

Real Cases Project: **Social Work Practice with Communities/Community Organization**

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INTRODUCTION

This teaching guide is designed for use across programs and schools of social work to show that content in the three case studies can be integrated into courses (single semester, dual semester, elective semester, and others) to study Social Work Practice with Communities/ Community Organization.

Although social work students and teachers work with diverse populations, communities of vulnerable children are of major concern to those engaged in social work practice with communities/community organization. Given that the three case studies are drawn from the ChildStat initiative, and contain similarities to other real life social work encounters, they challenge teachers and their students to identify, discuss, study, and work on broad practice issues regarding traumatized children and sometimes immobilizing child welfare systems.

In bounded and risk-limited classroom environments, teachers can create curricula space for the study of social work practice with communities/community organization, and students can discover their child welfare practice voices in various social work courses. In these various social work education settings, students can also learn to envision helping children using a continua of practice actions, appropriately processed, analyzed, and designed. The three case studies, along with the conceptual, theoretical, and skills-building materials which underpin the course, can help students keep vulnerable children in mind over the length of courses.

Presented below is an overview of a social work practice with communities/community organization curriculum; the relevance of the three case studies; selected learning

objectives; a summary of the content included in this guide, strategies for integrating the Cases into the courses, and a conclusion.

A. Overview of this Course within the Social Work Curriculum

It is important to maintain the understanding that social work students originate from diverse communities. They attend social work courses that vary by school/university, and are placed in fieldwork organizations that vary by age, location, size, program, mission, staff, auspice, and interest. Practice with children is a venue for some, but not all, students. Moreover, because neglected and abused children must interact with various and oftentimes harmful systems, social work practice with communities and community organization courses can be flexible enough to entertain attention to other populations who although themselves oppressed, discriminated, victimized, or denied social justice, may be exacting harm to a child or to children.

Some attention to children and other groups can flow from conceptual, applied, and theoretical materials contained in scholarly materials such as books, journals, web sites, newspapers, and references devoted to community organization, community planning, development, and policy, etc. Moreover, some attention can be transferred to classrooms from fieldwork settings, where students practice in experiential and applied roles with segments of children's communities, and other populations.

Uniquely, the three case studies can help fill gaps in the availability or accessibility of case materials with which students can identify and share affects, particularly at the beginning of semesters where many students have no assigned case material, and have to spend downtime concentrating on other than practice activities. Therefore, early in semesters, the case studies can be distributed in classrooms to students to read thoroughly so they can begin to build competencies, skills, knowledge, and learning associated with problems that each of the families face from the perspective of the best interest of the individual and within the frameworks of child welfare interest groups, community based institutions, child-rearing communities, and larger societies.

At early class sessions, students and teachers might spend adequate time formulating baselines regarding rules of inclusion, agreements on practice principles, teacher-and-student roles, sessions structures, and other rules that will place the case studies content most efficiently and uniquely.

B. Relevance of Case Studies to Course

In the process of developing this teaching guide, a group of community organization students were asked to read a previously developed child welfare case, and then to participate one week later in a classroom discussion. As this case included some particularly challenging features, the students were disturbed with some of the content presented in this case. Every one of the students shared feelings, perceptions and knowledge about the case, and they offered observations related to the various players depicted in the case. Students who had worked with similar cases suggested that the

case depicts how child welfare systems had worked for a long time and, for some, the ways they continue to work. One student shared increased emotions, having left a direct practice setting working one-on-one with children to pursue community organization studies.

It is important to note that as arrangements were made to submit the remaining pages of the case to the students, they voiced strong views that they, Community Organizers, could use this “real” case in class to pursue practice skills, knowledge, competencies, and learning.

The students in this pilot use of a case study were advanced-year Community Organizers, pursuing a Master’s Degree in Social Work. Although these students study theoretical, strategic, and tactical community organization for two specialized semesters that are linked to customized applied practicum settings, for other students the case studies can be integrated into one semester, two semester, elective semester courses or in courses designed around other time frames to accommodate foundation year, bachelor-level, elective, auditing, matriculated, or non-matriculated students.

C. Specific Learning Objectives Related to using these Cases in this Course

At the conclusion of semesters, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate abilities to organize and structure Case Study Teams;
- Utilize appropriate content of the three case studies and assigned scholarly materials to explore how to begin community organization practice.
- Discuss specific themes within a case study in submitted assignments such as essays, practice papers, presentations, and others crafted by teachers.
- Demonstrate abilities to understand the primary practice tasks related to organizing a child-focused community needs assessment related to the assessment content contained in the case studies.
- Demonstrate abilities to organize theoretical projects containing elements of action, youth participation, and training, as treatment interventions with planned positive outcomes benefiting children.

D. Overview of this Teaching Guide

Identification, extraction, and implementation of themes contained in each of the three case studies can be useful to structuring courses. Each instructor can make decisions regarding which themes will be focused on and how they are integrated into courses.

For example, a teacher extracted three strategic themes (see below) from content in the case studies and integrated them into the courses mentioned above. These three

themes underpinned development of the course objectives, assignment of course sessions, allocation of time spent on the case content during a school year, and crafting appropriate student assignments. The discussion below is organized around course structures, teaching methods, supportive materials, and a conclusion.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

A. Strategy One: Entry Point Organizing

1. Areas of the case to be highlighted:

In the complex ecology in which child welfare problems exist, students of community organization are highly concerned about where, when, and how to begin practice. For example, should practice begin at the point of learning, as announced on the first page of the Ann M. Case: “Social worker from the hospital that treated Ms M. for injuries resulting from the beatings inflicted on her by her husband during their vacation in Jamaica is concerned about mother’s capacity to care for and protect children. Children were present during father’s attacks on their mother.”

