
Gary L. Shaffer

As we celebrate the centennial of school social work, the field faces many of the same professional and social situations first encountered at the turn of the past century. Immigrant populations are growing rapidly, social worker–student ratios continue to be high, and schools remain bureaucratic, inflexible, and slow to change. The “Roaring Twenties” marked the greatest expansion in early school social work, and a time in which many of the core functions were first identified. These functions persist today as school social work retains its role linking home, school, and community. However, the social action and leadership emphasis of early school social work pioneers has been replaced primarily by casework with maladjusted students and a peripheral role in the decision-making process in schools. This article identifies successful practice, training, and education of early school social work practitioners and reflects on how current practice has advanced or digressed with the passage of time.

KEY WORDS: history; promising practice; school social work

A 1920 New York Times article (“Visiting Teachers Meet”) reporting on the recently formed National Association of Visiting Teachers trumpeted, “As a result of their visits the pupils are so improved that they are enabled to advance from grade to grade regularly, whereas if they were left alone they would in many instances fail to do so” (p. 14). It was an impressive achievement that the influence of school social workers—or visiting teachers as they were then called—was being recognized less than 15 years from the initiation of the practice in New York, Boston, Chicago, and Hartford, Connecticut. However, 1920 was merely the beginning of the greatest expansion of the visiting teacher practice. During the Roaring Twenties, explosive immigration and universal attendance laws fueled the need for visiting teachers. As the practice rapidly expanded, critical discoveries about the structure and best practices of the visiting teacher programs were used to shape this developing field.

Ironically, as we celebrate the centennial of school social work, the field is facing many of the same professional and social situations first encountered in the 1920s. Therefore, this is a propitious time to explore the best practices of the 1920s; an examination that may help to inform current practice by addressing the following three questions: What successful practice standards were developed? How were early pioneers prepared for practice? Has current practice advanced or digressed with the passage of time?

A rich picture of the visiting teacher efforts in both large cities and small communities during the 1920s is painted by the well-documented visiting teacher demonstration programs established by the Commonwealth Fund in the 1920s, the work of the Public Education Association of New York City, and the professional literature of the time (Culbert, 1921, 1929, 1930; Oppenheimer, 1925; Richmond, 1922; Sayles & Nudd, 1925; Wickman, 1928). Jane Culbert, a pioneering force in the visiting teacher service, noted that the aim of the professional publications was “to present the main principles of procedure that were workable and wise according to the judgments of successful visiting teachers in diversified situations” (Culbert, 1930, p. vi).

Many challenges faced the continuing development of the visiting teacher service. Even the title of this new professional field reflected the struggle for identity that continues today. Lide noted,
He may be “visiting teacher,” “visiting counselor,” “school counselor,” “school social worker,” or any of the several other titles. This lack of uniformity seems to reflect to some extent the confusion as to the purpose and functions of the service. It appears to be derived from the uncertainty as to who he, the social worker, is in the school. Is he a “visiting teacher,” a “counselor,” or a “school social worker”? The first title implies identification with education, the second is in common use in psychology, and the third is clearly related to social work. (1953, p. 25)

Lide’s use of “he” was in deference to standard English, as the visiting teachers were overwhelmingly white, formally educated women.

**TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS**

Developments at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century set the stage for the visiting teacher expansion of the 1920s. Compulsory attendance laws were finally established in every state by 1918. The school-age population of cities in the eastern and midwestern regions of the United States expanded rapidly with the migration of African Americans from the South and immigration from across Europe. However, the growing number of students, their different languages, and the diversity of social and cultural practices were not always welcome. Ellwood Cubberley, an influential educator, wrote, “Our task is to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as part of our American race and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order and popular government” (1909, p. 15). In line with Cubberley’s thoughts, Americanization assimilation programs and English-only efforts were widely initiated.

