Social Work Education: Preparation for Social Work Practice in Sectarian Settings

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This article describes a model of one school's experience in integrating the ethnic component into the entire fabric of the school, into non-ethnic courses and even into non-curriculum areas . . . the primary objective . . . (being) to prepare students for social work practice in the general community with particular emphasis on the Jewish community.

Schools of social work have recently become much more concerned about the preparation of social workers for professional practice in ethnic communities. In order to meet these concerns, courses with ethnic content were added to the curriculum in recognition of students' need to understand and value the ethnic and cultural component of their work with these communities.

The educational programs that have emerged were usually grafted onto already existing curricula. Most programs consisted of a number of courses with specific ethnic content, and perhaps a number of field placements in agencies serving the particular ethnic community. The integration of this content into the ongoing program of the school was considered to be desirable, but rarely achieved. Nevertheless, students with particular interests in ethnic groups were afforded opportunities to study the culture of the group in order to be attuned to its values, ideals, behavior patterns, and issues of minority status in a majority culture.

The field of Jewish communal service has always been concerned with the preparation of its practitioners for professional practice. It was felt that professional expertise was not sufficient to render effective service, but the practitioner needed a knowledge of the history, values, culture and particular behavioral patterns of the Jewish group. This knowledge would enable the practitioners to be sensitive to the nuances of the client's behavior that may trace its etiology in cultural values rather than in psychodynamic process. Without this knowledge, the practitioners may err in ascribing idiosyncratic behavior to pathological sources, when they may actually be an expression of a prescribed religious ritual. In order to meet the particularistic ethnic needs of the organized Jewish community through professional education, the Wurzweiler School of Social Work was founded in 1957. Its primary objective was to prepare students for social work practice in the general society, with particular emphasis on the Jewish community.

This paper is a case study of the Jewish dimension of the Wurzweiler School. Its significance in the curriculum, and in non-curriculum areas will be discussed within the general framework of the ethnic dimension of professional education for social work.

The Wurzweiler School began with an idea, conceived by the late Dr. Samuel Belkin, president of Yeshiva University, that there ought to be a school under Yeshiva University's auspices that translates Jewish values regarding man's relationship to man into professional forms. Some of these values are expressed in acts of *hesed* and *tzedakah*—kindness and righteousness.

Though the School was conceived through an "idea," its functioning and the conception of its Jewish objectives are influenced by the "materialist conception" —by what the needs of the people are and by the demands of agency service. Concerns and issues from the field of practice and the profession are integrated into the curriculum. Realities of practice in the agencies are a great concern but the School also has a point of view. Faculty teach what they think students ought to know if they intend to work in Jewish agencies. These represent faculty ideas that provide a framework for practice.

The American Jews and Their Society Course

The Jewish dimension of Wurzweiler is manifested mainly in two year-long courses, in other courses, in certain policies and procedures, and in the ambience of the School.

The major objective of the *American Jews* course is to help students to become aware of, and sensitive to, the ethnic and cultural component of their clients' backgrounds. The Jews, as a group, serve as a paradigm to illustrate this objective. The emphasis on the ethnic component in social work practice serves several functions:

1. It enables students to deal with their own ethnic and religious identities. This obtains for non-Jewish and Jewish students alike.

2. The heterogeneity in the class enables the Jewish students to encounter differing ideologies. Many Orthodox and non-Orthodox students, as well as non-Jewish students, learn about each other's point-of-view for the first time in the class, and they invariably develop a healthy respect for each other. As Peter Berger once said, "face to face interaction reduces typification."

3. The student's perception of the client changes. He is educated to view the client not only from a psychological, sociological and systems perspective but from the perspective of his group's history, values and beliefs.

4. The course provides an opportunity for students to explore the meaning of the ethnicity of an agency. The major issues revolve around the definition of an agency's ethnic auspices and their translation into objectives, practice and service.

The emphasis in this course on the ethnic and cultural component of practice is a *mission* of the School. This is our idea in response to the gaps in practice. Experience has shown that social workers, particularly Jewish social workers, tend to avoid, overlook, deny and not tune in to the Jewish issues in the clients'/members' concerns. Wurzweiler faculty feels they are educating a generation of social workers who will be aware of their own ethnic identities and will be sensitive to this dimension in the clients' lives. Students are encouraged to share their practice experience and within a conceptual framework, provided by the faculty. The student learns to view people not merely in their universal dimensions as human beings, but in their particularistic associations as members of ethnic groups—Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, Italians, etc. This perspective contributes to the student's perception of the client as a whole person and to his unique identity as a member of a particular group.

