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SOCIAL WORK'S PROFESSIONAL MISTAKE:

CONFUSING STATUS FOR CONTROL

AND LOSING BOTH

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The dimensions of control and power supporting monopoly are central to the professional notion. These factors are implicit in the attribute professional formulation traditionally put forth and adopted by Social Work. This paper asserts that social work leadership between 1915 and 1952 misunderstood or ignored these crucial dynamics. This "mistake" led to practice methodology (casework) and educational policies (graduate-only) that sought status rather than occupational control. This flawed analysis split the occupation in its formative years. The article concludes that the result has been social work's inability to gain professional standing.

The notion of a profession contains a fundamental assumption: any occupational group wishing to be recognized as professional must first define and exercise control over the boundaries of its realm of activity. Fundamentally, this boundary establishes control over members in the profession

by identifying who is "inside" and who is "outside." This factor creates the foundation of authority thereby forming a basis for the claims of "expertise" embedded in the professional ideal (Gerst and Jacobs, 1976; Johnson, 1981; Starr, 1982: 3–29). This paper discusses social work's lack of understanding of this assumption, and the results of this mistaken analysis.

The issues identified in this discussion as central to social work's historical professionalization process are: 1) development of a scientific base coupled with a communicable technique; and 2) the subsequent, and related, educational policies that initially spelled out the roles of "professional" and "non-professional."

The resolution of the first issue was CASEWORK, and the second was the GRADUATE ONLY model for professional education. The period under review begins in 1915 with Flexner's speech to the Conference of Charities and Corrections (Flexner, 1915:576–90), and ends with the formation in 1953 of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE).[1] Recent comment and discussion from within social work (Specht et.al., 1984; Howe, 1980; Austin, 1983; Leighninger, 1980 and 1984)[2] indicate that we still struggle with the issue of professionalization and the education/ training dimension continues to be a focus for active, even heated debate. In an effort to contribute to this timely concern, this paper highlights what are believed to be historical reasons contributing to social work's "mistaken analysis" and offers thoughts on the consequences both past and present.

This paper first identifies the dimensions of CONTROL and MONOPOLY as central to the notion of a profession and the professionalization process. Applying these two dimensions and the power perspective they represent to social work's professional development, I assert that leadership during the period under review either misunderstood or ignored their importance. The mistaken analysis supported practice and educational philosophies and policies that failed

to implement the requisite control and monopoly over the logical realm of social work's early occupational activity—the public welfare sector. Instead, the foundation that was laid split social work and actually undermined its efforts toward achieving professional standing. Specifically, the conclusion is drawn that active, and successful, resistance to under-graduate training/education as entry-level professional prep-aration was a key factor that hampered social work's quest for full professional development.

Before turning to the discussion, I want to emphasize that the following review does not argue that professions and professionalization are good or bad. I have taken the historical record of social work at its word; that is, it wanted to be a profession. I think the goal has not been achieved, and I believe much energy has been dissipated by social work as a result of our flawed pursuit. Ivor Kraft has poin-tedly observed:

> Despite deliberate efforts . . . to promote social work to the status of a dominant and learned profession . . . these efforts did not take, and it is now clear that social work is destined to remain among the "heteronomous" or subfusc professions in our culture (Kraft, 1980:2).

Taking Kraft's point, this paper clarifies and suggests possible historical reasons, emanating from within the field, that have contributed to social work's difficulty and failure to realize its professional goal.

Professions and Professionalization

In the early Twentieth Century, a resurgence of profes-sions occurred in the United States (Starr, 1982:3–144). Medicine was the dominant example of this resurgence, and provided the paradigm for other occupational groups, like social work, who were seeking recognition as professions. Medicine's success was idealized and incorporated into what became known as the Attribute Model of Professions (Tho-ren, 1972; Stein, 1968; Kraft, 1969; Feldstein, 1971;

Leighninger, 1980, 1984). In this model, desirable char-
acteristics, or traits, are identified and an occupation
presumably reaches professional standing by developing the
noted characteristics.

