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School Social Work in Hartford, Connecticut: Correcting the Historical Record

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This paper corrects the historical record on why and how school social work began in Hartford and who was instrumental in establishing the new service. The findings, based on a study of primary sources, revealed that a school principal, and not a psychologist as previously claimed, initiated the process that led the Hartford Charity Organization Society to appoint its Visitor, Winifred Singleton Bivin, a social caseworker, to also become the first social worker in the schools in January 1907. The social work profession, which owes its origin to the Charity Organization Movement, is also obligated to the Hartford Charity Organization Society for its cooperative work with the schools, which led to the inception and subsequent development of school social work by the schools and, in 1909, the appointment of Miss Sara Holbrook who subsequently became a national leader in the development of the fledgling profession.

This paper corrects the historical record on why and how school social work began in Hartford and who was instrumental in establishing the new service. The inception and early development of social work in a Hartford school, primarily based on an examination of primary source documents, is presented. The prevailing view, as reflected in the historical record or professional literature, is critically analyzed. Finally, the methodological and substantive implications for the profession are discussed.

School Social Work in Hartford: Inception and Early Development

The decision to seek professional "help and advice" occurred in the fall, 1906, when the principal of the Second North School,

Arthur Derrin Call (1907), contacted the Superintendent of the Hartford Charity Organization Society regarding a thirteen year old child, Nellie K., who "had been in the first grade for seven years and still she could not read a complete sentence" (Bivin, 1907, p. 1242). Call had observed a number of "extremely backward children" and believed "that the trouble in most cases was of a physical nature possibly needing medical treatment (1907, p. 12). It was Nellie, however, that "especially attracted [his] attention" that led to his request to contact the Society.

Winifred Singleton Bivin, a student at the Hartford School of Religious Pedagogy and the official visitor of the Hartford Charity Organization Society (1906, 1907), was sent to "investigate and assist" the Second North School (Call, 1907, p. 12) and began her work with Nellie (Bivin, 1907). After contacts with the home and parents, a visit to a specialist (who diagnosed "large adenoid growths"), and a subsequent operation, Nellie demonstrated dramatic improvement in hearing, weight gain, and improvement in school work (Bivin, 1907, p. 1242). Call's (1907) enthusiastic reaction, as he noted Nellie's remarkable improvements "was an incentive to the study of a large number of dull and backward children" (Bivin, p. 1243).

Four teachers, who were requested to refer children "they considered dull," resulted in a referral of 32 boys and girls, from 9 to 14 years of age (Bivin, 1907, p. 1243). After tests and observations, it was determined that "eighty-four percent had defects of sight, defects of hearings, enlarged tonsils, adenoid growths or nervous disorders of a sufficiently serious nature to definitely hinder progress in school" (p. 1243). Seeking medical attention, the next step, involved home visits to secure parental cooperation and to assess the financial condition of the home, and to offer assistance to parents on behalf of their other children (Bivin, 1907). The assistance that was offered focused on obtaining needed medical attention and prevention of illness.

By May 21, 1907, "eighty children were examined by the visitor [Mrs. Bivin], of whom eighty-two percent were found to need medical treatment" and were treated by specialists (Bivin, 1907, p. 1244). The work included home visits; school, physician, and hospital contacts; medical treatment; examination of children for defective vision, throat diseases, and nervous disorders by

specialists; surgical operations; provision of glasses; and commitment of two children (Call, 1907).

Call (1907), at the end of the school year, acknowledged the debt the Second North School owed to the Society and particularly to Mrs. Bivin. The Hartford Charity Organization Society (1907), in its annual report, quoted almost all of Call's report on "Abnormal Children" and the work of Mrs. Bivin. The Society then concluded this portion of its report:

The excellent results of this work in the Second North School has led to a demand for a similar effort in other schools, and we greatly regret that the pressure of other work has made it impossible, for the present, to extend the service. In the Second North School, however, the importance of the work is so fully recognized that a special visitor is being employed at the expense of the school to work along these lines under the supervision of this Society. (p. 8)

The following school year, 1907–1908, work with "abnormal children" was continued by three women: Miss Carrie A. Gauthier, visitor for the Charity Organization Society (1907); Miss Mary E. Hutchinson, listed as "special visitor; and Miss Mary Fisher (Call, 1908). Call (1908) again addressed his concern that "physical abnormalities among the children" explains much of the delay in children who did not advance from grade to grade (p. 12). By June 1, 1908, over 500 families had been visited, and over 1000 calls had been made to the COS, Dispensary, doctors, the Hospital, and children in the school (Call, 1908). Almost 350 children "have been reported for medical treatment, 42 operations have been performed, 47 children have been specially treated otherwise, and 15 children have been furnished with glasses" (Call, 1908, p. 12). The focus continued to be on the physical and medical needs of the children.