Students who have written papers on the ethnic component for this course can attest to the significance of understanding the client's behavior in the framework of the distinctive cultural, ethnic, and religious values of his group. They develop sensitivity to this dynamic in the client's background and to the ways in which it is intertwined with his problems and identity. Students use their knowledge of ethnicity to view the client in his social and communal context. Awareness of the ethnic and cultural components of behavior enlarges the social worker's view of the client beyond his individual psychology.

Students report sensitivity to the Jewish

identity component of the client's narrative has had the effect of opening long dormant aspects of self that nostalgically exude warmth, love, nurturing and caring. The professional relationship takes a different turn. There is greater rapport, more sharing of feelings, less tension. The professional and the client open up more fully to each other, for the connection is no longer merely on a rational level but on an emotional level that touches profound feelings about self, family and community, values and aspirations.

The Jewish Social Philosophy Course

The introduction of this course into the curriculum was motivated by an idea—that there is an "elective affinity" between a Jewish philosophy of man and social work's philosophy of man, despite the fact that one is a religion and the other is a profession. The task of the teacher and students is to search out the common ground between these two systems of thought as well as their areas of difference. The purpose of the course is to help students to develop a philosophy of helping that is grounded in, and strengthened by, the beliefs and values of their ethnic/religious group. Here, too, the ground is the student's practice. A philosophical framework is provided by faculty to help students conceive their practice from a different perspective. Excerpts from student papers illustrate the achievement of this objective.

One student describes a ten-year-old schizophrenic boy with whom she is working as one who has no friends, can barely read, cannot concentrate on learning and has great difficulty separating from his mother. She interprets his behavior and his problem from the perspective of Buber's I-Thou relationship:

> . . . how will David achieve personhood? He has not separated from his mother enough to develop and know his I, his own internal centre. Since he is related to by his parents as a "problem child" (their terms) who does not produce or perform adequately and is not a source of satisfaction or joy to them, isn't there a good chance he is learning to see himself in this way? How can someone who is such a disappointment to the most significant people in his life enter into relationship with others? The anticipated pains of being a disappointment once again with others may be enough to make one withdraw from relationship and from what Buber defines as real life. (All real life is dialogue, meeting.) What I am trying to say is that you have to have an I before you can have an I-Thou relationship. You have to respect and love yourself in order to be able to genuinely give love and respect to others. Buber put it this way: "One must truly be able to say I in order to know the mystery of the Thou in its whole truth."

Another student made a connection between sin and repentence in Judaism and the process through which clients go when they come to the agency for help and engage in a relationship with a social worker.

> Just as in repentence man seeks to do better in the future should he be confronted by similar circumstances so that he would not choose sin again as he acted, man seeks to improve the temporal and spiritual conditions of society. He thus participates in creation by reshaping the world, a world which is as yet unredeemed.

More specifically, the process of change appears to be similar.

> Just as the repentant Jew is asked to remember his sin and learn from it, the client, too, can learn from his past experiences as he tries out new behavior and travels toward new horizons.

One student made a connection between God's creation of the world and the professional self. Isaac Luria, a Jewish mystic, conceived the doctrine of *tzimtzum* containment, contraction as the means by which God created the world. Felice Grunberger explained it in her own words:

> Creation was actually predicated upon God's contraction as opposed to His emanation or externalization. The idea that the all-powerful divinity withdraws something of Himself to create is awesome. It suggests that God con-

> ceived of man as so precious that He willfully gave up part of Himself in order for man to exist. It suggests further that containment is a necessary preparation or prelude to creation. Implicit within the Lurianic view is the concept that creation is not solely a process of emancipation but one of intentional restraint.

Containment is interpreted as a nonverbal act of self-restraint. "Containment is a necessary hesitation on the part of the worker and an intentional tentativeness in action. The worker is asked to will herself to be contracted. The contraction of the worker enables the expansion of the client's freedom to create a process of relationship."[7] Another name for the worker's contraction or containment is the conscious use of the self.

One student viewed social work in a religious context:

> I cannot create an I-You relationship—not even if I went to social work school for ten more years. If a relationship reaches an I-You quality, it is a grace. My part in it is to be ready and perceptive, to put my judgment and values aside temporarily, to tune in—not only to the client, but also to what goes on around him—and us—and in the "space between" us. Social work is an ideal way to serve God. It means to prepare the stage so that He can reveal himself.

These excerpts from papers written for the *Jewish Social Philosophy* course illustrate a conception of practice from a philosophical base. These students viewed clients from a perspective other than social work theory. The course offered them an opportunity to gain new insights into the helping process and to understand their clients within a different framework.