The Attribute Model is flawed, and one succinct state-
ment of its primary flaw in regard to social work is provided
by Simpkins:

> The attempted identification of social work as a profession
> proceeds by comparing attributes and by emphasizing work-
> ers' unique knowledge and skill. The argument is of a syllogis-
> tic form: professions are activities identifiable by particular
> traits, therefore social work is a profession . . . Whatever may
> be thought of the logic of this argument, the principal flaw
> lies in the major premise which is based on a naive acceptance
> of 'trait' theory. In fact, no agreed list of professional attri-
> butes exists, most are just ragbags tailored to suit the needs of
> whatever group is using them to aspire to professional status
> (Simpkin, 1983:119–120).

The enshrining of the syllogistic nature of the attribute
model had occurred in social work by 1920, and the *ends*
(traits) of the process became viewed and confused as the
Means.

Feldstein (1971; also Goode, 1969) clearly states the es-
sential nature of the occupational professional boundary: "If
a profession is to function with any kind of power it must
control not only the activity ot its members, but the activity
of the other workers in the territory or industry over which
it claims expertise." The power and control perspective does
not refute the usefulness of attributes, but places them in an
appropriately dependent, secondary position. The attributes
represent desirable characteristics that come after the
would-be profession has mapped out its basic boundaries.
The programmatic expression of these boundaries has cus-
tomarily been the process of training and education, leading
to acceptance into the professional circle. This view of pro-
fessions acknowledges the necessity of control and the re-
sulting monopoly as prerequisites for gaining power, recog-
nition, and/or the status exemplified by the attributes. By

applying the power and control perspectives, rather than status, to a historical review of social work's occupational development the nature of social work's mistaken professional development gains clarity and provides insights into current difficult and contentious professional issues.

The Search for a Scientific Base, a Communicable Technique, and Practice Unity:

In 1915, social work confronted the question of professionalization by inviting Abraham Flexner to address the Conference of Charities and Corrections. Flexner concluded that social work was not a profession.[3] Two years later in an apparent response to Flexner, the first delineation of an individual practice emphasis, the casework method, appeared in Mary Richmond's (1917) book *Social Diagnosis*. As Leiby (1978:122) notes, *Social Diagnosis* was an organized statement that served "to transform (friendly visiting) into the notion of deliberate and constructive case-work."

A few months after the publication of *Social Diagnosis*, at the annual meeting of the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW), in a paper titled "The Social Caseworker's Tasks," Richmond addressed Flexner's 1915 verdict that social work was not a profession by asserting that social work now had a scientific method called "casework" (Drew, 1983). This method contained the distinguishing characteristics of "*skill* in discovering the social relationships by which a given personality had been shaped; second, *ability* to get at the central core of difficulty in these relationships; and third, *power* to utilize the direct action of mind upon mind in their adjustment (Drew, 1983: 39). As Lubove (1965) has pointed out, casework evolved into social work's primary technology exerting significant influence on the field's subsequent development.

During the Twenties, following the emergence of Richmond's casework formulation, social work experienced a period of great expansion. A national organization, the American Association of Social Workers (AASW) was

founded in 1921. The AASW's stated purpose was that: "act-
ing together, (members) shall endeavor through investiga-
tion and conference to develop professional standards in so-
cial work" (Pumphrey and Pumphrey, ed., 1961:307). The
AASW developed as a companion organization to the NCSW
which had existed since 1873. Both NCSW and AASW pro-
vided impetus during the '20s for social work to develop
standrads of education and practice that would have a broad
national focus, as well as the already noted professional
stand.

During this period, a struggle between generic and
specific casework developed that was not mere intellectual
play.[4] If Flexner's challenge to social work was to be met,
this potential splintering had direct bearing on the task: in
order to be professional by the Flexnerian attribute model,
commonality of function was essential and this diversity had
to be bound together into a unified whole.

A special committee was appointed by NCSW in 1925 to
study the issue of generic practice with the goal of bringing
clarification and unification to the increasing diversity in so-
cial work. The committee, known as the Milford Conference,
met for three years and approved a final report in November
1928 and published it in 1929.

The Milford Conference report emphasized that
casework was at the core of the developing social work oc-
cupation. The Milford Conference position did not stem the
tide of specialist association formation but it represented a
symbolic statement asserting that casework was the base for
future professional development regardless of the particular
or specialized practice setting.