During this time, child labor laws limiting the working hours of youths and prohibiting their employment in dangerous settings were strengthened (Trattner, 1970). Advances in psychology, psychiatry, and mental hygiene promoted efforts to “fit the school to the child” rather than the traditional efforts to “fit the child to the school” (Irwin & Marks, 1924). A visiting teacher of the era, Helen Weston, recalled the radical changes in educational philosophy: “I remember in 1921, when I became a visiting teacher, you were speaking of the impact of educational practice of your new discoveries. Remember ‘individual difference,’ ‘the whole child,’ ‘education for all the children of all the people’” (Lee, 1959, p. 122). For decades, progressives like Jacob Riis, Lillian Ward, and Jane Addams had lobbied for stronger child welfare legislation, nurseries, kindergartens, community recreation programs, and evening schools to decrease crime and address the pervasive poverty of the migrants and immigrants (Spring, 2001). John Dewey, Francis W. Parker, and William H. Kilpatrick led the progressive education movement and initiated child-centered schools with educational and recreational facilities open to the public. Rugg and Shumaker (1928) observed in the mid-1920s, “In the formal school of today the teacher still does the thinking, planning, and initiating. Pupils are passive, quiescent, generally uninterested if not actively antagonistic. In the child-centered school, however, pupils are alive, active, working hard, inventing, organizing…” (p. 57). In addition, new recognition was given to the environmental influences on the child’s education, and greater attention was being paid to the influence of the family and community. Mary Richmond (1922) wrote, “There are five school hours in a child’s day and nineteen other hours; obviously, a valuable approach to the school child is through his social relationships in those out-of-school hours” (p. 199).

Given the rapid social, legal, and economic changes of the era, the public schools seemed the most appropriate place to modify the behavior of youths and their families. Similarly, the visiting teacher movement seemed an appropriate vehicle for this activity. Settlement workers, women’s civic leagues, child welfare practitioners, and others who studied “child maladjustment” thought the schools an excellent environment for intervening with “problem” children and youths. The school was selected as the intervention site because it had a “signal opportunity to detect symptoms of child maladjustments as they appear in school dissatisfactions, poor school work, indifference, in persistently troublesome or erratic behavior, in rumors of undesirable companions or unwholesome interests, in apparent neglect, in environment or home conditions that are dangerous or predisposing to delinquency” (Culbert, 1921, p. 4).

The visiting teacher was expected to use her skills as educator and social worker to remove and prevent, as far as possible, barriers to learning. “The
service performed by visiting teachers has as its primary purpose the study and adjustment of children who present problems of scholarship, personality, or behavior, or whose home or other environmental conditions appear to be interfering with their progress and future development” (Culbert, 1930, p. 466). The National Association of Visiting Teachers, formed in 1919, gave a face and voice to this growing field of practice.

Commonwealth Fund Influence
In 1921, the Commonwealth Fund of New York City began establishing three-year visiting teacher demonstration programs in 30 communities as part of their nationwide “Program for the Prevention of Delinquency.” The Public Education Association of New York carried out the training and implementation of the demonstration efforts. Fifteen sites were operational by 1923 and another 15 sites were added by 1925 (Oppenheimer, 1925). Wide varieties of communities were selected to test the service under differing local conditions (Table 1).

The selected communities supported the effort by paying a third of the worker’s salary and pledging to continue the programs if they proved viable. The Commonwealth Fund, in turn, published program reports, provided courses and seminars for teachers and school staff to demonstrate the value of case study and treatment to serve students with problems, and offered consultation to school systems interested in initiating similar services. Examples of the posters used for education and public relations are on pages 246 and 247.

In 1923, Howard Nudd, chairman of the National Committee on Visiting Teachers, estimated that there were 140 visiting teachers in 50 cities and counties in 26 states. Nudd hoped that the momentum created by the demonstrations initiated by the Commonwealth Fund would quickly multiply these numbers. By 1930, when the demonstration programs ended, there were 244 visiting teachers in 31 states. Furthermore, 21 of the demonstration communities decided to continue the service (Fink, 1942), and the movement continued to grow.

Guidelines for Promising Practice
Oppenheimer’s (1925) research provides many details of the visiting teacher practice and administration during this period. This seminal research included review of student case records and a broad survey to determine the expectations of an effective visiting teacher service. Oppenheimer reviewed 1,300 student case records that were completed in 1919, 1920, and 1921, most of which came from practitioners in New York City, Chicago, and Kansas City. In addition to conducting surveys with visiting teachers, Oppenheimer surveyed principals; superintendents, including both those familiar and those unfamiliar with visiting teacher practice; college educators; and social workers.