The *Jewish Social Philosophy* course also deals with practical issues. The students' practice experiences influence their choice of subject matter for investigating Jewish and social work values and their implications for practice. Subjects dealt with during the second semester include:

1. Relationships: a) male and female, the role of the woman; b) husband-wife sexuality; parent-child—the family; c) Jew-non-Jew—sectarianism of agencies and the relationship among students in the school.
2. Ethics of fund-raising.
3. Death and dying—ethical issues in health care.
4. A Jewish philosophy of social work practice.

While the Jewish dimension is prominent in the *American Jews* and *Jewish Social Philosophy* courses, it is manifested in other courses, too. In the social work practice courses as well as the *Social Welfare Organization* course, the concept and role of the agency are discussed. Since students are placed in Jewish agencies, the agencies' functions are seen in terms of their objectives as sectarian institutions and their community sanction.

In the practice courses, students tend to see Holocaust survivors among their caseloads; they are responsible for Jewish programming in Centers and Y's; they are actively involved in fund-raising for the local Federation and United Jewish Appeal.

In the Human Behavior and Social Environment course, behavior change is compared with the *t'shuvah* (repentance-process) in Judaism. Rites of passage such as naming a child, puberty, marriage and death are viewed cross-culturally, with particular emphasis on the Jewish perspective. The cultural dimension is one of the features of the course that aims to help students to understand the variety of human behavior during the developmental stages of life.

Since the predominant group of the student body is Jewish, and students are encouraged to express their views and feelings in class, it is inevitable that Jewish issues will be introduced whether they originate in agency practice, Jewish values and traditions, contemporary Jewish life, or the social biography of the student. Students are helped to develop respect for their own cultural background as well as accepting the difference that other students

and clients bring.

The specifically Jewish courses have a reciprocal relationship with the rest of the curriculum. There is overlap as well as uniqueness, but even when there is overlap, the same subjects are viewed from different perspectives, depending on the purposes of the course. Ideas are reinforced in different courses as Jewish and non-Jewish students engage with each other around issues that divide and unite them as social workers.

The Jewish Dimension in Non-Curriculum Areas

Preference is given to Jewish agencies as the locus for the field of instruction of students. The Jewishness of the agency, though, is not the major criterion for selection; it is rather the environment that they provide for student learning. Students are placed in all agencies that meet this criterion regardless of their sectarian auspice.

The issue of Jewishness assumes prominence in the admissions interview. After exploring the candidate's reasons for choosing social work, the interviewer asks for the reasons for applying to Wurzweiler. This question opens the issue of the Jewishness of the School and the candidate's ethnic identity. The interview then takes a turn toward the exploration of feelings regarding identity, family ties, and group belonging. Non-Jewish candidates are asked to consider the meaning of attending a Jewish-sponsored school. They are told that they, too, will have an opportunity to examine their own ethnic and religious identities.

The Block Education Program has introduced another dimension to the Jewish purposes of the School. Wurzweiler extends its educational program to students in predominantly Jewish agencies across the North American continent, Israel, Australia, and Alaska to express its commitment to serve and maintain ties with the far-flung Jewish community.

The Jewish Ambience at the School

Jewish holidays are celebrated at the School by students, staff and faculty. On Purim, we read the *Megillah* (Scroll of Esther) and dine at a traditional Purim *Seudah* (party). Chanukah and Israel's Independence Day are also celebrated, and the Warsaw Ghetto uprising is commemorated.

Each office and classroom has a *Mezuzah* on its doorpost. *Mezuzot* have profound theological and mystical significance.

The requirement that all students depart early from their agencies on Fridays in order to arrive home before the Sabbath is a policy of the School. It applies to the non-Jewish students as well, and obtains regardless of the particular student's degree of religious observance.

The emphases in the School on learning, the maintenance of high standards, and the student's responsibility for his own learning reflect the traditional Jewish concern with education and intellectual pursuits.

Some faculty members, as well as many students, wear *kippot*, head coverings, that have religious significance.

A brief story of a Hasidic Rabbi and his disciples sums up what we are attempting to do at the School.

> When thousands of disciples came to the Gerer Rebbi on a festival, the Gerer said to them: "Let me be candid with you. You cannot depend upon me as an intermediary between God and ourselves. I can merely attempt to point out to you the right paths in good conduct, leading to Godliness. But you must walk thereon without my aid. Learn to stand on your own feet, and even if your Rebbi is not a great man, you will not fall.