

# **The History of School Social Work and Special Education in Iowa**

James P. Clark

The beginnings of school social work in Iowa can be traced to the 1960s when federal supports for educating students with disabilities were first being established. The enactment of Public Law 9-10, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), provided limited federal funding to states for special education instructional programs, including the hiring of special education teachers. When the ESEA was amended in 1969, provisions for funding support services such as social work, counseling and school psychology were added to the law. As a result, a few (approximately 20) school social work positions were established in some Iowa school districts. The focus of practice at this time was on students considered to be economically disadvantaged. The role of school social workers was to facilitate participation of the parents of these students in their education.

At this time, school social workers felt the need to organize efforts to support the development of the specialization within the broader profession in Iowa. In 1968, the Iowa School Social Workers' Association was established in response to this need. The Association was the source of information, support and unity for school social workers that were spread thinly across the state at that time.

In 1975 Congress enacted Public Law 94-142, *The Education of All Handicapped Children Act*, primarily in response to persistent advocacy by parents of children with disabilities. Congress noted that one million children with disabilities had been excluded entirely from public education or had been provided only limited access to public school programs. The law provided unprecedented assurances for children with disabilities to be educated in public

schools. It also was designed to ensure that all students with disabilities had access to a free appropriate public education including individually designed special education and related services prescribed in an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

School social workers were particularly interested in the provisions for related services. These supportive services were to be provided if it was determined that a child with a disability needed them in order to benefit from their special education. For example, the behavior of a student with emotional disturbance might be disruptive to an extent that precludes their ability to engage effectively in specially designed academic instruction. The student might need a behavior intervention plan developed by a school social worker in consultation with the teacher. The plan would be designed to address the disruptive behavior in a manner that ensures the student will benefit from classroom instruction. It would be based on the school social worker's assessment of the student's social, emotional and behavioral needs.

School social work was not specifically identified as a related service in P.L. 94 -142 when it was initially enacted. However, as a result of advocacy by the National Association of Social Workers a definition of "social work services in schools" was included in the federal regulations for implementing the law. (In 1990 *social work services in schools* was added to the act itself.) As a result the role of school social workers in special education was validated and federal special education funding for school social work services was authorized.

The implementing regulations defined "social work services in schools" as:

- "Preparing a social or developmental history on a handicapped child,
- Group and individual counseling with the child and family,
- Working with those problems in a child's living situation (home, school, and community) that affect the child's adjustment in school, and

- Mobilizing school and community resources to enable the child to receive maximum benefit from his or her educational program.” [Title 34CFR§300.24(b) (13)]

Three essential social work functions were evident in the definition – assessment, intervention, and case management. These functions illustrated the nature and type of services that might need to be provided to a student. However, school social worker services were not limited to these specific functions.

In order to fully comply with the provisions of the new law, states were required to begin a “child find” process to identify children that needed and were entitled to special education and related services. This required a comprehensive statewide system for evaluating students thought to be eligible as well as a system of providing instructional programs and support and related services to these students. In recognition of the need to establish infrastructures for meeting this daunting challenge, funding mechanisms were developed to support school districts in hiring special education teachers and the Iowa Legislature passed House File 1163 which created 15 Area Education Agencies (AEAs). The AEA intermediate education system was designed to provide efficient and equitable access to support and related services providers, including school social workers. AEAs were also designated as sub-recipients of federal special education funds which required that they have general supervision, i.e. regulatory, responsibilities for ensuring that district complied with all of the procedural requirements of the federal law as well as state laws and administrative rules. This dual set of service and regulatory functions made Iowa AEAs unique among intermediate agencies in the country.

The number of school social workers increased dramatically between 1975 and 1980 as a result of the enactment of *The Education of All Handicapped Children Act* and the creation of

AEAs. The approximately 20 school social workers in Iowa grew to over 200 during this period of time. School social work practice also changed as a result of the mandates of the new federal law. The previous mandate of ESEA supported an ecological approach in which both school and student change were the focus of assessment and intervention. In responding to the new “child find” mandate of *The Education of All Handicapped Children Act*, school social workers found themselves, along with their support and related service colleagues, in a “gate keeping” role. Assessment took on a distinct “illness orientation” in the process of diagnosing and classifying students by their particular disabilities. The focus was on identifying and mediating the individual skill deficits of students that were presumably caused by their disability.

The child find assessment process at this time typically utilized a “battery approach” in which a standard pre-determined set of assessment procedures were administered for the purpose of determining whether a student had a disability and was entitled to special education. According to Clark (2002) the purpose of this battery approach was “... to examine and describe the characteristics of the student and compare them to pre-established criteria for specific disability categories” (p. 4).