Working Conditions
Although the visiting teacher was expected to spend at least half of her time visiting homes and collaborating with outside agencies, it was also considered important for the visiting teacher to have a designated office in the school where she could be easily contacted by parents, students, and staff. In addition, telephone access and locked file storage were deemed essential. Many records were recorded by hand, but in some instances typewriters were used; however, little, if any, secretarial support was provided. Although the total daily hours of the visiting teachers were similar to those of classroom teachers, accommodating parents’ work schedules often required visiting teachers to make early morning, evening, or weekend appointments. Salaries were most often provided by boards of education; smaller numbers of visiting teachers were paid by private

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<th>Table 1: Communities Selected for Visiting Teacher Demonstration Programs: 1921–1930</th>
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agencies. Those under the auspices of the Commonwealth Fund demonstration programs were funded by the National Committee on Visiting Teachers in cooperation with the local school boards. Visiting teacher salaries and status were judged equal to that of classroom teachers.

Supervision of the visiting teacher services was often the responsibility of the superintendent or his delegate. Some locations provided immediate supervision through visiting teacher supervisors, principals, special education supervisors, or bureaus of attendance. In a few instances, outside agencies provided supervision of visiting teachers. In cities with seven or more visiting teachers, the trend was to employ a visiting teacher supervisor capable of providing professional social work supervision. Oppenheimer’s (1925) surveys found that 67 percent of all respondents and 71 percent of the visiting teachers surveyed preferred a visiting teacher supervisor who could provide technical support, with direct supervision provided by the school principal.

The visiting teacher supervisor was expected to be appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the superintendent, have full authority over her staff, and be a member of the superintendent’s cabinet. Those surveyed by Oppenheimer (1925) thought this supervisor should also nominate candidates for employment, select schools to receive services “at the request of the principal,” assign visiting teachers to schools, hold coordinating conferences with principals, represent the school with community agencies, and prepare special, monthly, and annual reports.

School and Community Scan
Emma Case, director of the Visiting Teacher Department in Rochester, New York, outlined a routine for the visiting teacher beginning her assignment to a school (Case, 1923). According to Case, the visiting teacher should first study the regular grade levels and then the special education classes for children with disabilities. She should also become acquainted with the special education teachers and others who meet the special needs of the students. Next, she should study the community to identify resources available to address the special needs of families. Then she should do the same for the city as a whole, to “know the tools” she would use within and outside of the school.

Types of Problems
The visiting teachers were faced with an array of challenges: poor scholarship, lack of parent cooperation and supervision, immigrant families who misunderstood the purpose and function of the
schools, language barriers, family poverty and unemployment, students and parents with mental and physical disabilities, tenements and homes lacking light and safety, recreational needs, erratic attendance, and children whose conduct prohibited teachers from achieving their academic objectives. Large caseloads, overcrowding in classrooms and schools, lack of teacher support, and a deficit of resources (especially in rural communities) made service delivery difficult.

Types of Interventions

In the foreword to Oppenheimer’s (1925) research report, Nudd wrote:

It is natural in a new field that there should be considerable divergence in practice in the different communities in which the work is conducted. However, one fact stands out clearly…the fundamental purposes of the [visiting teacher] work are generally understood and the need for the service is universally recognized. (pp. vii–viii)

Visiting teachers were expected to be the link among the home, school, community, and advocates for those students unable to adjust to the schools. Oppenheimer’s (1925) research identified 44 core functions of the visiting teacher on which 75 percent of his respondents agreed. The findings included the following: The visiting teacher should

1. Interview parents in regard to the children’s personal history, habits, temperament and interests…
2. Analyze the child’s social environment, home and neighborhood…
3. Confer with parents to enlist their cooperation…
4. Try to adjust home conditions…in regard to school work, conduct, attendance, and interests,…
5. Interpret the school’s purposes and ideals…
6. Bring to the principal and teacher all data which will make for a better understanding of the child…
7. Represent the school in all dealings with special agencies… and
8. Investigate the causes of intermittent attendance. (pp. 121–126)

Visiting teachers were to avoid direct social relief (that is, clothing, funds, and transportation), but referral to an appropriate agency was expected.