Correcting the Historical Record: A Critical Analysis

According to Culbert (1921), Oppenheimer (1924/1925), and Reihl (1949), Dr. George E. Dawson, Director of either the Psychological Clinic or Psychological Laboratory, was responsible for initiating "school social work" in 1907 at the Henry Barnard School in Hartford. He was doing testing in 1906 and brought to the principal's attention a child "who was abnormal and possibly

needed medical attention" (Reihl, p. 5). Dr. Dawson either privately maintained the work until it was taken over by the public schools, or, for two years, a group financed the visitor. The school social worker was first called a "special teacher" and "assisted [Dr. Dawson] in securing the history of children and in carrying out the recommendations of the clinic. . . ." (Oppenheimer, p. 4). Subsequently, numerous authors (e.g., Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 2000; Hancock, 1982) essentially have relied directly or indirectly on Oppenheimer's understanding of Dr. Dawson's role.

Second North School

While most authors (e.g., Culbert, 1921; Hancock, 1982) have not cited the school in Hartford where school social work began, Oppenheimer (1924/1925) specifically stated that the work began in the "Henry Barnard school in 1907" (p. 4). Confounding the school discrepancy, official sketches of Dr. Dawson (Cattell, 1932; "Who Was Who," 1968), perhaps submitted by him, state that he was the director of the department of child study of the Henry Barnard School from 1908 to 1916. To clarify, Call (1909), principal of the Second North school, recommended that the school be named after the famed Henry Barnard. Within one year Second North was renamed the Henry Barnard school (Call, 1910). School social work thus began at the Second North school.

George Ellsworth Dawson (1861–1936)

Dr. Dawson, during the period relevant to this inquiry, was a professor of education at Mount Holyoke College in Western Massachusetts from 1903 to 1908. He was also a professor of psychology at the Hartford School of Religious Pedagogy from 1902 to 1919. From 1919 to 1925, Dr. Dawson was a professor at the International Y.M.C.A. College (now Springfield College), just 25 miles north of Hartford (Cattell, 1932; E. Towle, personal communication, July 6, 1999; "Who Was Who," 1968).

Beginnings at Second North. The evidence that Dr. Dawson began his study of certain children at Second North no earlier than the fall 1908 is indisputable (Cattell, 1932; Call, 1909; Dawson, 1911; "Who Was Who," 1968). Dr. Dawson stated that he began his study of "children backward in their studies" on November 1,

1908 (Dawson, 1911, p. 14). The purpose of his research "was to determine, as far as possible, the cause, or causes, of a pupil's failure to profit by the work of the public school" (Dawson, p. 14).

For the first time, Dawson is included in an annual report for Second North, 1908–1909, with a brief synopsis of his intended work (Call, 1909, p. 17). Annie Fisher, a teacher of "foreign children" at the Second North school since 1905 (Call, 1907, p. 11), may have been the catalyst for Dr. Dawson's association with Second North beginning in the fall 1908:

The most unusual endeavor Fisher instigated was the program for psychological investigation in the school. In the summer of 1908, Fisher traveled abroad. . . . [and] studied in Germany. There she was most interested in the programs for the development of retarded children. The next fall semester, Dr. George E. Dawson . . . began conducting tests for mentally deficient students at Fisher's school. There is reason to believe that Fisher acted as ambassador in situating Dawson's study in her school [Second North]. (Rose, 1981, p. 6)

Work with the Visiting Teacher. A review of Dawson's publications, beginning with 1908, does not reflect the role attributed to him in regard to inception and support of and work with visiting teachers between 1906 and 1908 in Hartford (Dawson, 1908, 1909a, 1909b, 1910a, 1910b, 1912a, 1912b, 1912c). One of Dawson's publications, "A Psychological Classification of Public-School Pupils" (1912b), and the one in which he identified himself as the Director of the Department of Child Study at the Henry Barnard School, was perhaps a logical citation to acknowledge the assistance of the "school visitor" or visiting teacher. This study, which began in 1908, and "included a rather detailed investigation of the mental processes of some two hundred children and youth," did not mention the "school visitor" or "visiting teacher" (Dawson, 1912b, p. 1161). In 1912, however, at Dawson's request, Annie Fisher began working with Dr. Dawson. Fisher commented: "'He asked me to assist in the testing and I grew quite interested because we had a number of problem cases in the school.' Out of this grew a special Child Study Department" ("*Wesleyan Woman*," 1965, p. 13).

