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Social Worker Efficacy in Changing School System Policies

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SOCIAL WORKER EFFICACY IN CHANGING
SCHOOL SYSTEM POLICIES
(A RESEARCH PROPOSAL)

A RESEARCH ESSAY
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
WATERLOO LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY

by
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

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The policies of an organization are the most important component in defining its purpose and setting its priorities. The public school system in Ontario is no exception to this rule. In the past century education in the public domain has made no major changes in its policies. The present authoritarian, tightly constricted, vertical hierarchy is the same organizational structure introduced by Ryerson in the 1850's. At that time, such a system reflected the prevailing societal purposes and needs. But today the public school system does not function in such a manner as to fill its role in 20th century Canadian society.

The question now is not one of the legitimacy of change in this system, but one of how this change can be effected in the light of present knowledge about organizational innovation.
SIGNIFICANCE

The educational institution has every child between the ages of 5 years and 16 years for approximately 25 hours a week, 10 months of the year. No other public system influences each citizen for such an extended period in the crucial developmental years. Having been a teacher in the public school system, I am deeply aware of the possibilities for enrichment and growth, as well as indifference and permanent social handicaps the system can offer. It is an old and unfortunate adage that school systems are always 50 years behind the current state of knowledge in their practices. Policy changes are the only corrective measures that can bring about system wide alterations in a cohesive orderly fashion.

My interest in the potential for social change and influence began in teaching, but has been underlined again and again by experiences in the field and the library. Girls at Vocational High illustrates the relative futility of individual and group services as the main assault on poor functioning within the system. The results of these services were generally the same as could have been predicted from no help at all. Schafer views deviance in the public school as "adverse pupil-school interactions" and carefully explains the role the school system plays in actually reinforcing mal-
performance in school pupils.  

Social work is now a part of some school system structures. The role it plays in the majority of cases is helping the individual pupil adjust to the status quo, (i.e. Scarborough, Kitchener, North York). Social workers as staff members, as well as providing social services, add an aura of professional status to the boards for whom they work. For these and other more respectable reasons, school boards are hiring more social workers to be a part of the school system. With these opportunities arising, it is imperative to have valid basic data on the social worker's efficacy as a change agent with reference to policy alterations.

FOOTNOTES


*both inside and outside the system
The purpose of this study is to begin a long term research project calculated to measure social workers' efficacy and influence in changing the school system through policy alterations.

In this study the purpose will be:

1) to investigate the relationship between the social worker's efficacy in changing the school as a system, and his position as a school staff member, particularly in terms of:

a) identifying and elucidating possible variables in the relationship especially with reference to:

   i) the importance of the point of entry or hierarchical position in the system

   ii) the years of social work experience of the worker

   iii) the kind of social work experience of the worker

   iv) the worker's social work specialty

   v) the years of school social work experience of the worker

   vi) the job description of the worker

   vii) the worker's understanding of the role and functions assigned to him by the school system
viii) the worker's perception of the primary and secondary sources of the system's expectations concerning his role and functions
ix) the size of the school system
x) the number of social workers employed
xi) the existence and effects of reference groups among social workers in the system
xii) the influence of a reference group outside the school system, if one exists, upon the worker's efforts within the system

b) investigating the influence of the worker's orientation on the relationship. Orientation will include the worker's methodological preference, social work experience and education, and social values concerning changing the school system.

c) identifying resources available to workers inside and outside the system
d) ordering variables in a general scale of influence on the relationship
e) beginning a profile of workers outside the school system who are working to change school policies
f) discovering the proportion of school social workers interested in system change through policy alterations.
g) designing research tools to continue the project

h) finding a funding body interested in further research

The design choice is an exploratory study, in order to examine the possible effects of the above variables and identify other unknown variables in this relationship. The methodology is informal and flexible in order to focus on the information and data, and their implications as these are recognized. No other study has concentrated on this research question, and therefore an exploratory study is needed to further define the characteristics of the relationship.