Selecting the theme of entry point organizing can help students struggle with finding an appropriate, feasible, and efficient place for social work practice with communities/community organization and the best intervention for use with the children.

2. Teaching methods:

Since the continuum of social work practice involves beginnings, middles, and ends, and because students are concerned early in semesters with engagement with client systems, it would be logical to place entry point organizing early in a semester around the topic of “engagement”. Teaching methods could include brief lectures, student group discussions, class reports, debriefings, oral presentations, and others with or without the support of assigned readings, audio visual aides, or other venues.

However, it is essential that students be required to read the three case studies. Teachers can use their personal preferences regarding whether to assign supportive reading material as preparation for session activities in classrooms. During the pilot for this guide, one teacher required that students visit at least one government’s child welfare web site, one child welfare organization’s web site, and the Association for Community Organization and Social Administration’s (ACOSA) web site (www.acosa.org) to gather relevant information that promotes better understanding of points of entry options that might be feasible and possible, and then report their findings in a large group discussion during a session.

Sample syllabi are available for the courses mentioned briefly in this guide. If teachers choose to do so, students can be referred to selected primary literature regarding children, organizing, and child welfare found in *The Journal of Community Practice*, the *Journal of Social Problems*, and others. One very good article for the point of entry strategy is Austin. S. (2005.) Community-building principles: Implications for professional development. *Child Welfare*, 84, 2, 105-18.

B. Strategy Two: Community Resource-Needs Assessment

1. Areas of the case to be highlighted:

Assessment is a highlighted issue for discussion in each of the three cases. To varying degrees, interest was reflected in linkage to community resources. This strategy looks at the role of this assessment process.

Community resource-needs assessment related to the case studies can fit well in the study of social work practice with communities/community organization courses. Community resource-needs assessment is taught for a limited amount of time in one course utilizing teaching methods that include a mini-lecture, one group task discussion, one group class report, and an instructor-led debriefing activity.

2. Teaching methods:

Students should be encouraged to read the cases and read any ancillary course session readings, look at sample community assessment tools, and find relevant articles on assessment contained in a scholarly journal.

These are the types of articles that students might find enriching:

Kerman, J. B., et.al. (2003). Seriously emotionally disturbed youth: A needs assessment. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 39, (6), 475

Taylor, K.I. (2005). Understanding communities today: Using matching needs and services to assess community needs and design community-based services. *Child Welfare*, 84, 2, 251-65, or many others that exist in a myriad of sources.

C. Strategy Three: Participatory Training Handbook Project

1. Areas of the case to be highlighted:

The case studies content highlights problems of children, including those particular to adolescents. They address issues of neglect and abuse, and a range of economic conditions. The issue of child abandonment (when children are virtually on their own without resources and support), raises the question of how these vulnerable people can be strengthened collectively using community practice options.

2. Teaching methods:

An example of engaging youth in a participatory training handbook project is a theme that can fit within the social work practice with communities/community organization courses.

For example, this theme was taught for a restricted time period in several course sessions structured in the middle of a semester so that students could understand some prevailing sustainment issues found in social work practice with communities/community organization interactions with client systems.

Given individual teacher styles for course delivery, one teaching method used consisted of a lecture-discussion on how to plan and organize a community organization project where students were then allotted time to work in Case Study Task Teams toward the strategy of assembling a participatory youth handbook. Instructor-led debriefings were held at points in time where it was deemed important to integrate the primary knowledge attained by each team into teaching moments on topics related to “youth recruiting”, and “motivating traumatized youth to participate in a project activity”, and “youth training”. Later in the semester, a whole-class activity was used to summarize all activities undertaken to understand this theme.

Project planning and development literature can be very helpful as students gain knowledge related to conceptually defining “project” and then operationalizing project-related Case Study teams from the perspective of social work practice with communities/community organization around the idea that vulnerable children have useful attributes (knowledge, experiences, suggestions, and skills) that can be shaped into assets that benefit themselves and external child communities.

Rather than the teacher feeding material to students, this course required that students became competent in identifying issues as they arose in groups, processed these issues as individuals, discussed these individual processes with members of the Case Study Task Teams, and harvested information on the issues from relevant literature, and finally made decisions for issue-resolution for the sole best interest of the children.

CONCLUSION

This teaching guide demonstrates that schools of social work can integrate social work practice with communities/community organization study into curricula having the three case studies as the foundation for learning, knowledge, skill, and competency. Themes can be extracted from the case studies and utilized to formulate course objectives, arrange course structures and content, organize teaching methods, and produce child focused activities that students can find useful as they practice with child communities

and other community systems. Examples were offered to show that one school of social work used the case studies with the urgings of community organization students.

Although several themes were extracted from the case Studies, a myriad of themes/issues exist in them that could be useful to the development of community social work students' knowledge, skills, and competences in child welfare. Some additional social work practice with communities/community organization themes suggested by the case studies include problem formulation, population, community, neighborhood, child participation, coordination, collaboration, coalition, organizer role(s), intervention, program, project, service, accountability, professional competence, social justice, advocacy, empowerment, and many more.

Building these new themes into existing, collective social work practice with communities/community organization curricula for fixed periods of time, say five years, continually evaluating, revising, and applying them so that significant numbers of youth benefit can encourage more innovation, creativity, and help. Best practice themes could continue to be discussed in papers, manuals, newsletters, web sites, and others by faculty, students, family members, and children together with professionals and lay communities. Organized practice should focus on goals that place child participation in the vanguard of these activities where the survival of and the best interest of the child prevail.