Because the federal regulations for the law initially described the social history as one of the social worker’s functions, this procedure became the school social worker’s standard assessment in the battery approach. Clark and Thiede (2007) have explained that these social histories were typically “developmental” or “educational” histories that were designed to collect information that would document whether the student was eligible for special education. Students and their family members were interviewed in completing the social history. Determining the effects of environmental conditions and cultural factors was an important focus

of the social history and represented a significant and unique contribution of school social workers in the process of determining special education eligibility.

A new opportunity for school social workers in Iowa emerged when Congress enacted Public Law 99-457, The Education of the Handicapped Amendments of 1986. This new law extended the mandate of P.L. 94-142, Part B to children from age 3 to 21 (the original provisions required states to serve handicapped children from age 5 to 21), and it added a new Part H that provided a discretionary grant to serve children from birth to age 3. The Iowa Department of Education was designated as the lead state agency responsible for the development and implementation of a statewide inter-agency system and, as a result, AEAs were also designated to play a lead role in this effort including the provision of early intervention services such as social work.

Key provisions of Part H were especially relevant to school social work practice. Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) were required to be developed for children who were determined eligible for early intervention services. A service coordinator (case manager) was required to be assigned to each eligible child and his/her family to coordinate evaluations and services included in the IFSP. Social work services were specifically identified as an early intervention service in the Act and in the implementing regulations. Hare and Clark (1992) underscored that with the enactment of P. L. 99-457 case management (a process created by the social work profession) had "... become an integral part of services to disabled children" (p.54).

Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the mid-1990s the Iowa Department of Education launched a comprehensive special education systemic reform initiative – the Renewed Service Delivery System (RSDS). A grassroots statewide change effort, the RSDS focused on improvements in response to concerns about the separation of general education and special

education including the over-reliance on pull-out programs for students requiring special education, the over-referral and over-identification of students requiring special education, the extensive use of standardized assessments in the eligibility determination process, and the focus on process and procedures rather than results (Tilly, Grimes & Reschly, 1993; Grimes, Kurns & Tilly, 2006; Clark & Tilly, 2010). A problem-solving approach to addressing the learning and behavioral needs of students was piloted with an emphasis on functional approaches to assessing learning and behavior problems. This also included the development of individualized interventions with the use of direct and frequent progress monitoring procedures to inform the formative and summative evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions.

The RSDS demonstrated the effective use of problem-solving methodology and the value of emphasizing the pursuit of results in special education practices and programs. These concepts subsequently became codified in the revision of Iowa's Administrative Rules of Special Education as well as in national policy with the enactment of Public Law 105-17, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997, commonly referred to as IDEA '97. New provisions for disciplinary actions for students with disabilities included requirements for conducting functional behavioral assessments and developing behavior intervention plans. IDEA '97 also added a new emphasis on the need for children with disabilities to participate in the general curriculum of the school including the need to ensure that these children were actually progressing in this curriculum.

The emphasis and focus on results and functional approaches to behavioral assessment prompted changes in the assessment and intervention practices of school social workers. The primary purpose of assessment shifted from entitlement decision-making using an assessment "battery approach", to problem solving using a functional approach to behavioral assessment and

intervention development. In a problem solving system, a functional approach to assessment enhances understanding of the purpose and effect of the behaviors of concern and provides information that is useful in developing a student's IEP or other behavioral interventions (Clark, 1998; Clark et al., 2006).

Initially, many school social workers resisted a functional assessment approach that was based primarily in behavioral theory and practice. However, for most practitioners the similarities between this approach and traditional social work practice became quickly evident. Clark and Thiede (2007) pointed out that “the functional assessments and behavior intervention plans developed by social workers were distinguished by their inclusion of perspectives and strategies from ecological and strengths based social work practice” (p. 277).

In recognition and support of this shift in policy and practice, in 2002 the National Association of Social Workers' Standards for School Social Work Services (NASW 2002) were revised. The new standards espoused “a functional approach to assessment” using an “ecological perspective” (NASW, 2002, Standard # 12). Though school social workers continue to collect interview data from students and their families, the social history is no longer the cornerstone of school social work assessment practice (Raines 2002; Clark 1998).

The AEA system continues to be the infrastructure supporting the employment of most Iowa school social workers, however the number of school social workers employed by local school districts has steadily grown over the past two decades. The Iowa School Social Workers Association continues to unite school social workers' efforts to improve services in collaboration

with the Midwest School Social Work Council, the Iowa Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the School Social Work Membership Section of NASW, and the School Social Work Association of America.

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