FOOTNOTE

IV

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The best source of material in the proposed study's area is outside the field of social work proper. Management consultants and organizational researchers such as Argyris and Bennis provide some insights into the proposed research. Emphasis upon a sociological rather than a psychological approach seems to be the modus operandi of these authors.

Bennis, in Changing Organizations, states:

"Frequently, the change-agents are not actual members of the client-systems; in other cases they are. There are some who say that significant change depends on the impetus generated by an external agent. They argue that only a skilled outsider-consultant can provide the perspective, detachment and energy so necessary to effect a true alteration of existing patterns. Advocates of the internal model take the opposite stand. They argue that the insider possesses the intimate knowledge of the client-system (and the power to legitimize) that the external change-agent lacks. In addition, the internal change-agent does not generate the suspicion and mistrust that the outsider often does. His acceptance and credibility are guaranteed, it is argued, by his organizational status."

Bennis mentions only one instance of staff members working organizational change within the employing system. General Electric hires and trains organizational change agents for work within their own structure. However, the change-agent is always sent to a setting where he is pre-
viously unknown. This approach parallels the outside consultant more closely than the inside colleague. Argyris, Caplow, and Lewin approach a setting at the management's request, and work with the organization using a problem-centred orientation. When the initial problem for which consultation was requested is solved, the consultant gradually withdraws his services.

Seashore and Egmond in "The Consultant-Trainer's Role" provide some very relevant insights into school system changes. A trainer-consultant approach was used in a school system experiencing organizational dysfunction due to staff relationships. The superintendent, principal, and 20 teachers were involved in the programme. Their conclusions as to the consultant-trainer's contributions to the change process were:

1. Freeing personnel in the organization to participate in the training process.
2. Serving as the stimulus for redefining the situation.
3. Providing the initiative in exploring difficult or unknown problem areas.
4. Providing continuous support as the change process is started.

*through organizational change
5. Providing aid in the continuous diagnosis of problems.

6. Providing helpful information, procedures and resources.⁶

Alertness to these conclusions can help the researcher define the variables affecting change potential both inside and outside the school system. In the above study the change-agent was basically outside the system, but his involvement was longer than occurs in most consulting situations. The training component appears to be a function of at least a quasi-staff member, and the emphasis on continuity in support and diagnosis indicates the time element. The entry point of intervention is assumed in all consultant roles to be fairly high on the hierarchial scale (i.e. management usually requests the service). Social workers enter the school hierarchy via different roles and job descriptions, and these variables may effect their efficacy.⁷ Sensitivity to emerging indicators of the most advantageous point of intervention is part of the proposed study. Seashore and Egmond's choice of school personnel (Management, i.e. 

⁶Some school social workers sign a contract identical in form to a teacher's contract and are directly responsible to the assistant or superintendent of the system. Others are hired by the Board as clearly defined supplementary personnel to the educational hierarchy. Workers from community agencies also enter the system through classroom intervention points or at the Board level as community consultants to the entire system.
(superintendent) and employees (teachers) in their study implicitly points out the importance of involving different status ranked members of the hierarchy in organizational change. The continuity factor also presupposes that some degree of consensus exists among the members of the system that changes will occur over time and that commitment to change must continue. This study will explore these areas in order to clarify the relative importance of Seashore and Eggmont's conclusions regarding organizational change in schools.

Brager, in summarizing the experiences of Mobilization for Youth, in attempting to influence organizational change in the New York City school system, points out three main factors:

1) **the substance of the proposed change.** Some proposed changes are shared goals between the educational system and the change agent. Others, however, violate established system goals and are highly resisted. The scope of the suggested change also affects the opposition encountered.

2) **the resources available to the change agent.** These may include money, prestige, publicity, knowledge, legitimation and communication, influentials, and community support.

3) **the strategies used by the change agent.** The main strategies used for affecting institutional change include demonstration methods, integrative methods, and political or pressure methods.
All three factors are relevant areas to be sensitive to, in this study. Emerging insights about the ordered importance of each in influencing social worker efficacy in changing policy must be carefully sought.

Brager speaks specifically to the inside-outside system relationship in discussing the legitimization and communication component of resources available to the change agent.

