

---

# The importance of schools and teachers in child welfare

**Robbie Gilligan**

Senior Lecturer in Social Work, and Academic co-Director, The Children's Centre, University of Dublin - Trinity College

**Correspondence:**

Robbie Gilligan,  
Senior Lecturer in Social Work,  
and Academic co-Director, The Children's  
Centre, University of Dublin -  
Trinity College,  
Dublin 2,  
Ireland

**Keywords:** child welfare, schools, social  
support, social work, teachers

**Accepted for publication:** September 1997

**ABSTRACT**

The article begins by challenging what is considered to be the relative neglect by child and family social work of the importance for children of school and teachers. Key roles of school in children's lives are conceptualized. School is argued to have potential as an ally for children, a guarantor of basic protection, a capacity builder, a secure base from which to explore the self and the world, an integrator into community and culture, a gateway to adult opportunities and a resource for parents and communities. It is suggested that school can have a special supportive value for children experiencing adversity, including those in state care or under supervision, those whose parents have divorced, and those recovering from abuse or neglect. The implications of the central importance of schools and teachers for child and family social work are discussed with reference to the child as client, work with teachers, work with the wider school and community, and policies in social work agencies and in education and training programmes for social workers and teachers.

**INTRODUCTION**

Schools seem remarkably invisible in the field of child and family social work, despite social workers playing some direct role in their operation in many countries. Educational policies at a global, national or school level appear to generate little attention in social work education or research. The role of the teacher as the professional with most contact with children seems to go virtually unacknowledged in much of social work and wider child welfare circles. This article sets out to challenge social work's relatively frequent neglect of school as a powerful institution in the social development and protection of children in every country. Various roles which schools can play in the social development of young people are conceptualized and discussed. In addition, the specific contribution which schools can offer to vulnerable categories of youngsters is considered. Finally, possible implications for social work practice are teased out in the fourth section.

Often there is a chasm in children's services between schools and teachers on the one hand and the non-educational services to children on the other.

Writing from a British perspective, Jackson (1994, p. 273) refers to a 'deep split between education and care which runs through all our institutions and services for children'. From a five country study of measures to tackle children's educational disadvantage, Lewis (1996, p. 78) concludes that 'the social distance between schools and other service systems seems pervasive'. In everyday services to the school child, this can lead to a situation captured in Fitzherbert's (1980, p. 349-350) memorable phrase, where many of the social and health services and professionals in the school's 'orbit' behave rather like 'rogue meteors, diving in and out of the school atmosphere at odd times'. To the outsider, any such lack of coherence and common purpose between child professionals and systems may seem bizarre and incomprehensible. There may, however, be many complex reasons for the cleavage, which have their origin *inter alia* in important differences in administrative structures, philosophical assumptions and professional socialisation and ideologies.

While achieving greater integration and coordination of services by disparate systems and professionals is not easy (Hallett & Birchall 1992; Lewis

1996), there are some voices within social work lamenting its share of responsibility for the neglect of education as a key dimension of the lives of child clients. One leading British researcher in this area (Jackson 1994, p. 277) has been moved to describe as 'shocking' the indifference to their child-client's education which she found among some but not all social workers in her study. It seems curious that social work, whose defining professional emphasis is on the social context and social experience of the client, should risk losing sight of the social institution second only to the family in its developmental impact on children. This lapse is even more odd when it is considered that, in some countries at least, school-based or school-focused social work constitutes an actual or potential specialism (Lorenz 1992; Allen-Meares 1994; Staudt & Powell 1996; Blyth & Milner 1987; Blyth *et al.* 1995; Kotze 1995).

Jackson (1994, p. 278) has called for a change in social work attitudes to education, and another social work academic, Stein (1994, p. 358), in a similar vein, has challenged any automatic assumption in social work that welfare priorities should dominate educational ones in planning for children at risk. This paper seeks to promote such a shift in attitudes and priorities among social workers. It asserts the importance of school as a potential source of vital educational *and* social experiences, especially for children at risk. It emphasizes the important preventive, developmental and rehabilitative potential of *positive* school experience.

