

NEW THINKING
for changing needs



A. S. W.

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Edited by Joan F. S. King, M.B.E., M.A.,
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hold the situation together the possibility is that the crisis will resolve itself, and then it will be because of you that a result is achieved.

THE SKILLS OF SUPERVISION — A STUDY OF TEACHING METHOD

MISS O. STEVENSON, B.A.

It might be helpful to begin by explaining how my interest in this subject arose. I began to be aware that everywhere in this country in the last few years groups of field work supervisors, often led by anxious tutors fresh from social work themselves, were struggling to learn about teaching; yet hardly ever, it seemed, did we refer to our colleagues the teachers, who had been thinking for a very long time about the aims of education and the processes of learning. The joint conferences at Keele University College between teachers and social workers, held in 1958 and 1959, were an obvious step in the right direction,¹ but a systematic attempt to relate theory about education and learning to the field of social work and education was necessary.

Clearly, one must begin by acknowledging a great debt to Charlotte Towle, whose book, "The Learner in Education for the Professions" deals exhaustively—but, dare I say, exhaustingly also—with this subject. Social workers in this country have a great need, which is not being adequately met, for reappraisal of some of the American writing on this subject in the context of their own situation, their own strengths and weaknesses, in training, at the present time.

This, then, is what I would like to attempt: a tentative discussion of some of the educational theory which I think would be helpful to social workers in their newly acquired role as teachers.

I shall be considering mainly the task of the field work supervisor. But I recognise that this is, of course, a shared responsibility between tutor and supervisor and that the

lessons the supervisor can learn apply equally to the tutor in the academic situation.

As a kind of backcloth to our thinking, let us keep in mind that all learning is a struggle. We need never imagine that if we were clever enough and the students were stable and intelligent enough, the path would be a smooth one. Charlotte Towle has reminded us that "learning is the organism's means to survival".² Yet within every organism—whether it is the plant life at the bottom of a pond or a nice healthy student—there are opposing forces, one which strives to change and adapt, another which resists change. Both these forces are essentially a means to survival; apparently contradictory, they in fact bring about a healthy tension between stability and progress. A degree of resistance to change in our students, therefore, is far more than a personal problem or even a particular aspect of professional social work training, though both these may be contributory factors. It is basic to all learning situations which involve change.

For social work students, of course, there are particular reasons why this learning is painful at times. We know that to study the complicated human situations in which a student social worker finds himself stirs the deepest feelings and must at times produce acute discomfort. We know that all kinds of fears—of the unknown, of helplessness and so on—are manifest during training. But the deepest learning about ourselves and about relationships must always be painful, whether or not it is in a professional context. Paul Tillich,³ the theologian, writing on "The Depth of Existence" comments:—

"The depth of suffering . . . is the door, the only door, to the depth of truth . . . It is comfortable to live on the surface so long as it remains unshaken. It is painful to break away from it and to descend into an unknown ground. The tremendous amount of resistance against that act in every human being and the many pretexts invented to avoid the road into the depth are natural". (p. 66.)

This reminds us that so much of what we tend to think

of as specific to social work education is, in fact, basic to all living and learning and has challenged scientists, theologians and educators alike. For example, Martin Buber,⁴ writing of education, says:—

“It is the longing for personal unity . . . which the educator should lay hold of and strengthen in his pupils”. (The Education of Character, p. 146.)

That statement can profitably be put beside our own preoccupations as social work educators with various aspects of integration within our students—for example, integration of their intellectual and feeling processes in the service of others.

I have so far been ranging widely, and perhaps a little vaguely, over this topic. We need, I think, to be less parochial in our thinking. The pressures of social work are such that they afford little opportunity to the supervisor to widen his horizons, to see what he shares with others, and what is unique to his own situation.

However, generalities are sometimes rather like Chinese meals; you feel very full at the time and soon afterwards rather empty. So it is time to be more specific and I want to consider three books which have been particularly meaningful to me in relating educational theory to social work training. The first will, I imagine, be familiar to many of you. Whitehead's⁵ “The Aims of Education” contains two essays which are unrivalled for their vitality and clarity and it is upon these that I have based much of my thinking. But useful also in quite other ways were Bruner's⁶ “The Process of Education” and Simpson's⁷ “Improving Teaching-Learning Processes”. Bruner's book is about the teaching of mathematics and physics; Simpson's about American high school teaching. Yet they both have something to say to us.