"The relationship between the change agent and the change target, particularly as it affects legitimization of the agent's role, can be a further resource. If the agent is located within the system, it has legitimization as an "insider". Although it may be hampered by the strictures of the system, its position within the organization gives the agent access to certain tools and strategies in a change effort. The outsider, on the other hand, is viewed with suspicion by the "experts" who stand guard against his efforts. Free-wheeling activity is more possible for an outsider, but legitimization as a change agent is not."

It would appear that the inside-outside relationship has the most obvious effect on resources available; particularly those of communication and legitimization of strategies and proposed change.

Brager, in discussing the location of the change agent, sheds further light on the "point of entry" variable being explored in this study.
The location of the change agent affects both the quantity and the quality of its (the institution's) interaction with the change agent. The insider, if well placed in the hierarchy, has the opportunity for extensive communication in 'chipping away' at values or programs he believes need to be changed. His words carry the weight of his position, with all the sanction (or lack of it), his role implies. A place at the 'communication center' of an organization affords him considerable power to effect change. This may be less than is often assumed, however, since as an insider he is bound by all the constraints of organizational role. Thus there are advantages and disadvantages in both positions which contribute to the determination of appropriate strategy.9

Brager also highlights an educational quirk that Mobilization for Youth identified in its work with the New York City school system. The system differentiates between professional educators who are academic in orientation, and those who have had practical classroom experience.

"The position of those professional educators who are supportive of the change effort may be depreciated in any case since, as academicians they lack classroom experience. To the system's practitioners, they are, by definition, "impractical"."10

The variable concerning worker orientation and its relationship to worker efficacy may extend beyond social work methodology and strategy to educational experience and background. There are indications the school system is suspicious and unimpressed by purely academic knowledge, and is more open to a more "practical" experimental orientation.
In summary, the literature points out some relevant general hypotheses about systems change. Brager, in particular, furnishes evidence that more than one variable is at work in determining policy changes in the school system, via worker intervention.

Nevertheless, the further exploration, clarification, and identification of the variables affecting policy changes by inside and outside system personnel, are virgin ground to this study.

FOOTNOTES

2. Ibid., p. 115.
8. Ibid., p. 111.
9. Ibid., p. 112.
10. Ibid., p. 110.
As stated in the Purpose and Design chapter, the conceptual area under study is the relationship between the social worker's efficacy in changing the school as a system, and his position as a school staff member. The relationship is the main area of investigation and the number of specific variables affecting it are not known, but sought at this point.

In order to make empirical investigation possible, the variables mentioned in the relationship will be operationalized as follows:

a) The social worker's efficacy in changing the school as a system will be measured in terms of policy changes that affect the system, that came about through the worker's direct or indirect efforts or influence.

b) The social worker will be defined as a person with at least 1 year post-graduate social work education, whose job description includes the words "social work".

c) The school staff member will be defined as a social worker whose employer is a School Board or the Provincial Department of Education.
Data collection will be conducted by the author using informal interviewing techniques. The interview will be at least one hour in duration and will solicit information on:

1) job description
2) interest in system change through policy alterations
3) length of tenure
4) previous experience
5) actual social work being conducted
6) orientation of worker as to social work methodology, and educational theory
7) position in hierarchy or point of entry into system
8) relationship with other social workers on this topic

All workers' opinions will be solicited on:

1) the potential of the school system for change in policies
2) the number of colleagues working towards change in policies
3) methods attempted
4) methods that succeeded
5) sources of resistance in system
6) potential points of entry into system
7) interest of system in research in this area
8) the importance of professional reference groups to the worker's efforts to change the system
9) the advantages and/or disadvantages of being
   a) inside or b) outside the school system in terms of working towards policy change

In addition to the specific points mentioned, the interviewer will encourage communication on any relevant area pertaining to social work intervention in the school system. Rapport will be considered important and consciously sought in order to receive undefensive, accurate opinion and fact.