Department of Child Study: Hartford. Culbert (1921) believed that Dr. Dawson, when in Hartford, initiated visiting teacher work as the “director of the Psychological Laboratory” (p. 85). Oppenheimer (1924/1925) thought Dawson was the “Director of the Psychological Clinic in Hartford” in 1907 (p. 4). Subsequently most other authors accepted Oppenheimer’s view. Dawson, however, was not the director of either a psychological clinic nor laboratory when he was in Hartford.

From the 1911–12 school year until he left in 1917, Dr. Dawson was associated with a “department of special psychological and physical investigation” (Call, 1912, p. 6; Henry Barnard School, 1971). Dr. Dawson, however, beginning with the school year 1911–1912 through 1916–1917, when he submitted his final report, stated that his work was conducted in the Department of Child Study (Call, 1912, p. 17; Henry Barnard School, 1913, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1917). Not until May 30, 1916, does he refer to himself as the “Director,” whereas the Henry Barnard School (1917) listed him as “supervisor” one year later (p. 5).

Psychological Laboratory: Springfield. From 1913 until his death, Dr. Dawson was the “Director of the Psychological Laboratory” for the public schools in Springfield, Massachusetts (City of Springfield, 1913, p. 25; “Who Was Who,” 1968). The National Committee on Visiting Teachers (1924) noted that the visiting teacher in Springfield, who began in September, 1913, “has always been associated with the psychological laboratory. . . . One day a week is spent in giving tests to the children; the remainder of her time is given to the social service work connected with the laboratory and the carrying out of laboratory recommendations for psychological tests referred by school principals” (p. 13).

How was the School Visitor Financed?

Culbert (1921) believed that Dr. Dawson “developed and privately maintained the work” (p. 85). Phipps (1939), however, relying on a document of excerpts of a radio program by Batschelet, claimed that Dawson convinced citizens to finance a visiting teacher for two years. If Dr. Dawson had financed Mrs. Bivin, one might expect that he would have made a donation—perhaps a sizable donation—to the Hartford Charity Organization Society. Yet,

Dr. Dawson is not listed in the "memberships and subscriptions" category for the years ending on November 1, 1906 through 1908 (COS, 1906, 1907, 1908). The Society, also during this three year period, does not refer to Dr. Dawson or anyone for specifically contributing to the maintenance of a visitor at the Second North or any school in Hartford. Similarly, not one of the annual reports for the Second North and the Henry Barnard school acknowledge any contribution by Dr. Dawson nor anyone else for the support of a school visitor.

One may speculate that funds were contributed by Dr. Dawson or others to the Hartford School of Religious Pedagogy to support Mrs. Bivin's from the time she began working with the Second North School in January, 1907, until she left the city, upon her graduation in May 1907, but records are not available at the Hartford School to ascertain this speculation (C. Sperl, personal communication, November 19, 1999).

The arrangement, however, to work with the Second North school was with the Charity Organization Society (1907) and not with the Hartford School of Religious Pedagogy. Call (1907) acknowledged "the debt our school owes to the Charity Organization Society and to Mrs. G. D. Bivin in particular," but he did not mention the Hartford School of Religious Pedagogy nor Dr. Dawson (p. 14). The Society (1907) also reported in November 1907, that, in the Second North School, a "special visitor is being employed at the expense of the school" (p. 8). In December 1908, the Society again noted that the "Second North School and the Brown School have employed special visitors during the past year" (p. 8).

From Visitor to Visiting Teacher

Oppenheimer (1924/1925) believed that the visiting teacher "was first called a 'special teacher'" (p. 4). A "special teacher," Hattie Wolff, was first employed at Second North for the school year 1906–1907 to instruct "backward children" (Call, 1907, pp. 14–15), but it was Mrs. Bivin, the official COS visitor, who practiced social work. The following school year, 1907–1908, the term "special visitor" is used to refer to the work of Miss Hutchinson who, in part, replaced Mrs. Bivin (Call, 1908, p. 3). In 1908–1909, the worker is referred to as the "Friendly Visitor" (Call, 1909, p. 20;

1910, p. 3). During the school year 1910–1911, Sara M. Holbrook was submitting reports as the “visiting teacher” (Call, 1911, p. 26). Extant documents do not support “visiting teachers” being identified as “special teachers” in the Second North or Henry Barnard schools.