My arguments in this paper are based on seven key propositions derived from my reading of the literature, and informed also by my experience of pre-service and in-service education and training work with social workers, teachers and other child-focused professionals and considerable contact with inner city services and conditions:

1. School experiences can have a positive and long-lasting effect on the social as well as educational development of students (Rutter 1991; Sylva 1994).
2. School must be seen as a potentially key preventive and protective resource for children experiencing social adversity, since happily the positive effects of school experience seem most evident or potent among students who are vulnerable and have few other supports (Rutter 1991).
3. Teachers are the professionals who have the greatest involvement with the general body of children and therefore those whom other child-focused professionals must seek to understand and engage.
4. Resources to assist children and families experiencing adversity are difficult to generate, in terms of both finding additional resources and avoiding stigma. Proponents of a strengths perspective remind us to look for resources in unlikely places. Even the harshest local environment may also be 'a lush topography of resources and possibilities' (Saleebey 1992, p. 7). In such a setting the school is likely to be a prominent landmark.
5. Schools are an essential component of more comprehensive multi-method approaches which are essential in tackling large-scale adversity through social development strategies and programmes (Dryfoos 1994; O'Donnell *et al.* 1995).
6. The fact that some schools or teachers may succumb to the impact of deficits in resources, policy, governance, support, training or the socio-economic base of their host community does not mean that schools cannot be successful in unpromising circumstances. Any disillusion with schools or teachers based on unhappy personal or professional encounters with schools or indeed philosophical reservations about schooling should not blind us to the normalizing, integrative and developmental *potential* of the school as a social institution, especially for children who are thin on other sources of non-stigmatizing support, social inclusion and encouragement in their lives.
7. Effective coalitions between social services, educational professionals, parents and others can be powerful levers for realizing the potential of the school whether for an individual child or whole communities (Comer *et al.* 1996; Bassuk 1997).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SCHOOL'S ROLE IN CHILD WELFARE

In this section it is argued that schools play, or, more precisely, have the potential in the right circumstances to play a number of important roles in the social development of their students. These roles are conceptualized under a number of headings.

### School as ally

Schools can offer children positive role models of helpful, caring adults. A favourite teacher can become 'not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confidant and positive model for personal identification' (Werner & Smith 1992; Werner 1990, p. 110). Findings from a recent British study of teenagers' experiences of social work and related services

suggest that, for some young social work clients at least, teachers may be preferred to social workers as confidants (Triseliotis *et al.* 1995, p. 140). Schools can supply a major source of unrelated adults 'who can serve as "listeners" and "valuers"' (Seidman *et al.* 1994, p. 519) for young people as they try to cope with the demands of developing an identity beyond their families and with the pressure of the peer group.

### School as guarantor

School has a role as a monitor of the individual daily well-being of students. It represents the most accessible and natural setting in which to gather evidence about a child's social functioning and attachment to home, peer group and community. In a sense, schools act as guarantors of the well-being of school age youngsters at risk. In the words of one commentator, without the teacher early identification of a child's problems is 'frankly a non-starter' (Fitzherbert 1980, p. 361). Appearance, behaviour, performance, time-keeping, parental contact, and progress to and from school can all provide clues for alert teachers as to the social life of the child within and beyond the school gates. A British official guidance document for relevant professionals and agencies stresses that:

'because of their day to day contact with individual children, during school term, teachers and other staff are particularly well placed to observe signs of abuse, changes in behaviour or failure to thrive' (Home Office *et al.* 1991, p. 50).

Vigilance and action on the part of the school can trigger the process of help when the school's threshold of concern has been crossed. Schools can flag to staff, parents or the relevant services possible difficulties students may be having as victims (bullying, abuse) or as risk takers (problem drug use). Schools may be able to lend their voice to a case for resources for a child in need. Schools are also in a pivotal position to play a proactive role in relation to the prevention of bullying behaviour among students on and off the school premises (O'Moore 1995).

### School as capacity builder for children

Schools can provide children with opportunities to build their self-esteem and competence (Brooks 1994, p. 546). High expectations of their students imply that the school and the teachers believe in the innate capacity of the young person. Such high expectations

can help to promote resilience in young people struggling with adversity (Benard 1992).

