelor's degree. Often this degree is not a Bachelor of Social Work ("BSW"), but instead a more general degree in the arts and/or sciences. The group identified the importance of changing the views of professional institutions and students about working in the child welfare system in order to bring the "finest" into any of the professions that work with parents in the child welfare system.

This discussion about recruitment focused on law and social work education. Recruitment is difficult in both schools for a variety of reasons. In schools of social work, child welfare practice is often not viewed as "clinical." This is a disincentive to many who pursue graduate education in social work for the purpose of doing clinical work upon graduation. For many students, "clinical" social work has become synonymous with mental health practice. In law schools, students believe that they will be unable to make an adequate salary if they work in child welfare. Therefore, students resist registering for courses related to child welfare and do not sign up for child welfare externships or clinics, which are generally voluntary. While having no specific recommendation beyond those mentioned above, the working group agreed on the importance of reversing this trend.

B. *Continuing Education*

While the working group focused on graduate education, it also agreed on the importance of continuing education. A major part of the discussion initially focused on the role of graduate schools, especially schools of social work, in helping to train the caseworker staff, generally comprised of individuals without social work degrees, yet who provide the major casework functions in the child welfare field. Some members questioned whether there was a way to effectively address the needs of front-line child welfare practitioners, who are not in graduate school, but are the primary players in parents' lives. Other members felt that training organizations were better suited to meet these needs, while supporting the move toward increased professionalism in the field. Some commented on the increased effort to professionalize the child welfare system, noting the recent change in civil service titles in the New York City system, which will ultimately require all supervisors to have at least thirty credits towards a MSW. In the meantime, however, members agreed that a collaborative relationship between graduate education and training programs would enhance the quality of training overall provided to front-line workers. How this can be achieved is an area that needs further study.

The group then focused on the continuing education programs that schools could provide for their graduates who are working in the child welfare system. A major suggestion was that graduate schools develop and offer an in-depth interdisciplinary certificate training program for graduate social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and lawyers. This model would bring together the four disciplines in a cooperative training effort, leading to a certificate in interdisciplinary child welfare practice.

In addition to this effort, it was also suggested that individual schools could provide continuing education programs for continuing education credits, which would enhance the ability of the generalist practitioner, whether in social work, law, psychology, or psychiatry, to work more effectively with parents in the child welfare system.

C. *Systemic Change*

The working group agreed that graduate schools should promote systemic change to better achieve justice for parents. Three major areas in which graduate schools could effect systemic change were identified.

First, graduate schools should collaborate to research and evaluate social and legal services for parents. A research agenda needs to be developed and priorities agreed upon. Effective programs must be identified so that they can be replicated.

Second, graduate schools should assist with the development of new models for parent representation and service delivery, such as participating in the creation of a publicly funded agency representing parents. The schools can serve as a catalyst to develop one or more models for representation by sponsoring innovative conferences and providing resources (e.g., student interns) to implement conference recommendations. Graduate schools are also particularly well-suited to conduct training for, and evaluation of, new models for representation and service delivery.

Third, graduate schools are uniquely situated to participate in the research and development of alternative models for representation, such as mediation, family case conferencing, and court diversion. The group also encouraged schools to collaborate with appropriate sectors of the child welfare system to support educational initiatives for parents.

Notes & Observations