

“Driving Ms. Jane Addams”: Students and Instructors Learn in Field Education

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In this narrative article, I share the story of two white female social work students from small predominantly white Midwestern towns, who were placed at the same site in an African American urban inner-city field assignment in Chicago, Illinois. Invariably, the students and I encountered challenges and obstacles while attempting to work with the youth, parents, and teachers at their site. In the process of supervising the students, we all learned valuable social work lessons.

This article describes my experience supervising two undergraduate social work interns in a field placement at the same project site. Both students were from a small, private Christian college located in the Midwest. Each student reviewed descriptions of a variety of potential placement sites and self-selected their placement at the university-community wellness project in Chicago. I became a field instructor for undergraduate social work students while directing the university-community health partnership in Chicago, Illinois. The project was housed in a public elementary school in the urban inner-city community, West Englewood.

The community was populated with over 98% African American residents. One out of three households was headed by a single female, compared to 13% – or slightly less than one out of eight households – across the city. The median income of West Englewood residents was \$22,131 compared to \$45,734 for all city residents. West Englewood had very high rates of unemployment. In Chicago, slightly less than 20% of the population lives below the poverty level. In West Englewood, 43.8% of the population lives below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2010). West Englewood was a crime-ridden, poverty-filled ghetto with under-performing public schools.

The primary goals of the university-community health partnership were to improve the health and wellness among third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade youth and their families through community

organizing activities and educational, medical, social, recreational, cultural awareness, counseling, and mentoring services. The students were assigned to every area of the project (Angelique, Kyle, & Taylor, 2002). The project offered a uniquely exciting opportunity for students to learn while practicing social work. As their field instructor, I had an opportunity to learn the importance of how to guide them through their conceptualization of cultural competence in social work practice.

Student Profiles

Ms. Avery* was a 21-year-old white female; an only child who was raised in a Jewish home in a predominantly white small Midwestern town. She attended predominantly white primary and high schools and admitted having little or no contact with African Americans while she was growing up. Ms. Avery was an observer, with a dry but keenly intelligent manner of someone who obviously had difficulty with new people and new places. She spoke at a very fast pace with precise and measured words and absolute authority. She seemed to unconsciously keep people at arm’s length while exuding a kind of snobbery. She was clearly xenophobic. She voiced her most important goal for the field placement as “really wanting to make a difference by helping people to change their lives.” While her emphatic expression was an important component, it was clear to me that she would need some direction with this population.

The other student, Ms. Karson,* was a 23-year-old

white female; a third child from a middle-class Christian home. Ms. Karson grew up in an overwhelmingly white community in a small Midwestern town of about 50,000. She attended high school with a handful of African American students. She described having at least one "Black associate," not friend, during high school as a result of participating in the publication of the school's newspaper. As she spoke, Ms. Karson's eyes glowed with a sparkle of curiosity. When queried about what she expected to get out of her experience, Ms. Karson said that she "planned to learn about how to do social work in real live situations, with real live people," where she "could really help." It was evident to me from the beginning that she was eager to learn and also needed some direction with this population. Together the two students mutually shared the goal of wanting to help and the belief that they could do it.

The Journey Begins: Orientation

I designed a comprehensive orientation experience for both students. I wanted to make sure they were well prepared for what was ahead. I envisioned that the young interns would be like "fish out of water" in this new and tough environment. The students had much to learn as they were so culturally different from the population they would serve. The West Englewood community was a rough neighborhood, and the youth and families were experiencing a diverse set of long-standing and hard-to-handle issues. I knew that I would have to conduct a considerable amount of cultural education in order for them to be prepared for their placement. While I was hopeful about the students' ability to adjust to their new work environment, I was admittedly frightened and lacked confidence in their dedication to continue the momentum they had each so eagerly displayed.

