

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER\*

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School social work (visiting teacher service) dates from the early 19th century when social agencies provided money and personnel for that purpose. Later, local school boards assumed responsibility for providing visiting teacher services. The role of the school social worker has undergone continuous and significant change; thus it is timely to re-examine and clarify the role of the school social worker. This paper deals with the outcomes of a study of perceptions which certain professional groups hold about the role of the visiting teacher, especially their activities, attitudes, and beliefs. Their perceptions were gathered in a standard way by means of an opinionnaire which was built for the study. The analysis focused on determining areas of agreement and disagreement among the groups of respondents.

### Procedure

#### Respondents

Three groups of respondents were selected from three Florida counties in which ten or more visiting teachers were employed and in which there were social agencies whose staff members could be polled. One group consisted of certified visiting teachers who were rendering service to the elementary schools. Thirty-two or 51 per cent of this group replied to the opinionnaire. A second group consisted of certified elementary principals and teachers who were located in schools served by visiting teachers. Thirty-six or 60 per cent of this group replied to the opinionnaire. A third group consisted of social agency personnel whose clientele included troubled school children. Thirty-three or 55 per cent of this group

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\*Based on D. Merry, "The Perceived Role of the Visiting Teacher as Revealed by Sampling Opinion of Visiting Teachers and Other Personnel Directly Concerned with Visiting Teacher Service in Elementary Schools" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Florida State University, 1962).

replied to the opinionnaire. The fourth group consisted of college and university faculty members who were responsible for the pre-service education of visiting teachers. Twenty or 63 per cent of this group replied to the opinionnaire.

### Opinionnaire

The opinionnaire consisted of four sections of items. Section A consisted of eight items and was entitled Broad Operational Concepts; Section B, 14 items, Role of the Visiting Teacher in Assessing the Situation; Section C, 32 items, Role of the Visiting Teacher in Working toward Solution; and Section D, 26 items, Role of the Visiting Teacher in Determining Procedures to be Used and Results to be Obtained. Each item contained some concept, idea, or type of action presumably related to the role of the visiting teacher. Each item called for a response on a five-point scale whose extreme positions were Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree. Items were based on a review of the professional literature of school social work and on interviews with people who were familiar with the work of visiting teachers. The first-draft was reviewed by a group of college personnel responsible for the education of visiting teachers. Their comments and criticisms served as the basis for drafting the final version of the opinionnaire which was used in the study.

### Analysis

Data were analyzed according to the following steps.

Step 1. The first step in the analysis consisted of preparing a simple distribution of responses for each item for each group.

Step 2. For each item and each group the actual number of responses was adjusted to give equal weight to the four groups of respondents.

Step 3. With the adjusted responses described above, the over-all percentage of responses for each level of each item was calculated.

Step 4. These percentages were inserted in a Likert table as presented in Edwards (1957). The end result of this computation was the scaled value varying from 0 - 3, inclusive, which was then used as a common unit of measurement with which to make between-group comparisons.

Step 5. The scaled values were used to determine the mean scaled value assigned to each item by each group of respondents.

The analyses were then focused on answering two basic questions. First, at what level does each group place each of the items of the opinionnaire? Second, were the opinions of two or more groups sufficiently similar to regard them as "coinciding"? The answer to the first question was determined by the mean scaled value awarded. As the mean scaled value approached zero, the item represents something which the group feels that the visiting teacher definitely should not believe or do; as the mean scaled value approaches three, the item represents something which the visiting teacher definitely should believe or do; and when the mean scaled value lies between these extremes, but at a considerable distance from both, the item represents a belief or action which is indeterminate. The descriptive classification U (undesirable) was given when the mean scaled value fell below 1.000; D (desirable) when above 2.000; and I (indeterminate), when between 1.0 and 2.0. To answer the second question, if opinions of two or more groups differed by .25 or less, they were regarded as coinciding, C. Greater differences were regarded as noncoinciding and were indicated by NC.

## Results and Conclusions

The mean of the mean scaled values for each section of the opinionnaire for each group are reported in Table 1.

The mean responses to all sections and subsections, except for the subsection "Specific Procedures," are positive and similar over groups. Thus, one might infer that the work of the visiting teacher should progress smoothly because of the similarity between her role as she sees it and her role as perceived by other professional colleagues with whom she comes in contact. The items in the Specific Procedures subsection are not considered significant in a description of the role of the visiting teacher; all groups show a similar evaluation of them. It is possible that the indeterminate classification given this subsection is due to the great emphasis on individualizing help to the elementary school child. If so, then it follows that different procedures will be used according to the social diagnosis made. Perhaps no specific procedure would always, nor never, be used; the visiting teacher would use procedures as required by the situation and/or the particular child.

Table 1  
 Mean of Mean Scaled Values Given Parts of the Opinionnaire  
 by Each Professional Group

Sections of Opinionnaire	Respondents				Overall Opinion
	Visiting Teacher	School Personnel	Social Agencies	Teacher Trainers	
A. Theory	2.247	2.122	2.205	2.259	Desirable
B. Assessment	2.489	2.446	2.383	2.455	Desirable
C. Problem Solving	2.521	2.439	2.469	2.468	Desirable
D. 1. Specific Procedures*	1.358	1.583	1.494	1.246	Indeterminate
2. Evaluation and Appraisal*	2.396	2.793	2.329	2.234	Desirable

\*For purposes of analysis Section D (Role of the Visiting Teacher in Determining Procedures to be Used and Results to be Obtained) was broken into two subsections, the data for which are described separately above.

Comparison of Acceptability of Operational Concepts Suggested in Items 1-8 of the Opinionsnaire

Section A; Items	Mean Scaled Value				Difference Between Means			
	Visiting Teacher	School Personnel	Social Agencies	Teacher Trainers	Overall Opinion	VT-SP	VT-SA	VT-TT
1. Regard child as one having central responsibility for working on his school-related problem	1.982	1.797	1.688	1.817	Indeterminate	C .185	NC .294	C .165
2. Respect the confidentiality of professional information helpful in dealing with child and his problem	2.437	2.437	2.289	2.437	Desirable	C .000	C .148	C .000
3. Have wholesome respect for authority and its constructive use in dealing with school child	1.867	1.659	1.696	1.680	Indeterminate	C .208	C .171	C .187
4. Identify in a positive manner with the purposes, structure and method of the school	2.785	2.358	2.465	2.838	Desirable	NC .427	NC .320	C -.053
5. Take responsibility for examining and understanding school program, then contribute to its improvement	2.000	1.969	2.276	2.306	Desirable	C .031	NC -.276	NC -.306
6. Promote welfare of children through interaction based on school as part of community	2.272	2.356	2.423	2.339	Desirable	C -.084	C -.151	C -.067
7. Recognize assets and liabilities of home in working to utilize parents' potentiality in guiding child	2.592	2.534	2.702	2.552	Desirable	C .058	C -.110	C .040
8. Have a positive concept of self and of the worthiness of visiting teacher service	2.041	1.866	2.107	2.107	Desirable	C .175	C -.066	C -.066

Table 2 presents a comparison of the responses of the several groups to each of the items comprising Section A: Broad Operational Concepts (Theory). Comparisons between groups for all other items in the opinionnaire appear in the dissertation but are not presented here.

The range of opinions expressed by visiting teachers suggests that important differences exist within that profession. The differences are probably associated with the amount of formal education and the area of specialization of the several members of this group.

## Bibliography

Edwards, Allen L. Techniques of Attitude Scale Construction. Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947. Pp. 149-151.