

MENTORSHIP IN SOCIAL WORK: A DIALOGUE OF POWERFUL INTERPLAY

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This narrative is a reflection on the experiences and awareness of a social work mentoring process. The historical background of two social workers is presented through the lens of a mentoring relationship in an attempt to provide services to troubled youth and families in the State of Georgia. Based on many discussions over several years with both social workers, this narrative serves as a testimony for the positive contributions that can develop from mentorship in the field of social work.

Introduction

This is the early morning of what would have been Jeannette Comer Noell's 95th birthday had she lived past age 93. Her time ended after a serious fall, subsequent surgery, and a respiratory embolism. Mrs. Noell (my maternal grandmother) was often referred to as "wise beyond her time." She was a skilled social worker and educator in the State of Georgia for many years. However, if you were to talk with her, there would be a sense of humility about her wherein she would give credit to many other people who gave her a helping hand along life's journey. One of the special people she often mentioned was her mentor in the field of social work, Ms. Elsie Nesbit, whom I always refer to as "Elsie."

According to Mrs. Noell, whom I always call "Nette," there was a time in her life—after the death of her husband, Willis Newton Noell—that she had to change careers and earn a higher income to support her two daughters. Due to the high demand in the late 1940s and 1950s, social workers were paid more than school teachers. She was asked to pursue a new position that the State of Georgia created, which was referred to as a "visiting teacher" or "school social worker." In order for Nette to enter this new position, she had to successfully complete more education from the University of Georgia. When she entered the University of Georgia, she was introduced to her instructor Ms. Elsie Nesbit. Little did they know that their connection would carry meaning well beyond their work.

This narrative describes the more than 40 year connection between Nette and Elsie, which includes a reflection from the author's perspective about the impact of their connection and focuses primarily on mentorship in social work. It has been suggested that such a long, close friendship established from mentoring in social work is a rare gem that must be documented. Therefore, this work purports to make transparent their connection such that other mentors and mentees can have knowledge about making a powerful impact on another social worker's life.

Reflections on the Impact of Mentorship: The Author's Perspective

Being the granddaughter of a social worker who was so involved and committed to service in the early years of education and social work has given me much to be grateful for. The impact of mentorship that my grandmother shared with me, as well as her values and her sense of loyalty to serving the underprivileged in society, has certainly contributed in large part to my career in social work. Nette did not urge me to pursue social work as a career. In fact, I do not recall her ever mentioning that I might explore social work as a college major. Instead, she shared her experiences and values with our family. She explained her views about helping the economically challenged segment of the population, and the importance of respecting the privacy and integrity of those in need of clothing by giving clothing inconspicuously through the use of a "clothes

closet" organization and personal delivery. She shared the importance of perseverance with people in authority in order to stand up for social justice, or to speak for people who were not able to speak for themselves. These and other lessons that I later learned were pertinent to the profession of social work are firmly rooted in my being. I still feel her sense of value in giving kind and thoughtful service to others in my everyday commitment to social work practice.

When it was time to make a decision about declaring my college major and career decision, I was drawn to social work because of certain related coursework and instructors that I was involved with in courses like Introduction to Psychology and Sociology. I investigated careers and college majors through the career development center at the University of Georgia, where I was tested to match my interests and skills to certain careers. Social work was clearly in the forefront of discussion in those days, and I thought that the systematic, methodical steps I'd taken to reach my decision—as well as my test results—were what made me destined to pursue social work as a career. It has since become quite clear that the influence of my grandmother's values and the love and respect that she earned in our family were what gently nudged me to become a social worker more than anything else.

Getting to know Elsie through my grandmother and hearing about their professional history and personal friendship made a profound difference in my career choice as well. Both were very warm, approachable ladies who always made time to sit and talk and solve or prevent problems. Listening to their exchanges, having the great fortune to be in the company of one or both of them has meant the world to me in my personal and professional development. These two ladies instilled in me basic social work values and a commitment to serving others that leaves me grateful beyond words.