The sample will include school social workers chosen by a "best informants" method. These contacts will be supplemented by persons whose school system involvement is known through professional literature or reputation. In concentrating solely on the components that contribute to the failure of system change, it is possible to miss entirely variables that might contribute to success, had they been present. The lessons to be learned from unaccomplished system change are important, and will come out in the study through the questionnaire and the questions in the interview.
In the same manner, non-school social workers concerned about, and attempting intervention, in the school system will be identified. Identical data collection will be used with these persons.

The sample selection will be fairly small (8 to 10 cases) but a range of different settings and locations (i.e. community agencies, provincial services, urban and rural settings, varying sizes of school populations) will be used. All school systems considered will be publicly supported systems, administered by an elected Board. Parochial school systems will not be considered at this time because of the few social workers in the system, the partial community representation, and the structure differences due to church affiliation and religious values.

In order to assess the proportion of school social workers interested and/or involved in system change*, a questionnaire will be sent to every social worker whose employer is an Ontario public school Board or the Department of Education. A covering letter will be enclosed explaining the purpose of the study and soliciting co-operation. Additional comments in the area of social work in the school system will be encouraged. The Interview Schedule, questionnaire, and procedures are included in Appendix A.

*defined as policy alterations
At this stage in the research, validity and reliability are not paramount, and the results of the questionnaires and the interviews will be compiled to indicate areas that suggest further investigation (i.e., do social workers see themselves as change agents in the school system? Is the relationship being researched affected by worker orientation?)

The data will be analyzed solely for insights and correlations that suggest operating variables. In summarizing the results, the researcher will be particularly sensitive to emerging variables that influence how efficacy relates to position, role, and orientation. The variables identified or further elucidated will be roughly ordered to give focus and direction to the following steps of the project. With such an exploratory design, no direct correlations can be made, but tables will be drawn up to compare questionnaire data and interview material as to:

1) school and non-school workers' responses
2) possible groupings of similar responses among school and non-school personnel
3) possible clustering of similar responses due to an intervening variable, such as orientation.
VI

EXPECTED FINDINGS

Due to the nature of the study, no conclusions, as such, are expected. However, the findings predicted by the author are:

1) Resources available to the worker to change the school system, vary widely within the school system and outside the school system.
2) The point of entry into the school system greatly affects the worker's efficacy.
3) The higher the point of entry into the school system, the more consensual resources that are open to the worker.
4) Changing the school system through policy alterations is not the prime interest of school social workers.
5) School social workers' distrust and suspicion of system change, where it exists, will be as great as the majority of educators.
6) No clearly defined profile of workers outside the system interested in school system change will emerge at this time.
7) The only variable that will emerge about workers outside the school system interested in system change is their tendency to cluster together, and not work individually towards school system change.
8) The worker's background in academic and practical experience will be an important variable in communication and legitimation of strategies within the educational structure.

9) The job description of the majority of school social workers will not mention system change.

10) No clearly definable profile will emerge as to the school social worker's perception of the sources of expectation (within the school system) that affect his role and function. A tendency towards confusion about the location of primary and secondary sources will emerge.

11) Professional reference groups, where they exist, will affect the social worker's efficacy in altering school system policies. The tendency of the worker will be to follow the norms of the professional reference group, whether inside or outside the system.

12) The orientation (including the worker's methodological preference, social work education and experience, and social values concerning changing the school system) of the worker will emerge as an important intervening variable in the relationship of position to worker efficacy.
VII

IMPLICATIONS

Research Implications

The findings would suggest that further investigation into the relationship between the school social worker's efficacy in system change through policy alterations and his position, must concentrate on the factors that affect the school social worker's perception of his role, function, and resources. Comparisons as to the differences between the school social worker's perceptions and the perceptions of a more community-based worker, seem indicated.

The orientation of the worker in the system may be the most important variable in effecting policy changes. If the worker perceives himself as an integral part of the educational machine, (particularly if he sees himself as set in the vertical structure), his commitment will be to goals other than system-wide change. However, if the orientation of the worker is to address his efforts* to the school as a system, as well as to his clients within it, his efficacy may be increased.