Where Richmond's book had been a ground-breaking
definition and explication of a new activity, the Milford
Conference report reflected a developmental statement build-
ing on the established past and striving to point a future di-
rection. With these and other events, by 1929 social work
had acquired many of the basic ingredients for professional

legitimacy called for in the Flexner attribute perspective.[5] Paralleling these practice developments was the debate over how best to educate, train, and socialize the new professional worker. The opposing sides of the debate fell into two broad categories: Agency-based versus University-based preparation. The means of education/training and therefore incorporation into the professional "select" was the pivotal area by which social work established its understanding of professional. The emergence of casework and the emphasis on its scientific/academic enhancement shaped the ultimate graduate-only professional education policy adopted by social work.

The Institutionalization of the Scientific Base and Technique: The Graduate-Only Ethos Develops

In 1919 the Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Work (ATSPSW) was established to address professional training/education issues. ATSPSW was the forerunner of the American Association of Schools of Social Work (AASSW). Between 1920 to 1923, James H. Tufts, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago completed the first study of social work education and training with support from the Russell Sage Foundation. Tuft's study (1923) first analyzed existing social work practice and inferred from this the characteristics of social work in general. Based on these characteristics, Tufts examined social work education and training as it existed and offered recommendations for future developments. A contemporaneous questionnaire study was conducted by Paul Beisser (1923). The results were published under the title "A Measurement of Professional Training: Deductions from a Questionnaire Study of Social Work Positions."[6] The Beisser results were presented in December 1922 to a joint meeting of the American Sociological Society and the ATSPSW. Beisser's study according to the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Boehm, 1977) influenced social work educational thinking while Tuft's was

seemingly ignored. Beisser's study recommended "that so-
cial work (education) be considered a professional school,
provided it met certain requirements of autonomy within
the university" (Boehm, 1977:301).

Throughout the 1920s support grew for the establish-
ment of educational standards and practices that would
maintain the perceived momentum toward professional
maturity. Consistent with Biesser, the principle of university
affiliation was firmly in place by the end of the decade. Ad-
vocates for agency-based training were unsuccessful in as-
serting their views. The professional ideal sought by social
work leadership of the time characterized agency-based
preparation as apprenticeship/vocational and therefore an-
tithetical to the notion of professionalization (Blostein, 1977).
This same view would reappear later as an objection to ef-
forts promoting undergraduate social work education.

In May of 1927, Edith Abbott of the University of
Chicago delivered an address to the annual meeting of the
AASSW titled "Backgrounds and Foregrounds in Education
for Social Work." Abbott's comments implied a maximum
definition for professional education:

> Is it true that we have or should have any such thing as a
> group of "routine caseworkers," and second, is it desirable
> that two grades of social workers should be trained—those
> who are to be constructive leaders in the field and those who
> are to be merely routine technicians of some sort? (Abbott,
> 1942:36).

In the same speech, Abbott correctly asserted the fun-
damental role of training/education in the formation of a so-
cial work profession and its boundary function:

> . . . in the final analysis it is clear that social work will never
> be a profession and that social agencies can never be
> standardized except through professional schools. Not until
> some course of professional study is required as a prerequisite
> for entrance (sic) can it be said that social work is really a pro-
> fession (Abbott, 1942:40).

One year later Abbott's definition, supporting a singular graduate-only definition, was explicitly stated in a paper entitled, "Some Basic Principles in Professional Education for Social Work";

> . . . our profession calls for character as well as education . . . character is frequently, if not usually, a plant of slow growth and can be developed in a proper educational atmosphere better than anywhere else. That is one reason for our stress on the development of graduate rather than undergraduate schools; the undergraduates are not yet prepared, even with careful supervision, to understand and carry the heavy responsibilities which our profession lays on its members (Abbott, 1942:47).

Abbott spoke for a dominant sentiment held by social work education leaders of the time, that is, asserting a developmental argument that combined with the view that any preparation other than university and post-graduate was viewed as occupational, technical and thus non-professional. Even with the growing graduate-only ethos, undergraduate advocates were many and vocal during the 1920s (Hagerty, 1942). The baccalaureate advocates were not anti-graduate, but viewed undergraduate preparation as appropriate for professional entry-level, and a relevant foundation for further graduate and specialized education/training.