Schools also have an important 'social inoculation' role in strengthening the capacity of children to cope effectively in adversity and to resist the temptation or impact of negative experiences or risk-taking behaviours. School programmes have been developed to address questions as diverse as the prevention of child abuse, bullying and problem drug use. School-based child abuse prevention programmes have become an important part of the preventive armoury in child protection. While their enduring impact on children may still be the subject of debate, it is undoubtedly true that such programmes have been valuable consciousness raisers among parents, teachers and the public. Research and debate within the educational systems in Europe have been important in raising the public profile of peer abuse – bullying – among school age children. In the case of risk behaviours such as drug abuse, there is some evidence that well-constructed school-based life skills training programmes may have an impact in reducing subsequent drug use (Botvin 1995, p. 188).

Quite apart from specific content or programmes which schools may teach, the mere perception of schooling as positive may be protective for the young person at risk. School may enhance the precious quality of resilience, i.e. the capacity to develop normally despite adversity (Zimmerman & Arunkumar 1994; Smith & Carlson 1997). In a large New Zealand study of youngsters experiencing social adversity, those who were classified as resilient more often reported themselves as enjoying school (Fergusson & Lynskey 1996, p. 287). American researchers have found that a sense of belonging to school can protect against adolescent substance abuse (Hawkins, Catalano & Miller 1992).

Strongly linked to the concept of resilience is that of *self-efficacy*. Individuals with a strong sense of self-efficacy 'will try harder and persist longer' when faced with difficulties and obstacles and will be more likely 'to attribute failures on difficult tasks to insufficient effort' (Lee & Bobko 1994, p. 364). It seems that positive school experience may also foster in quite a central way a sense of self-efficacy. In the long run, the positive effects of school may be due less to what children are actually taught than to the school's impact on 'children's attitudes to learning, on their self esteem, and on their task orientation and work strategies' (Rutter 1985, p. 607).

Schools can influence pupils' destinies not only by fostering scholastic attainment, but also by the

'promotion of other prosocial attitudes and behaviours, and the inculcation of a positive self image' (Mortimore 1995, p. 357). According to a Norwegian study of influences on children's development, organized leisure opportunities – to which school may frequently offer access – may assist in preventing behaviour problems in children (Borge 1996). A study of children from non-harmonious homes has found that positive recognition for hobbies or activities is protective for such children (Jenkins & Smith 1990, p. 67).

It may be the relationship between an individual child and a supportive teacher which is the catalyst for a child's recovery from adversity. In securing progress towards recovery, it is important for teachers and other professionals not to underestimate what teachers can contribute in their day to day relationship and work with the child. Through daily contact, the teacher may be able gradually to help a child to change their view of a stressful experience (Robson, Cook & Gilliland 1995, p. 173).

### School as secure base

For the child experiencing normal developmental opportunities, school is a place in which to develop confidence and social belonging, in which to rehearse adult roles and identities and from which to explore oneself and the world. The supportive school, in the view of a Dutch observer 'presents a secure space for students who experience being respected as persons and find an environment that stimulates and values their intellectual, social and emotional possibilities' (Deen 1995, p. 21). Within a positive school ethos, teachers can come to recognize the value of the classroom and the school as 'a symbolic and practical sanctuary for the vulnerable child' (Gilligan 1996). Routines and rituals – the hallmark of the school as social institution – may convey consoling security to a troubled child. Similarly, for a child whose world is one of gloom or turmoil, or for whom daily certainties are dissolving, the familiarity and constancy of school, teacher, classroom and desk may serve as an extremely important 'protective shield' (Garmezy 1991).

Research into the impact on children of being caught up in their parents' divorce has found that the school's 'continuing presence in their lives' was important to children experiencing the discontinuities and distress associated with the break-up of parental marriages (Wallerstein & Kelly 1980, p. 44).

School can offer vulnerable children asylum from a barren, neglectful or abusive home environment. It

can serve as 'a refuge from a disordered household' (Werner 1990, p. 109). In the case of children caught up in the midst of marital break-up, an American study found that school served as 'a refuge from family difficulties and sorrowing parents' (Wallerstein & Kelly 1980, p. 44).