The influence of the school system's expectations for social workers both formal and informal must be further clarified. The confusion that workers have regarding the sources

*through his position, whether it be inside or outside the system

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of expectation requires further research. If middle management and other levels of system administration are unclear as to their role in relating to the worker about his role, functions and resources, role strain in the entire system may affect the worker's efforts. This situation may negatively affect the worker's orientation to the system, but positively affect his efforts toward change.

The role of the worker in dealing with the system, as well as the priorities set and strategies considered, may appear to be a sub-function of his professional identity and reference group. Clarification of the reference group's influence on professional goals and practices would be an additional aim in the second step of this project. Workers in the system who sign teachers' contracts and who are responsible to a middle management educator, may take on part of the set of the school teacher, particularly in a system employing few social workers. The worker may lack a reference group that can support and clarify the social worker's role in a system that is controlled by another profession. The role of professional reference groups outside the system influencing worker efforts to change policy in the system, is a variable to be remembered in future research. The finding that workers outside the system cluster together to work towards school system change, underlines the importance of the
reference group variable. Perhaps groups of individuals outside the system have more resources at their disposal in toto, even though their individual resources may be rather limited. As Brager has pointed out, the school system is sensitive to outside pressure and attention and as in civil war, the quarrelling school ranks may close in fear against community intervention.¹

Definitely enough stepping stones will be discovered through this study to make the continued project a worthwhile research goal.

**Theory and Practice Implications**

It may appear that the orientation of the worker has a greater effect on his efficacy in systems change, than the norms of the setting.

At once this is both encouraging and discouraging for practice. It would suggest that change can happen in settings with norms that do not actively encourage innovation if the orientation of the change agents remain firm. This development makes some assumptions, however, that are discouraging upon closer view. In the school system, the change agent is in jeopardy of losing his panoramic social work perspective. The system's orientation is not that usually attributed to 20th century social work theory. Some educational
policies are in direct opposition to current behavioural theories, (i.e. enforcing standard expectations on all children in terms of behaviour, regardless of developmental, cultural, or socio-economic differences).

In order to remain a professional and not a quasi social worker, more emphasis may be needed on practice orientation and how to keep it, not just obtain it. This is an area social work educators and professional associations must address, in order to graduate, social workers who may be identifiable as professional workers throughout their careers.

An aside for practice, is the communication gap between non-social work institutions and social workers. Perhaps, a beginning practical step might be to recruit workers who have had practical educational experience to work with these systems. Since educators are overly suspicious of academic opinion, and respect practical experience in their own field, a worker with this background might allay enough fears to permit undelusive dialogue. Again the orientation question must be firmly settled within the worker and system to prevent role strain.

In a system as publicly sanctioned by, yet alienated from, the community, it appears difficult to work from within due to system constrictions, and yet difficult also to
gain access from outside.
Perhaps a beginning tactic might be a demonstration project involving community workers seconded to the school system from another community system (i.e. Department of Health). In this way, the worker's point of entry would be at the Board level (escaping part of the hierarchical bind) and the worker's domain would legitimately be system-wide.* The worker's reference group would be the social work system of origin. In this way the worker would supplement the educational system, yet have a legitimised position and status within it. The additional power and support of the sponsoring system might leave the worker free to concentrate more on system change, then on endless orientation, methodology and access struggles.

FOOTNOTE

APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

The locations, numbers and employers of school social workers in Ontario is available through the current list of School Board facilities compiled by the Women Teachers Federation of Ontario. From this information, the questionnaires will be sent to all Ontario school social workers. This list will also provide the total number of school social workers in Ontario in order to compile the percentage of workers who complete and return the questionnaire.
QUESTIONNAIRE

PLEASE ANSWER AS HONESTLY AS YOU CAN

1. I have the following educational background:

   B.A.
   One year post-graduate social work  ___
   Two years post-graduate social work  ___
   More than two years post-graduate social work
   M.A. in field, other than social work  ___ Field___
   Other

2. I have the following experience in school social work:

   1 year  ___
   2 years  ___
   3 years  ___
   3-5 years ___
   more than 5 years ___

3. Additionally, I have had the following experience in other areas of social work:

   1 year  ___
   2-3 years ___
   3-5 years ___
   more than 5 years ___
   Area with most experience _____________________

4. Educationally, I have the most concentration in the following methodology: (please order, 1, 2, 3, 4)

   casework  ___
   group work  ___
   community organization ___
   other  ___ Specify___________
5. a) Ideally, social work in the school system should have the following goals and aims:

b) How could these aims and goals be implemented?