Numerous dynamics during the 1920s supported the momentum for the graduate-only definition articulated by someone like Abbott. In addition to the "developmental" argument, there was the apparent presumption, with medicine as the model, that the advanced nature of graduate study (with a liberal arts base) was, *a priori* more professional. A third issue promoting the post-baccalaureate model was the genuine educational dilemma of incorporating the practical field-work component into the traditional academic liberal arts undergraduate model. By defining social work education as post-baccalaureate, this fundamental educational problem was avoided.[8]

In the same year as Abbott's speech, a book by Sydnor Walker, *Social Work and the Training of Social Workers* (1928) was published. Originally written as a Columbia University Ph.D. dissertation in Political Science, this "outsider's" analysis of the social work field provided comparative thoughts to those asserted by leaders such as Abbott:

> Underlying most of the discussion which takes place as to what educational preparation is desirable . . . is the assumption that all persons entering (social work) need the same general type of training. The schools of social work often state explicitly that they seek to prepare students of firstrate calibre for positions of leadership. But if preparation of social work is eventually to be a necessity for all entering the field, it may be well to raise the question whether preparation is to be the same for everyone (Walker, 1928:158).

Walker followed her hypothesis with an analysis of the occupation and the implications for education and training:

> In reading much that is written one might suppose that all occupational divisions in this field were vertical rather than horizontal. The suggestion is offered that social work may be comprised of many "planes," calling for . . . varied and definite grades of preparation . . . for the preliminary interviewer in a welfare agency requires some background, but not that of the man who runs a community chest . . . in view of the practical demands of the field, preparation . . . will range from specialization in vocational courses given in the undergraduate liberal arts college to a graduate course of several years in a professional school (Walker, 1928:159).

Walker's discussion and analysis was relevant and accurate. Her conclusions rested upon extensive data collected from the 35 schools of social work that existed in 1927–28. While Abbott can be appreciated for high standards, there was nothing asserted by Walker and others to challenge the establishment and maintenance of high standards, nor the diminution of effort toward professionalization.

Against this backdrop of debate, concrete developments

in social work education moved rapidly after 1930. By 1932 a minimum curriculum had been articulated. In 1935, AASSW ruled that only schools of social work affiliated with Association of American Universities (AAU) membership colleges and universities would receive formal accreditation. By the end of the decade, the two year post-baccalaureate Masters degree was adopted as the only recognized professional credential.[9] Thus, when social work initially institutionalized control and monopoly, exemplified by the 1937 graduate-only action, it adopted a single advanced degree as both entry-level as well as the terminal professional practice degree. This action was the culmination of the attribute approach.

The graduate-only policy was taken in spite of evidence, like Walker's, that social work had numerous levels of operation ranging from minimum entry to more advanced specialized practice. But, throughout the 1930s in the context of the Depression and the growing public welfare sector, leadership moved social work toward the incorporation of a professional model that, in effect, defined as non-professional the fastest growing number of occupational roles available to it as an existing occupation and an aspiring profession. The 1937 action incorporated an emerging and significant contradiction: the majority-to-be of functioning social workers, in public welfare, were non-professional by the "profession's" own official definition (Hollis and Taylor, 1951:89–97). In effect, what social work accomplished with the 1937 graduate-only decision was a severing of its head from its supporting and still developing body. The status of graduate education had been asserted by the graduate-only policy, but the status was attached to the education level only and not to the content of social work activity, nor to a realistic assessment of the public welfare occupation/job market. Additionally, the presumed status accrued to an increasing minority of those who were, in fact, involved in social work.

Reviewing the burgeoning social work personnel needs beginning with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration

(FERA), Josephine C. Brown (1940) characterized the situation thusly,

> . . . as a rule the local staffs in the smaller places, especially in the rural counties, were necessarily made up of people who were not social workers at all . . . Many of these people who were employed by local agencies as investigators, and often as supervisors, had had their training and experience in other professions and allied fields . . . the social service staffs, then, especially in the smaller places, came to be made up largely of local people who were not social workers by virtue of any previous training or experience and were called social workers or case workers merely because they had been employed to discharge a social work function in the Emergency Relief Administration (1940:277–279).

The Undergraduate Advocates

During the 1940s the National Association of Schools of Social Administration (NASSA) was organized to promote and support undergraduate social work education. NASSA, formed in 1942, was an organization that ". . . identified with the tradition that tax-supported institutions have a responsibility for professional and quasi-professional personnel" (Hollis/Taylor, 1951:37).