The students' seasoning began with a windshield survey tour of the community. I drove slowly through the neighborhood. I wanted them to see it all. If they were going to back out, I wanted them to withdraw early in the process. I pointed out significant sites which included the neighborhood police station, key restaurants, the district offices of the Department of Children and Family Services, the whereabouts of drug sales, street gang hangouts, prostitutes' gathering places, and the locations of

partner community-based organizations. It was important for them to get a real sense of where they would be working, and with whom, on a day-to-day basis. This neighborhood would be their working home for the next several months. We stopped several times, got out of the car and walked to get a more intimate feel of the area. They commented about the large number of obviously unemployed men hanging around the streets pan handling. I understood their questions and comments. It was clear that the students were in a foreign land with a totally different custom and language than what they knew.

I was concerned about their ability to understand the realness of this poverty stricken neighborhood right from the start. I began to ask myself, "Would they be able to make the adjustments required to successfully work in West Englewood?" This concern unfolded even more when the students questioned me about the language used by the youth and families. I encouraged them to write down slang terms and listen to the teenagers for cues to understand the language. I also suggested that the novice interns find youth (cultural brokers) that they felt comfortable with to ask questions about language and the community (Poulin, Kauffman, & Silver, 2006). It was imperative that I address each cultural barrier as it arose.

I arranged a series of meetings with youth, parents, school officials, and a group of social workers (mostly aboriginal residents of West Englewood) who had been working and living in the community over the past ten to twenty years. Each social worker gave short presentations about their projects and detailed their experiences in the community. The youth, parents, and school officials introduced themselves and welcomed the students to West Englewood. Six weeks had passed. This officially concluded the students' orientation. They were ready to go. At least, I hoped they were ready to go. Quite frankly, I was still apprehensive about their launch into the community.

The Work Begins...

Each student was assigned to five youth and their respective families in addition to their group and other activity responsibilities. They were expected to facilitate a minimum of one individual session and one family session per week. After several

difficult and busy weeks, the newness of the placement had worn off. During weekly supervision sessions Ms. Avery continually complained about the youths' lack of motivation and complete disrespect for their teachers (Collardey, 2012). She explained how the youth and their parents frequently used profanity, which was often directed towards authority figures. She was frustrated by parents' repeated tardiness or missing appointments without notice. Youth and parents began to routinely refuse to attend or participate in their counseling sessions. Teachers at the project came across as being uncooperative. Ms. Avery asked, "Who do they think they are?" She exclaimed, "They do not want help from me!" It seemed as if nothing was going right, and it continued for weeks. Ms. Avery was frustrated, discouraged, and unfulfilled. It was difficult for me to listen.

Ms. Karson received the same treatment. What began as a richly promising opportunity had quickly turned into the beginnings of a nightmare. Youth were unruly in classes and groups and the majority of the time was used just trying to maintain order. Strangely, Ms. Karson expressed a different attitude while discussing her experience after a month. With a puzzled look on her face Ms. Karson angrily proclaimed, "These children and their parents are stretching me. I can see that it is going to take more than me just arriving and them getting better. All I can say is that I don't know what to do." Clearly Ms. Karson was perplexed, puzzled, bewildered, and embarrassed about not knowing what to do. To my astonishment, the social work students were clearly in a state of uncertainty and indecision as to what to do in this difficult situation. I was becoming impatient and intolerant of their naiveté. All I could do is ask myself, "What have I gotten myself into?"

I was puzzled about how to help the student social workers. Ms. Avery expected that both youth and parents would be readily receptive to her help and respond with change. Ms. Karson was confused and searched for direction from me (Poulin, Kauffman & Silver, 2006). I must admit, at first I was baffled and sorely disappointed at the students' responses to what I thought was a terrific placement. It made no sense to me that senior social work students would be so obviously out of touch with how to do social work.

As I went over and over the student's experiences, I realized that both were motivated by common forces. Ms. Karson and Ms. Avery were driven by their Judeo-Christian values to help others in need. I knew they would not give up the fight easily, and neither would I. While I had over twenty years of social services experience, and recently completed the field instructor training at the University of Illinois, I didn't know much about social work. I was just two months into the Masters of Social Work program myself. Something very strange began to happen. As I became more and more comfortable with understanding who the students were, my confidence grew in their ability to be successful. I realized that the students' deeply religious faith and beliefs would somehow get them past their current hurdles and obstacles. I also recognized the importance of my learning through the student's experiences.