May I remind you that Whitehead in his essay defines three stages of mental growth: the stage of romance, the stage of precision and the stage of generalisation. In the development of every child we can see these stages and Whitehead claims they should determine the way the child is taught. But just as these stages can be demonstrated

chronologically in children of different ages, so in each new learning situation, both within the span of a period of training and the experience of a particular case, there is a kind of repetition of this process, only speeded up. It is what Whitehead describes as “The Rhythm of Education”, and we can see this as well in the people whom we are training for social work as in the child beginning school.

Let us think first about “the stage of romance”. Here we who train social workers are in a strong position. There is no difficulty about finding the romance though you may *w/c* think so at the end of a long day. We do not have to combat rigid, joyless attitudes to school subjects like Latin or Geometry which have killed the romance stone dead. This is what Whitehead says about it:—

“The stage of romance is the stage of first apprehension. The subject matter has the vividness of novelty; it holds within itself unexplored connexions with possibilities half disclosed by glimpses and half concealed by the wealth of material”.⁸

There could be no more perfect description of the fascination which the beginning social work student feels for the families and the problems which he is seeing for the first time. Anxiety, resistance and insecurity there may be: but there is also excitement because he has chosen a field of work with infinite unexplored possibilities for understanding and helping others.

Ah, but you say—this soon rubs off: faced with the pressures and the limitations, the student soon leaves the world of romance and meets the hard realities of the situation. This is where the first vital task of the teacher is to be found. Somehow or other, you have to help the student towards the stage of precision, of discipline and of analysis, while leaving unharmed the precious source of his energy, so that he may recapture this feeling all over again from time to time, when he is older and wiser, and know again the romance of his subject. Each new group of students I have taught show this exuberance, this straining-at-the-leash—this desire to go out and move mountains, mixed in, of course, with all the uncertainties.

It is difficult in social work education to give these feelings some outlet while yet remembering the limitations of the agency and the protection of clients. Our own attitudes are crucial in helping to preserve the romance while nevertheless controlling the exuberance. Do we identify with the beginner and recapture some of the fun, seeing things through his eyes? Or are we envious and, therefore, a bit destructive of his enthusiasm, realising half consciously that somewhere along the way we lost the romance?

If our attitudes are sound, we can help the student to find a new and unending kind of romance and, in so doing, move him forward to the stage of precision. By this I mean that we can show him that the inner world of people and of himself is rich beyond all his expectations and that he need not depend on external action for his excitement. But in order to savour it to the full, he needs the detailed knowledge and the capacity to analyse a situation and a problem—in fact precision.

Paul Tillich,⁹ writing in "The New Being" has this to say:—

"We know that lack of love in our early years is mentally destructive. But do we know that the lack of occasions to waste ourselves is equally dangerous? In many people there has been an abundance of heart. But laws, convention and a rigid self control has repressed it and it has died. People are sick not only because they have not received love but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves".

Some of us might prefer to use the word "spend" rather than the word "waste". Perhaps the difference between the amateur and the professional in social work is that you are teaching him not to waste but to spend himself well. We must channel the romantic impulse to give it force and direction; but we must not block the flow.

This is, of course, one of the arguments for giving the student a fairly protected environment; by exposing him too soon to the enormous pressures and strains of the

work we run the risk of raising the level of anxiety beyond that which is manageable and thus reducing his capacity for enjoyment and excitement at the discovery of new things.

In this connexion, I would like to comment on the question which often arises in supervisors' groups, "What sort of cases should a student have"? or, more commonly, "What sort of cases should a student *not* have"? The fact that it is usually the negative form of the question is, I think, a pity and generally results in rather sterile discussion, in which different people mention a particular kind of case they think is unsuitable for a student without any general conclusion being reached. Then, of course, there is the perpetual cry, "I thought it was a nice *simple* case for Miss X but it turned out difficult". American literature on this subject seems to say: "in the field work situation we recognise that it is impossible to grade cases according to difficulty so we must just make the best of it", and this is said with regret. But I think we are very muddled on this point. Whitehead¹⁰ helps us when he says:

". . . it is not true that the easier subjects should precede the harder. On the contrary some of the hardest must come first because nature so dictates . . . The first intellectual task which confronts an infant is the acquirement of spoken language. What an appalling task, the correlation of meanings with sounds. It requires an analysis of ideas and an analysis of sounds . . . With this example staring us in the face we should cease talking nonsense about postponing the harder subjects".