In a controlled study of 643 students comparing those assisted by the visiting teacher with those who were not, Oppenheimer (1925) found that students in the visiting teacher group had a 20 percent greater rate of promotion compared with students not receiving visiting teacher services. In a subsequent review of 1,260 cases, Oppenheimer found the following interventions most effective as measured by appropriate school progress toward promotion and by the visiting teacher’s estimate of the student’s outcome:

- providing personal supervision and establishing supportive relationships (35 percent)
- collaborating with cooperating agencies to address needs (that is, Big Brothers and Big Sisters Programs, recreation, juvenile courts) (24 percent)
- remedying physical defects (14 percent)
- gaining family cooperation to address school concerns (14 percent)
- changing student’s class (6 percent)
- obtaining the cooperation of teachers to secure additional tutoring (5 percent)
- changing the student’s school (2 percent).

Much of the visiting teacher’s time was spent in the home helping the family address discipline,
expectations of the child, diet, sleep patterns, reduction in chores, changing attitudes toward the child, or helping the family develop and exhibit greater interest in the child’s success or failure at school. Whenever possible, early diagnosis and intervention was the recommended approach; “adequate provision for utilizing preventive rather than corrective measures is more economical in the long run and contributes most to the welfare of the children and of society” (Sayles & Nudd, 1925, p. 262).

Close collaboration with teachers and other support staff was necessary to carry out the case plans of the visiting teachers. Consultation and referral to principals, teachers, and other support personnel, such as school-based and school-linked health bureaus, dental clinics, and specialized services for exceptional children, occurred frequently. Other important allies for the visiting teachers included guidance counselors, whose focus was on preparing students for and securing employment; truant officers; and child study departments, which provided testing and placement services.

**Record Keeping**

Many visiting teachers did not like to keep extensive records, and steps to streamline the process were taken by professional groups. In addition to basic school and family demographic information, they recommended that the record include a “diagnostic summary” and a “tentative plan for treatment.” Oppenheimer (1925) pointed out that good records were essential as they led to better service.

They are valuable for the following reasons: (1) to provide the visitor with the means of checking her own diagnosis and methods; (2) to enable her to compare her work with that of other visitors in regard to quantity and quality; (3) to help her to improve her own skill; (4) to furnish specific case studies as a basis for education changes; (5) to show that the expenditure of public funds is justified; (6) to accumulate material for improving the technique of the profession; and (7) to furnish evidence of social maladjustments which the community may use in self improvement. (p. 132)

**Visiting Teacher–Student Ratios**

Unfortunately, children often failed to come to the attention of the visiting teacher, through either neglect or oversight, before their problems escalated and became quite serious. In part, this gap was a consequence of the large number of children the visiting teacher was asked to serve. Classes of 40 or 50 students were common in urban settings, complicated by high rates of teacher turnover. Oppenheimer (1925) found that many communities had set a ratio of one visiting teacher to every 1,500 to 3,000 students, a ratio based on the experience of the Public Education Association in New York City, the White-Williams Foundation in Philadelphia, and visiting teacher services in Rochester and Chicago. Actual student contacts ranged considerably from 119 to 1,175, with a mode of 500. Visiting teachers employed by local school boards served larger numbers of students, and those employed by private agencies or foundations served an average of 250 students. Nudd noted,

The majority of cities have adopted what we regard as the most satisfactory method, the assignment of a visiting teacher to a single school or to two or three small neighboring schools. This enables the visiting teacher to become identified with the interests of the school and neighborhood, and better to act as a representative of one to the other. The assignment of a visiting teacher to a whole city or to a too wide area defeats the very purpose of her work... The magnitude and intricacy of (her) tasks makes it obvious that scattering her efforts would unduly dissipate her energy, and tend to make her work superficial. (1923, p. 424)

The 1930 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection (1931) recommended a ratio of 1:500.