Discussion

No support was found for the long-standing belief that Dr. Dawson initiated visiting teacher work at the Second North school in Hartford. Dr. Dawson did not begin his psychological investigations at Second North until November, 1908, first mentioned the child study department in the school year 1911–1912, created the title of “Director” during the school year 1915–1916, and ended his work at the Henry Barnard school in 1917. Dr. Dawson, between 1913 and 1917, was also the Director of the Psychological Laboratory in Springfield. Some of the confusion related to his title and the duties of the visiting teacher may be due to Dawson’s dual assignments. There is no evidence that in Hartford he ran a “clinic.”

Other early statements by Culbert (1921) and Oppenheimer (1924/1925) cannot be accounted for, namely, that Dr. Dawson initiated the service, privately maintained the work, made efforts to obtain private support, or that the visitor assisted Dawson in securing histories in 1907. The visiting teacher was never called a “special teacher,” and the service began at Second North and not the Henry Barnard school. Dr. Dawson did not begin his investigations of “children backward in their studies” at Second North until November 1908.

Significantly, Mrs. Bivin, who graduated from the Hartford School of Religious Pedagogy in May 1907, neither acknowledged nor credited Dr. Dawson for his presumed role in establishing and supporting a visiting teacher (Bivin, 1907). Principal Call (1909) also commented: “I look upon the work being done by Professor Dawson as the most vitally important of any similar labors in any American public school known to me” (p. 17). Call, notwithstanding his publicly stated enthusiasm for Dr. Dawson’s research, never in any of his annual reports credited Dawson for his presumed influential role in starting the visiting teacher

program, including financial support directly or indirectly for a school visitor. Dr. Dawson also in his numerous published works did not mention any contribution to the establishment of visiting teacher work in Hartford.

Use of primary source documents, when available, have methodological and substantive implications for the social work profession. At a minimum, scholars should seek to access all available literature and especially primary sources to offer the most complete and accurate account of historical events relevant to the social work profession. The most critical primary sources used in this study (Bivin, 1907; Hartford Charity Organization Society, 1906–1909) were not cited by any author, and, all but one author, were also unaware of the relevant Second North and Henry Barnard annual reports.

Substantively, scholars should reexamine the belief that the beginnings of school social work in New York City, Boston, and Hartford “originated outside the school system itself” (Costin, 1969, p. 439), and that “[s]ettlements and civic organizations, rather than social caseworkers, developed the earliest form of school social work” (Lubove, 1971, p. 36). The evidence for Hartford’s inception of social work in the schools demonstrates the importance of the school principal and his positive relationship with the Hartford Charity Organization Society. The Society had an ongoing relationship with the Hartford public schools. In 1906, to illustrate, just over 125 referrals were made to the Society from the School Attendance Officer and the public schools (COS, 1906). Principal Call might not have contacted the Society for “help and advice” if the schools had not frequently relied on the Society to provide a range of services and assistance to needy children and families. The Society’s unique contribution, long neglected, obscures the relationship that existed between the public schools and the Society, the importance of its Visitor—an embryonic social worker, and the Society’s role as an incubator for a new professional service.

The work in Hartford continued with various workers until 1909 with the appointment of Sara Holbrook who served until 1921. In the fall 1922, upon receiving a Master of Arts from Yale, Holbrook, through the sponsorship of the Commonwealth Fund’s National Committee on Visiting Teachers, was appointed

Vermont's first visiting teacher, and also joined the faculty at the University of Vermont (McCullagh, 1995). Significantly, Holbrook was a founder, first vice president, and third president of the National Association of Visiting Teachers and Home and School Visitors (last named the National Association of School Social Workers). The Association, founded in 1919, merged in 1955 with other associations to create the National Association of Social Workers (McCullagh).

The social work profession, which owes its origin to the Charity Organization Society Movement (Poppo, 1995), is also obligated to the Hartford Society for the embryonic development of school social work. Without the positive relationship that existed between the school and the Society, school social work may not have begun in Hartford nor may Sara Holbrook have had the opportunity to become a leader in the creation of a national professional association.

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