An articulate and forceful spokesman from the NASSA ranks was Professor Mattie Cal Maxted of the University of Arkansas. Maxted, echoing Walker, strongly asserted a role for various levels of social work professional training and education. She spoke to the AASSW in January of 1945 on the topic of "The Need for Undergraduate Trained Social Workers in Arkansas" and her theme was that by embracing undergraduate social work preparation as an integral part of professional preparation then social work in the broadest sense would benefit:

> The facts are that we may have thought of training for social workers as graduate training, but the greatest percentage of our social workers have had little or no training and for them any training even though undergraduate is an advance (Maxted, 1945:1).

NASSA's theme was consistently one of wanting to strengthen social work, particularly its practice, and therefore its standing and recognition. Maxted again: "The profession of social work has had difficulty not from those who have a little training but from those who have no training and who do not know that any is necessary" (Maxted, 1945:5–6).

The NASSA message was not accepted by social work leaders. Rather than acknowledging the substantive point, the graduate-only status-bias ethos directed the energies of AASSW toward co-opting NASSA. The efforts were effective. With the subsequent formation of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the graduate-only advocates managed to neutralize the undergraduate advocates of NASSA. In 1952 NASSA disbanded and was absorbed into the newly formed CSWE.

Maxted in her straightforward style, both observed and prophesied at the final NASSA conference in 1952 that,

> . . . thus it is the untrained ones who are molding public opinion as to the nature of social work, and the attitudes toward the profession are in danger of becoming crystalized in the public mind by the standards set by these unprepared workers (Maxted, 1952:5–6).

Not until the mid-1960s did social work begin to rectify its mistaken attribute professional development by seriously contemplating an undergraduate professional degree. Even at that time the critical motivation for change came more from quarters external to social work rather than from within the field itself. Factors significant to this process were an overall increase in federal funding for professional education, the Social Security Amendments of 1962 strengthening the service role in public welfare, and the publication of the H E W report *Closing the Gap in Social Work Manpower* (Daly, 1965).

The Consequences

Ty 1950, statistical profiles (see Hollis and Taylor, 1951) confirmed the large and growing gap between those social

workers defined by academic credential as professional and those defined as non-professional. A telling confirmation of social work's mistaken professional direction was provided by the public's perception of the field, particularly since public sanction was a fundamental theme of the attribute professional models. The dimensions of the flawed professional process were unwittingly reported in the widely utilized Wilensky and Lebeaux text *Industrial Society and Social Welfare* (1965). First published in 1958, and used in schools of social work into the mid-1970s, their chapter, "Emergence of a Social Work Profession," reported results of national surveys conducted in 1947 and 1953 to rank the social status of social work (Wilensky and Lebeaux, 1965:309–312).

Wilensky and Lebeaux report that social work, or variations thereof, tended to rank in the mid-range of occupational status. The Wilensky and Lebeaux discussion assumes social work to be a profession; even though, in at least one of the reported studies, the occupational category listed ("welfare worker for a city") probably did not require a Masters (i.e., "professional") degree. Reflecting the attribute status bias, they conclude that the "problem" of social work's unrealized public and professional acceptance would be solved ". . . as the educational level of the average social worker rises" (1965:312). Rather than understanding and acknowledging the urgent and cogent pleas of Maxted and others, the thinking exemplified by their analysis reinforced the schism between professional and non-professional.[10] Wilensky and Lebeaux reflected and reinforced the mistaken professional analysis followed by social work that actually neutralized the professional goal while seeming to promote it.

Further, in regard to the power of the attribute/ideal dogma passed down from 1915, Wilensky and Lebeaux in the same chapter made an interesting assertion:

> Figures on the number of professionally trained workers greatly underestimate the *true growth of professional consciousness,* and public recognition of the profession in recent years.

The evidence is that *many more people identify themselves as social workers than graduate from schools of social work,* and many more positions calling for trained social workers exist than there are trained people to fill them (1965:309), author's emphasis).

Taken to its logical conclusion their statement provides affirmation of how little social work had understood the very end of professionalism, particularly control and power over the occupational arena.