**Training and Qualifications**

Initially, there was little consensus about the qualifications for and the functions of an effective visiting teacher practice. Because trial and error most frequently guided initial intervention efforts, both private and public programs strove to define the criteria of effective practice. Many of the settlement house workers and the early visiting teachers were college-educated women from schools such as Vassar, Smith, Bryn Mawr, Columbia, the University of Chicago, and New York University. These women used social action techniques as well as casework’s emphasis on individual and family change interventions (Levine & Levine, 1970). The Public
Education Association of New York worked with the Commonwealth Fund to define quality standards for visiting teachers and to gain support for the adoption of this service. The newly formed National Association of Visiting Teachers also acted to establish high standards and recommended that membership in the association require the following: a bachelor's degree or teachers' college certificate or its equivalent; at least one academic year of casework theory and practice in an accredited school of social work or two years of “well-supervised training” in a recognized social casework agency; at least one year of teaching experience; and one year of casework experience in a recognized casework agency or one year of visiting teaching experience (Culbert, 1930). Leaders in the field strongly recommended two years of teaching experience and two years of apprenticeship in a casework agency if study in an accredited school of social work was not achieved.

The recommended course of study for those entering a two-year program in a school of social work included courses and seminars in social casework; a minimum of one course in child welfare; courses in community organization; courses in the field of mental hygiene and nutrition and health; and a course in tests and measurements. Students were also advised to complete a micro and macro course in visiting teaching and field practicums in a casework agency and the public schools. Not all visiting teacher practitioners could meet these rigorous requirements; some had only teacher education and experience in the field (Culbert, 1929). Oppenheimer (1925) observed that it was not easy to find people with the desired training who were willing to work for the salaries paid to visiting teachers.

Formal training and hands-on experience were often supplemented by self-study. In her book The Visiting Teacher at Work, Culbert (1929) provided a list of suggested readings to guide those preparing to become visiting teachers. She divided the readings into seven sections: education, social work, mental hygiene and social psychology, the child, health, sex education for parents and teachers, and delinquency. The titles read like those you might find on a contemporary practitioner's bookshelf (Table 2). Suggested authors included influential educators, philosophers, researchers, and social advocates such as John Dewey, Helen Parkhurst, Bertrand Russell, E. K. Wickman, Lewis Terman, Arnold Gesell, Jane Addams, Mary Richman, William A. White, Mary Sayles, Edith Abbott, and Sophonisba P. Breckenridge.

### Table 2: Culbert’s Recommended Reading List for Visiting Teachers

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<td>Creative Youth</td>
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<td>The Child-Centered School</td>
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<td>Infancy and Human Growth</td>
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<td>What Social Workers Should Know about Their Community</td>
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<td>Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture</td>
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<td>Psychology of Special Abilities and Disabilities</td>
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<td>Infancy and Human Growth</td>
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<td>Children in the Nursery School</td>
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<td>The Art of Helping People Out of Trouble</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction to Social Psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Layman's Handbook of Medicine: With Special Reference to Social Workers</td>
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<td>Juvenile Delinquency</td>
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<td>Youth in Conflict</td>
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<td>Better Schools</td>
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Arnold Gesell, Jane Addams, Mary Richman, William A. White, Mary Sayles, Edith Abbott, and Sophonisba P. Breckenridge.

### Social Work Orientation and Training for Teachers

Early in the 20th century, it was common for elementary teachers, and even those of older students, to get to know the children’s family. Mary White, a centenarian and former teacher in rural North Carolina, recently recalled her work in the 1920s (Cecelski, 2006):

> I visited my students’ homes every afternoon during good weather. That way you got to know the parents and what the home life was like. Back then you were expected to do it... Sometimes they’d invite me to spend the night. I'd spend the night and they'd pack my lunch the next morning. I loved it... You saw all kinds of homes… (p. 8D)

As student numbers increased, this practice received much less attention.