In our situation, of course, the problem is complicated. In the selection of cases we are not simply talking of intellectual or even emotional complexity: we are talking of responsibility. I would suggest that our criterion for selection should be a positive, not a negative, one. We should give cases which will make it possible to "lay the firm foundations of a love, by so presenting it as to tempt the pupil to a joyous pursuit".¹¹ This is a definition of

the aims of education by Nunn. Does it sound unrealistic? All I am really saying is that there should be hope in the cases chosen; hope of some change, some progress, some achievement, however small or limited. This is what the beginner needs to have to increase his confidence and "lay the firm foundations of a love". If you offer this, you can, within the supervisory relationship, help him through all the rest; the complexities of a case can be simplified through focusing on particular aspects; the emotional impact can be withstood through the support and understanding of the supervisor. However, I recognise that students at varying levels of maturity and experience vary in their capacity to see *where in the hopefulness lies in a situation*. Change and growth are elusive concepts and in choosing a case at any stage, one can, I think, profitably ask two questions—"Is there hope of achievement in some area and may this student during the time he is with me be helped to see it"? In asking such a question about a case we are implicitly acknowledging three things; firstly, that all animals—social work students included—work best if rewarded; secondly, that the motivation of the social work student, the desire to help others, springs from the deepest reparative drives within him and to be reassured at an early stage that he can be helpful is crucial to continuing development; thirdly, that he must be helped to preserve the creative impulses in relationship which are at the centre of his own special "romantic era" as a social work student.

But—he must move into the phase of precision. Whitehead describes the phase like this:

"It is the stage of grammar, the grammar of language, and the grammar of science. It proceeds by forcing on the students' acceptance a given way of analysing the facts bit by bit", . . . but he adds: "the stage of precision is barren without a previous stage of romance".¹²

Grammar. What is the grammar of social work, and how can we help the student towards this precision? In "The Process of Education" Bruner uses the word

"structure" in a way I take to be similar to Whitehead's use of the word "grammar".

"To learn structure" (Bruner says) "is to learn how things are related", and he asks, "Students have a limited exposure to materials they are to learn . . . how can this exposure be made to count in their thinking for the rest of their lives"?¹³

The answer he gives is that the fundamental structure of the subject must be revealed. Which is an easier task, I would imagine, for a biologist or a physicist than for us as we muddle our way through the Social Sciences. But I think Charlotte Towle's definition of areas of learning in social casework will help us here. She describes six areas of learning:

- (a) an orderly way of thinking
- (b) knowledge and understanding of human behaviour
- (c) knowledge and understanding of working relationships
- (d) knowledge and understanding of agency structure and function
- (e) knowledge and understanding of the community and how to use its resources
- (f) knowledge of history and law and how to use it in the solution of social problems.¹⁴

The crucial area of self-awareness and developing skill in the use of relationship does not appear in the list: Towle sees this as stemming from the development of knowledge and understanding in the areas she describes, so does not mention it separately.

Perhaps a simple illustration, compounded of one or two cases allotted to students known to me, will show that these are not high-flown phrases but that we do in fact teach just these things all the time.

A young student in a Children's Department is given a family, the Morgans, where there are mounting rent arrears. The referral is from the Housing Department. The family consists of father, mother and eight children. There

is considerable marital tension, partly because of the wife's dominance and the husband's feeling of inadequacy and their underlying resentment of their roles. One of the children has attended a child guidance clinic; several of the other children show behaviour problems, and an adolescent girl is in a state of rebellion against her mother. There is considerable financial hardship and a need for material help. Some of the children have to be received into care at the time of the mother's confinement.

A study of that brief outline will shew that all six areas of learning specified are there embedded in this case. First, the area of orderly thinking. We assume, of course, that most of our students come to use with the capacity for orderly thinking well developed by a process of general education. (There are exceptions to this but they need not concern us here.) But they will need help to sift and clarify what is important and decide where their focus should be at different stages. In a family like the Morgans, multiple problems could muddle and discourage the student but careful discussion will help him to see where to begin and towards what to progress.