For example, imagine someone, anyone, simply declaring that they were "feeling" and "thinking" themselves to be more professional today ("professional consciousness") and on this basis asserting both the right and authority to practice accordingly. No established profession would abide such a declaration as a claim to authority. No client, patient, or consumer would accept such a claim. Yet, forty-three years after Flexner's address, a major social work history/policy text was making just such a claim. The fantasy nature of the Wilensky and Lebeaux statement serves as a marker of how far afield and misguided social work's ideology had been, and the powerful hold of the status attribute ideology.

Conclusion

Lubove has observed that, "the monopoly of a special skill is the essence of any occupational groups' claim to professional status. But expertise alone fails to distinguish a profession in the public eye . . ." (1965:117). Social work ignored the "monopoly" aspect in Lubove's statement and concentrated on the "special skill," and the result was the emergence of casework as the central skill/technology. Related to this key practice development was the educational policy adopted in 1937 defining the master's degree as the only recognized professional credential.

The 1974 incorporation of a baccalaureate level of professional entry represented a major step toward unifying the social work occupation and promoting effective professional control for itself. Even so, this legitimate action continues to

be met with resistance and ambivalent comment from established sources inside social work (see Specht et.al., 1984; Constable, 1984). [11]

Adding to social work's on-going internal struggle is the current social/political mood in the United States. With a history of flawed occupational and professional development, social work finds itself vulnerable to the assault underway against the broad range of human services. If a realistic understanding of the professional dynamic had been held fifty or sixty years ago, then potentially social work and social workers could have played then and now a more central and consistent role in the development of welfare policy. Instead, social work's energies have been dissipated in a mistaken search for status. By not defining into its notion of professional a realistic and functional entry-level certification representing fundamental control, social work secured for itself a future as a divided occupational group.

NOTES

1. The C.S.W.E. end-point is important since it represented the first amalgamation of social work education.
2. Howe presumes the attribute/ideal model of professional in its finished form and then discusses social work's historical ambivalence and difficulty with the model. Both Howe and Specht et.al., though addressing quite different issues, by overlooking the fact that social work has never staked out an effective occupational boundary claim and sharing an *a priori* position regarding the meaning of profession, discuss potentially relevant issues in generally irrelevant terms.
3. The attribute model presented by Flexner in 1915 can be summarized by six key points: (1) intellectual operations, (2) scientific learning base, (3) practical and definite ends, (4) educationally communicable technique, (5) self-organization, and (6) altruistic motivation. Also, see Thoren (1972) footnote on p. 46 for a listing of many of the primary attribute citations.
4. Hospital social workers had an association dating from 1918 followed by the American Association of Visiting Teachers (1919), the Section of Psychiatric Social Workers of the American Association of Hospital Social Workers emerged in 1922 and developed into the American Association of Psychiatric Social Workers in 1926.

5. A system of associations and journals was well-established and the national census underway in 1929 classified social workers as "professional" (Leighninger, 1980).

6. The Beisser study is cited in Vol. I of *The Encyclopedia of Social Work (1977)*, but the author has been unable to locate the actual published report.

7. Chapter 7 in Hagerty's book is titled "Graduate or Undergraduate Schools of Social Work?" He opens the chapter with the following comment: "I feel it would be absurd to discuss the above question were it not for the fact that writers chiefly from so-called graduate schools of social work have seriously questioned the advisability of giving training in social work to undergraduates" (1921:79). Later, in the same chapter, "Are the so-called graduate schools offering real graduate work? I have used the expression 'so-called' advisedly. There is a great distinction between giving graduate work and giving work to students who have graduated" (1931:84).

8. Hagerty discusses this issue and it surfaces in other discussions of the time. The scope of this paper does not allow for a full treatment except to observe that one thinks the issue was consistently side-stepped rather than confronted.

9. In 1937, the AASSW adopted the position that "all professional education for social work was to be offered as graduate study after October 1, 1939" (Hollis and Taylor, 1951:29).

10. Wilensky and Lebeaux's discussion is interesting in hindsight. They inform their reader in a footnote on page 312 that, "The National Association of Social Workers has recently (1956) declared it 'strongly opposes vocationally oriented undergraduate programs' of social work programs."

11. Constable's discussion of the "new" educational challenge facing social work is interesting, when set against earlier commmnentators like Tufts (1923), Walker (1925), Hagerty (1931), and Maxted (1952).

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