Educators began to realize that the relationship established between the teacher and student was more critical to student success in the classroom than the “teaching method in vogue” at the time. Bernard Glueck, director of the child psychiatric clinic supported by the New York School of Social
Work, wrote, “We have not infrequently met with serious obstacles to a child’s readjustment which were based on nothing else than the teacher’s difficulty to modify an opinion once formed about a pupil, often enough on the basis of incomplete or incorrect information” (Glueck, 1923, p. 7). Knowledge of the student’s work in the classroom was insufficient; understanding of child development and environmental influences was necessary. To address this need, visiting teacher leaders recommended that social work courses be added to teacher training to increase their knowledge and awareness of the social and psychological conditions that influenced student learning. Sayles and Nudd (1925) wrote,

With the reduction in the size of classes and the lightening of the teaching load, and with the development of a greater social consciousness through the addition of courses in social work and behavioristic psychology as part of professional preparation, teachers will in the future, it is hoped, be able to do more visiting than at present, and so become better acquainted with existing social conditions and their effect on their pupils. (p. 276)

**A Shift in Emphasis**

Early in the decade, visiting teachers used community and school change methods in their work similar to those used by the settlement house workers. Oppenheimer (1925) observed, “One of the important functions of the visiting teacher is to aid in the reorganization of school administration and of school practice” (p. 134). When the visiting teacher identified many children with similar difficulties, they organized school and parent clubs, special classes, community and recreation centers, ethnic cultural events, Big Brother and Big Sister programs, and nurseries for children of students and their parents. Oppenheimer’s observation continued: “It is of great value to the school to have the benefit of the point of view of one who is officially connected with its staff, who is in thorough sympathy with its plans and methods and yet constructively critical toward them” (p. 134).

Levine and Levine (1970) and Tynack (1992) noted that over the course of the decade, the visiting teacher practitioners became increasingly “professional” and they used more of the methodologies used in the mental hygiene movement. As the fundamental emphasis shifted, the visiting teachers’ social action and community organization activities diminished, and they focused more internally on the school and on maladjusted children. Political pressures also helped to shift their focus.

Conservatives wanted to stress academic subjects...[they]...viewed the new services [social work, health, and child welfare] as a diversion from their central tasks. ...Progressive educators argued, however, that compulsory attendance and child labor laws were bringing in new types of students and making it imperative to broaden the scope of the school beyond academic instruction. (Tynack, p. 24)

**CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE**

Today, school social work retains its role as an important link among the home, school, and community and most of the core functions identified by Oppenheimer (1925). School social work practitioners continue to be primarily white women whose pay and status reflect the present low regard for teachers, and traditional clinical practice remains the primary method of intervention in most schools. In many ways, the environment in which school social workers currently practice reflects that of the 1920s. For example, school districts still struggle with what to call this service. Some educators find the title school social worker too negative and reflective of child protective services workers. Schools remain primarily bureaucratic, inflexible, and slow to accept innovations. Our growing immigrant populations are seeing the resurgence of earlier Americanization and English-only efforts.

Use of the school and community scan (Allen-Meares, 2007) and the need for efficient recording continue to be important aspects of this work. The school as a locus for school-based and school-linked health and welfare services—so evident at the turn of the 20th century and the early 1920s—can be easily recognized today in the full-service school approach championed by Dryfoos and Maguire (2002) and the Coalition for Community Schools. Although this approach lost much of its influence between the 1930s and the 1960s, it now seems to be regaining a foothold nationally. Today’s expanding school-based mental health services are reminiscent of the child guidance clinics of the 1920s.

However, the practice environment differs substantially in other areas. Whereas the visiting teacher...
often had access to superintendents and principals and shared in school management, today’s school social workers and other student support staff frequently remain on the periphery of the decision-making process (Adelman & Taylor, 2006). The expectation that school social workers should be trained both as teachers and as social workers largely disappeared by the 1950s and 1960s, a shift of focus that may have contributed, at least in part, to the alienation of these practitioners in the host setting. The hope that teachers would be trained in social work knowledge and skill also failed to develop, with the exception of a few demonstration programs. Ratios continue to be of concern, and there is little consensus about the most effective ratios. In many districts, the supervisory roles for school social work remain filled by educators and those unfamiliar with social work practice.

Although similarities and differences exist in this centennial year, Sayles and Nudd’s 1925 observations still ring true today:

> It is evident that this is not a field for the novice or for one fitted solely to skim the surface of difficult situations and to prescribe palliatives. The visiting teacher must be a skilled craftsman who can analyze thoroughly the problems which confront her and can marshal social and educative forces inside and outside the school for clear and specific purposes. (p. 257)

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