As well as the possibility of learning about human behaviour through the dynamics of the Morgan family, the student learns about working relationships through contact with the child guidance clinic and the housing departments; about agency structure and function in relation both to preventive work and to reception into care; about the community and its resources by contact with the N.A.B. and with the W.V.S. about clothing and bedding; about law in relation to the provisions of Section I of the Children Act 1948, and so on. Most important of all, he learns that each of these is a part of the whole practice of social casework and thus he begins to get a grasp of the fundamental *structure* of the subject to which Bruner refers.

The more intelligent the student, the more readily he grasps this structure himself and does his own relating. But our method of teaching will play a great part in assisting him to make it explicit. Simpson, on American high school teaching, describes certain educational pro-

cesses applicable to all forms of study concerned with the identification, selection and solution of problems. (It may sound rather like an extract from Helen Perlman's "Social Casework—a problem solving process" but that is another story.) Simpson talks of the different ways in which the teacher can help the student with his problem-centred task. At the top of his list comes "evaluation, including self diagnosis". He proposes a continuous process of evaluation, whereby the student asks such questions as:

"Am I improving in my ability to pick out problems of importance to study"?

"Do I have specific goals and am I making progress towards them"?

"Am I improving in my ability to work independently" and so on.¹⁵

Now evaluation is no new idea to us and a continuous process of evaluation is a hallmark of good supervision. But we can help the student during this second phase of precision by being ourselves more precise in defining what areas of learning his different cases illustrate and what aspects of his activity he needs to evaluate as he goes toward his goal of professional social work. There are two warning notes, however, which have to be sounded. The first is that any kind of rigid advance to formulas can only lead to sterility in teaching; the balance between flexibility and vagueness, between rigidity and precision is a delicate one. Secondly, there may be some who will feel that such a process of self evaluation as is outlined in Simpson's book, will tend to induce excessive self-consciousness in the student. I think that this is partly a matter of timing and of gradualness. We cannot burden the beginning student with a list of our expectations of him in the form of evaluating questions. But, by gradually introducing such questions, we are helping him to define more precisely his areas of achievement or of failure, to look his self-consciousness in the face, as it were, rather than to endure the undefined agony of self-consciousness which besets social work students as they move from romance to precision.

As well as timing and gradualness, however, one must also take into account the personality of the student; there is some validity, I think, in thinking of students in two groups—those whose cast of mind is predominantly analytic, and those who depend to a greater extent on intuitive processes. Social workers have tended to equate intuition with feeling and, therefore, to value it highly: social scientists struggling to establish the validity of their subjects have tended to value more highly the analytic approach to problems. The strain which undoubtedly exists between the two groups is in part attributable to this—the social worker who says “I can’t explain, I just *feel* it” is maddening to the research worker who is seeking to analyse processes. But Bruner in “The Process of Education” helps us to see the fallacy in this apparent dichotomy. Bruner has a section on “the nature of intuitive thought” in which he emphasises the value which scientists in the world of physics and maths place upon it.

Intuition, he says, is “the act of grasping the meaning and significance of a problem without explicit reliance on the analytic apparatus of one’s craft” . . . “The shrewd guess, the fertile hypothesis, the courageous leap to tentative conclusions—these are the most valuable coin of the thinker at work” . . . Furthermore, he adds: “The use of the word intuition by mathematicians and physicists may reflect their sense of confidence in the power and rigour of their disciplines” . . .

In other words, the secure scientists can afford to respect intuition. As our students move into the stage of precision—and as we help him to be more precise—we must at the same time value the intuitive gifts which some students possess, by our willingness to examine these “leaps in the dark” with them, recognising their worth. On the other hand, none of us can rest content with intuition alone because of its liability to error. We hear a great deal of the analytic, intellectual students defence against feeling—easy enough to spot. Let us not forget, however, that the intuitive student may resist analysis for equally defensive

reasons though these are not, I think, clearly understood. I remember one such intuitive person saying that they were somehow afraid that the act of taking a hunch or an idea to pieces—or tracing it back to source, would somehow destroy it. This is just one suggested explanation of the problem—no doubt we could think of others.