6. Do you think the school system needs to be changed?
   Yes
   No

   If your answer is yes, please answer Question 7.

7. Do you think the social worker can do or should be the activating force in this change?
   Yes
   No

   If yes, please explain why the social worker can or should be the activating force.
If No, please explain why the social worker cannot or should not be the activating force, and who might be a better choice for this role.

8. In my day to day work I spend most of my time involved in: (please order 1, 2, 3).
   helping individuals change
   helping groups change
   helping the school system change

9. In the past year I attempted to alter a policy or part of a policy of my school system.
   Yes ______
   No ______

If Yes is answered to Question 9, please answer 9a.

9.a) In the past year, has the school system altered a policy or part of a policy, due to your direct or indirect influence or opinion?
   Yes ______
   No ______

If Yes, please explain the policy change involved and the method used to accomplish this change.
If No, please explain the policy resistances, or barriers or choices involved.


10. In your opinion, is policy change in the school system more feasible by a school social worker or a social worker outside the system? Another professional? Please explain your reasons fully.
Interview Schedule

The interviewees (8-10) will be selected by a "best informants" method through contacts the researcher has in the educational and social work fields. The publication, *This Magazine Is About Schools* may also provide some leads from which to select cases. These persons will be asked for personal interviews of at least one hour, carried out in a private setting.

In the personal interviews, the researcher will seek answers to the following questions:

1) What is the worker's social work experience?
2) What is the educational background of the worker?
3) What is his attitude towards school system policy changes?
4) What are his goals in school social work?
5) What is his position in relation to the school system?
6) Has the worker attempted policy changes?
7) What is his method?
8) Why is he interested in system change?
9) What place have reference groups in his professional life?
10) If blocks or resistance exist in the system, where are they and at what level?
11) What is his view of social worker's efficacy inside and/or outside the system, in terms of change potential?

Areas of special interest or commitment will be explored fully in the interview.
APPENDIX B

As this study is the beginning step in a longer project, the next phase for the research is outlined below.

**Phase II**

From the results of Phase I, it is predicted that three variables will emerge as very influential in the relationship of position to efficacy. The predicted variables are orientation, role conflict, and reference groups. A descriptive study to assess the particular characteristics of each, and the relationship of position to efficacy would then be needed. Hypotheses would be formulated, and a sample population of social workers selected as the universe for the study. The sample would be selected on the basis of questionnaire replies received in Phase I. Representativeness (in terms of geographic location, attitude, policy changes effected, and school system size etc.) could be addressed using the data collected from the interviews, questionnaires and the Federation list.

Data would then be available on which to build new hypotheses and define a study universe. From the information gathered in Phase I, a wider population of social workers outside the system would be known for work in Phase II.

Data and opinion would be solicited from the school
system Administration in this Phase to better understand the relationship of role conflict in schools, and tabulate the current practices in dealing with this phenomenon. From the results of Phase I, particular levels of Administration would be focused upon.

Contact with local branches of O.A.P.S.W. would be made in order to find professional reference groups, channelling their efforts toward school system change. Interviewing and questionnaires would be used to try and discover the factors that give rise to reference groups and positive action, as well as the variables that prevent reference group formulation or continuance, and group action.

As a part of Phase II, the present document would be presented and explained to funding bodies in order to make the project a viable ongoing research project. Suggested bodies are C.A.S.W., local branches of O.A.P.S.W., the Provincial Department of Health, the Provincial Department of Education, the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Department of National Health and Welfare. The last four organizations would be approached on the basis of the preventative potential inherent in better understanding the factors in school system change, and its positive influence on the Ontario population's well-being.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