One thing was certain; I needed to change my strategies for helping the students to learn to practice social work. I recognized that I was too relaxed with making sure that their weekly supervision sessions took place. I also realized that I was not thoughtful about what the supervision sessions need to cover. I tightened up my planning of the sessions to better address their ongoing practice needs and concerns. I began to meet with both students at least once a week for supervision, and for a while two or three times a week to make sure that they had the support they needed to be successful. I observed Avery and Karson in practice with the youth and their parents. I planned out the supervision meetings to make certain we covered topics important to both me and them. I began to sing the song over and over that the entire field placement was a "great learning opportunity." Much to my surprise, Avery and Karson never listened to the youth, parents, or teachers, but had all the answers, a critical engagement error. I could see the social work students preparing their answers while the youth were talking. They were not listening. I began to realize they were lacking the necessary skill of active listening, a foundation taught during their practice classes prior to entering their field placement.

I remembered my introduction to the planned change process in social work practice classes (Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002). This was an

opportunity for me to try out what I had recently heard about in class. I was unsure if I had really learned the material. All I could do is to give it a try. For the next several weeks I reviewed the basics of the planned change process. I worked with Ms. Avery and Ms. Karson to pay strict attention to each phase of the process, beginning with engagement and moving through assessment, planning, and implementation. We worked on authenticity, genuineness, being present, and active listening. The automatic and quick responses slowed and eventually disappeared from their interactions with the youth and parents. They were actually listening, learning, and beginning to conceptualize the importance of the change process.

I began to see the change in how the social work students interacted with the youth, parents, and school personnel. More importantly, I could see an improvement in relationships between the interns and the youth and parents. The youth and parents began to search out the social work students. There was no longer any need for the social work students to hunt down the youth and parents for groups or individual sessions. The interns had finally begun to build rapport and engage the youth and families, imperative first steps in the change process. I realized that my assessment of my own teaching style, coupled with the belief in the students, was an integral component of teaching for both me and the social work students.

We All Learned...

We all learned from the supervision meetings and regular check-ins that changes were possible for some of the youth, their families, and for us. Staying focused was critical to any chances we had at being successful. The student social workers had to earn the respect of the youth and parents. They had taken for granted that they would be automatically respected. I modeled active listening instead of doing all the talking. I stressed focusing on the seemingly small things that were really the most important things like authenticity, genuineness, and empathy (Paying, 2011). Positive results of our work were forthcoming.

After professional development training on cultural competency, I learned that the first stage of becoming culturally competent is self-awareness or self-assessment. This important ingredient leads to

self-knowledge and is the direct result of deep thought. I had totally neglected this step as I focused all of my teaching energy and attention on the neighborhood. I subsequently learned that the idea of cultural competency goes beyond the superficial level to that of introspection and self-understanding (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989).

The students helped me put what I had learned in the classroom into practice. I never thought that I would learn from what I had termed as "their learning experience." We made "lemonade from lemons" through constant collaboration and self-reflection. I was energized, encouraged, and confident about being a social worker. It never dawned on me that I would learn as much as, if not more than, the students from their field placement. Seeing the social work world through the eyes of the students gave me a fresh look and reaffirmed my conviction to the profession. Supervision was an opportunity for me to learn. I learned while the students learned (Thorndike, Gusic, & Milner, 2008).

Ms. Avery and Ms. Karson both sang the same songs stating that, "Change is a process not an event. Change takes time and usually does not happen quickly. And, change generally happens in tiny steps." Over the course of nearly 500 hours, I had watched two young women grow as social workers. Oh, and I nearly forgot again, I grew too. While the experience was not all "peaches and cream," when we evaluated their work it was clear that some things were positively different in the lives of a few West Englewood youth and families. Likewise, I was changed forever.

I would go on to work in university-community partnerships, complete two masters' degrees, and earn a doctorate in higher education. Many social workers are motivated to become field instructors so they can give back to the profession, influence and impact the development of new social workers, and to build their own careers (Ensher, Thomas & Murphy, 2001).

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* The names of the students are pseudonyms.