As supervisors, you will have to understand the mental bias of your student and adjust your style of teaching accordingly, perhaps especially as you enter the stage of precision, and seek to define with him more clearly his areas of learning and his performance in relation to them. And in this connexion, it is important to remember that every student—to quote Towle—“dares to think anew before he can act anew” and we need to help him accept as normal this gap between thinking and performance at a certain stage.

Finally, then, we move into the stage of generalisation, which Whitehead describes as: “a return to romanticism with the added advantage of classified ideas and relevant technique . . .”¹⁶ At this stage, the student must *transfer* what he has learnt from one case to others. Bruner points out there are two kinds of transfer;¹⁷ firstly the specific transfer of *skills*; knowing how to carry out certain kinds of action in certain situations. Obviously this kind of transfer applies in social work education, though to a limited extent, since we can only hope to present the student with a fraction of the specific skills he will need on the job. But we can offer him transferable expertise in some parts of the work. Far more important, however, is what Bruner calls “non-specific transfer”, “The transfer of principles and attitudes”, “the learning of a general idea which can then be used as a basis for recognising subsequent problems”. If we return for the moment to a family like the Morgans, we can see that the student’s learning about the dynamics of the family has 3 aspects. Firstly, there are the things about the Morgan family which are unique—*not* transferable, from which the student cannot generalise. Thank goodness there are, since this is the perpetual challenge and excitement. Then there are the patterns in the Morgan family which are going to

be the same for *some* other families, from which limited generalisation is possible both from a psychological and a sociological point of view. For example the nature of this marital relationship and the roles of these partners; the rivalry of the adolescent girl and her mother, and so on.

Finally there are the basic facts about family functioning from which the student may generalise widely—for example, the interaction of the members of a family one upon the other in subtle and complicated ways; the inevitable mixture of love and hate upon which family relationships are built.

Even with the ablest of students, the teacher can help the process of generalisation along, more particularly in those areas of learning upon which the ordinary student is less concentrated emotionally but which are no less important than the client, if the client is to be served properly. I have illustrated the process of generalisation about family dynamics. But lessons learnt from relationships with colleagues are as important and less readily grasped by students. Because these are often delicate and tricky, we are inclined to shy off them with students; but it is possible to help the student generalise about principles underlying co-operation by examining a crisis situation or a situation which went wrong and so working out what led up to the drama in the department on Friday evening at 5.0 p.m. Given that the personalities of X and Y play their part in such a crisis, the student may nevertheless be helped to see factors, upon which he can begin to generalise—lines of communication, for instance—who talked to who, and how their talking was recorded—delegation of responsibility and so on. In these areas of learning the supervisor may be particularly useful in the process of generalisation. I say “useful” deliberately because we must at all times remember the natural forces within the student, strengthened by past learning experiences which are continually helping him towards precision and generalisation. Nevertheless, it will be clear to you that I think the role of the teacher is a more positive one than simply removing impediments to growth, as some have suggested. The idea that you put a student in good earth,

press him down firmly and leave the rest to nature seems to me to be misleading. Perhaps the good caseworker will not always find it easy to adjust to the role of teacher—I am not sure about this. Yet the best of educational theory seems to correspond so closely to our ideal of growth in social work that I feel there should be no fundamental incompatibility in the dual roles.

Any discussion of teaching method must begin and end with a restatement of the basis upon which it all depends: the relationship of the teacher and the taught. This is true of all pupils at every stage, since we know that learning, the process of taking in and making your own, begins in the earliest months in the infant's relationship with his mother and that in a sense all subsequent learning is based on this process of introjection. Learning to be a social worker is a strenuous and demanding business and our students' great need is to establish with us a relationship of trust within which it is possible to learn. This is a familiar idea to all caseworkers but it has a particular meaning for the caseworker turned supervisor. This is what Martin Buber says in his essay on education:¹⁸

“Trust, trust in the world because this human being exists—that is the most inward achievement of the relationship in education. Because this human being exists, meaninglessness . . . cannot be the real truth . . .”

Your task, ultimately, is to create the trust in the meaningfulness of the particular world the student has chosen to enter; in your acceptance of him, you offer an experience of acceptance far more convincing than words which he may transfer to his clients; in your concern and compassion for him and for others you help to convince him that he was right to come to social work in hope and that he has found for himself a permanent romance.

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