I have since encountered an abundance of other mentors on my journey in the field of social work, from many different facets of the profession (e.g., academia, mental health inpatient/outpatient settings, both urban and

rural). Thanks to them, I have learned to appreciate discussions about ways to critically evaluate client systems and issues. Some mentors have guided me by sharing empirical research methods and opening my eyes to the world of evidence-based practice. Others have guided me through honest, direct, and high level trust exchanges about ways to navigate complex social service systems, and to improve self-care in order to better serve our clients. I have encountered many mentors who have spent countless hours with me in both professional and personal discussions where, in the moment, I have been increasingly aware of the value in trust, openness, support, and sharing. These encounters have been invaluable in terms of developing my ability to be present and honor the sacredness of the moment; the meaningful connection I witnessed between Nette and Elsie was evidence of how rewarding this can be. It is with this immense gratitude that I share this manuscript with the larger world in an effort to transmit what has been freely given to me.



History of the "Visiting Teacher" or "School Social Worker"

During the early 1940's, the Georgia Education Association, the Georgia Teachers and Education Association, and other organizations began urging policy makers to raise standards in education throughout the State of Georgia (Nesbit, 1976). Some of the major concerns were the need to raise teacher salaries and teacher qualifications, as well as to increase funding to schools across Georgia. In an effort to improve education and educational outcomes, the Compulsory School Attendance Law was passed in January, 1945 (Nesbit, 1976). This law established Georgia as the fourth state in the United States to pass legislation which created a statewide, school-related occupational position which is now

known throughout America as a "school social worker" (Nesbit, 1976).

Elsie was a pioneer in bringing social work to the educational system in the form of the visiting teacher/school social worker (vt/ssw) program to Georgia, and was very enthusiastic about it. In 1945, there was no school of social work in Georgia. On scholarship, she went out of state to earn an MSW. Upon her return, she was appointed director of the vt/ssw training at University of Georgia College of Education. Nette had been employed by her school in Cleveland, Georgia as a vt/ssw, and was in Elsie's first class.

The name "visiting teacher" was established in the early stages of the public welfare system, when use of the term "social worker" was not widely accepted at that time (Nesbit, 1976). As a result of this new legislation and failed attempts to mandate school attendance, it became important to the State of Georgia Department of Education that there be a well-trained professional to assist in the welfare of children and their education. In 1945, the Georgia Department of Education voted to alert every school superintendent in writing of the policy to hire a visiting teacher/school social worker that met specific guidelines. This included providing a professional service concerned with compulsory attendance, removing the causes of absenteeism, and promoting child development and regular school attendance (Nesbit, 1976).

Nesbit (1976) noted that this school attendance law acted as a profound catalyst to alter the use of children as laborers on farms and other work places by placing them in schools to learn. Visiting teachers or school social workers found themselves in the midst of multiple conflicts related to farmers and other Georgia citizens not wanting to abide by the law. While the purpose of the law was to *help* families get their children to school, there were many times when vt/ssws were placed in challenging positions having to hold the need for school attendance against the wishes of the family. In addition, the social and economic problems of the state affected children, and consequently became issues of the vt/ssws (Nesbit, 1976). For example, in order to

perform this job well, a reliable car was necessary to travel throughout communities and new cars were not readily available after World War II. Thus, many vt/ssws expressed feeling very blessed to be some of the first community members to get new cars after the war (Nesbit, 1976).

Vt/ssws began to join together and learn about one another through a workshop held at the University of Georgia (Nesbit, 1976). At the workshop urgent needs were made known, methods were shared, and they all came together in support of each other. After many years dealing with racial segregation and other issues in professional organizations, many vt/ssw's joined the National Association of Social Workers. Nesbit (1976) reported that Georgia became a front runner in America for developing state-wide professional school social work services.

The establishment of a specific training and certification program for vt/ssws was a lengthy process. After many gradual changes due to ever-increasing standards of certification set by the State Department of Education and the demands of the vt/ssws, the Georgia Association of Visiting Teachers worked to improve training opportunities (Nesbit, 1976). Through a joint effort and much work, the College of Education at the University of Georgia and many others made it possible for continuous graduate school education for vt/ssws, and a standard for obtaining a Masters of Education degree was put into place.

Even though the vt/ssw's program of study was based in social work philosophy, the education took place in the College of Education. Nesbit (1976) reported that in the year of 1964, the vt/ssw's graduate program was moved to the newly developed School of Social Work at University of Georgia. In her book *Nesbit Family History*, Elsie stated that she sat on the search committee for the first dean of the newly opened School of Social Work at University of Georgia, and was in the president's office when he was hired (Schwinn & Nesbit, 2000). She noted that having a school of social work where the vt/ssw's program could be based was a necessary beginning (Nesbit, 1976).

Mentorship in Social Work: Reflections of Nette and Elsie

On multiple occasions, Nette spoke of the importance of her education in the field of social work. The focus on community outreach in the form of assistance to vulnerable populations was paramount to meaningful social work. Both of these social workers were involved in the development of social work programs at schools to assist youth who were showing signs of difficulty in a variety of areas. During the time when Elsie mentored Nette, they discussed many cases and brainstormed approaches to assist the troubled youth and families in Georgia. In accordance with the compulsory school attendance law, the mission of the school social worker was to assure that a) children attended school and b) to investigate solutions for children who were not present to learn each day. As was previously discussed, this work was not easy but Elsie reported, "My memories of that time are almost entirely positive...the long, honest discussions, the way people interacted with each other, the way they handled emotions..." Elsie concluded her reflections by stating, "...some lasting friendships were formed" (Schwinn & Nesbit, 2000, p. 158). Through paving the way for school social work to happen in Georgia, new approaches to dealing with real life situations were forged and maintained, and many enduring friendships were established.

Throughout discussions with Nette, she repeatedly emphasized her concern for children who were marginalized due to poverty. She later developed a way to provide clothing for disadvantaged youth by putting nearly new clothes in plain paper bags to disguise the contents from peers who might ridicule their circumstances. The bags of clothing were distributed by the school social worker and were made possible through local community donations. This practice became popular and led to the development of a used clothing shop housed on the grounds of a local church. This enabled economically challenged people to obtain clothing in a dignified way.

As previously mentioned, the mentorship between these two women began when Nette was training to become a school social worker,

and their relationship lasted for more than 40 years. Nette reported that they spoke on the phone weekly, and that they would take turns initiating the calls in order to share the expense. From discussing cases of troubled youth in a professional context, to updating each other on the current happenings in their lives—ultimately helping each other endure personal life challenges such as transitions in where each lived, health issues, and family challenges—these two southern ladies remained well connected via telephone and letters.

Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

The capacity of a mentorship relationship to expand into an extended meaningful connection is important for social work education and practice. According to Stakrava (2005), many persistent social and cultural barriers can potentially impede the success of new teachers and students. There are many potential multi-cultural issues beyond economic problems that may pose barriers to social workers and educators. For example, racial and ethnic issues, language barriers, sexual orientation, and identity issues are of increasing concern in social work communication styles and approaches to dealing with potential social problems (Ambrosino, Heffernan, Shuttlesworth, & Ambrosino, 2008; Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2006). A seasoned social worker can assist in educating students about possible barriers in such a way that solutions can be created, and what appear to be barriers can be turned into fruitful discussions.

Mentoring may bridge the new teacher or student into positive career experiences and can be vital to a successful career. Stakrava (2005) also emphasizes the importance of the mentor describing his/her own experiences with basic life struggles so that the mentee can be allowed to have and feel a human connection. According to descriptions from Nette, Elsie was open about her personal challenges and welcomed Nette to do the same in an effort to foster meaningful connections between them. These discussions provided Nette with an opportunity to open safely up to

Elsie as a human being in addition to a professional seeking advice.

Collins (1994) produced empirical evidence about whether or not mentorship between social workers really makes a difference. This study demonstrated that while there was no causal link between mentorship and career success, there were positive outcomes for both sides. The evidence emphasized that the investment of time and effort involved in a mentoring relationship in social work can benefit all parties involved in career satisfaction, income levels, and overall success. Hence, mentoring in social work practice has the potential for positive change.

Conclusion

Mentoring in the early days of school social work meant a great deal to Nette and Elsie and apparently to many other vt/ssws. There is an unspoken yet deeply felt sharing of support and common philosophy between social workers. From the wise words of Elsie Nesbit, "No two vt/ssws are exactly alike in what they think and feel and do, and yet no one is entirely different from all the others" (Nesbit, 1976, p. 1). Through sharing common experiences and philosophy, there is still room for flexible variations on how to approach a situation.

While joining together in a pioneer journey toward better educational experiences for all children, the dedication, struggles, and many shared emotions and experiences enabled many vt/ssws to form lasting and meaningful connections that made a difference in their lives and many others. One social worker helping another may have a ripple effect more powerful than can be imagined, and many lives may be improved by participating in the process.

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