School-based after school care may offer valuable respite for parent and children in stressful home situations. This may provide the opportunity for children 'to enhance [their] self-esteem and perceptions of self-competence through the use of non-competitive, mastery-oriented activities and supplementary educational projects' (Thompson 1995, p. 174). For some children in trying home circumstances, attendance at boarding school may be a more positive option than remaining at home and a less stigmatizing option than placement in residential child care.

### School as integrator

Schools are a universal institution providing non-stigmatizing access to all school age children and through them to their parents. Schools rank second only to the family in their developmental impact. They enjoy 'unequalled influence...in children's lives with respect to social, intellectual, academic and behavioural development' (The Consortium on the School-based Promotion of Social Competence 1994, p. 279). Yet, problem-focused interventions and agencies geared to young people at risk have been criticised by an Australian commentator for 'bypassing the major social institution which all youth attend: the school' (Cotterell 1996, p. 205). They thus:

'devalue the skill and experience of teachers and devalue the validity of the school as a social system connected to the community by historical and emotional ties as well as geographical ones'.

### School as gateway to opportunities in adulthood

Schools can help to promote the individual's general development. They can have an enduring and positive effect on students' friendships and social skills, lifetime interests and accomplishments, and opportunities and progress in the labour force:

'The impact of school is potentially great...when [effective] schools change pupils' self-concepts, goals, beliefs about success and social responsibility, they exert powerful influence not only on subsequent education but also on employment and community participation in adulthood.' (Sylva 1994, p. 163).

A study of early school leaving in Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom testifies to the longer run economic significance for the individual of attainment at school. It demonstrates that in all three countries, those who leave school early or without qualification run a much higher risk of unemployment (Hannan *et al.* 1995).

The longer term benefits of school may also operate beyond the narrowly economic sphere of life. The evidence of a large New Zealand study suggests that school may have an important and enduring therapeutic value for young women who have experienced sexual abuse while growing up (Romans *et al.* 1995). It was found that three variables affected whether women who had experienced child sexual abuse had psychiatric problems in adulthood: level of conflict between the parents, the use of physical punishment as a form of discipline and whether the woman enjoyed secondary school. Clearly this latter point has important implications for social provision, since the school environment may be a good deal more susceptible to modification than the interior of the family unit. On the basis of their findings, the researchers argue that success and/or a sense of competence in any one of three domains at school – academic, social or sporting – can help to protect the young woman from trauma in family relationships and from the long-term deleterious effects of abuse. Second level schools may thus offer ‘alternative pathways’ for recovery from the traumas of child sexual abuse.

A British study has found a similar possible tendency for positive school experience to affect positively the progress of women who had experienced adversity in childhood. In addition, interestingly, this effect did not seem to operate for those not exposed to the adversity. Positive experience had an effect on good outcome in coping in adulthood for the ex-care group of women but not for a group of controls (Quinton & Rutter 1988). Positive experience in school may have been the crucial factor in giving the person a sense of being ‘able then to influence what happened next for him or her and so avoid a negative outcome’ (Champion 1995, p. 84).

Schools can also have an effect on the individual’s mental health and coping in childhood and adulthood. American research on personal networks found that ‘educational achievement is the single most powerful predictor of network size and composition’ (Cochran 1990, p. 303). Higher educational attainment, built upon longer stay at school, opened up social relationships, resources and identities, which in

turn reduce the risk for the individual of experiencing certain mental and physical illnesses (Cochran 1990, p. 308). School may be a source of life-long friendships and sporting and cultural interests. These relationships and interests may offer a range of ‘role identities’, a multiplicity of which it has been suggested may build a person’s sense of coping, competence and resilience in the face of adversity (Harris 1993). A variety of role identities, whether in the occupational, recreational or social spheres, may be protective of mental health. People with a very restricted range of role identities may be particularly vulnerable (Cochran 1990). The additional role identities, for instance, of friend, musician, sports fan, charity worker, which young people may initially acquire in school, may influence positively subsequent psycho-social functioning and mental health. Mortimore (1995, p. 357), for example, confirms the considerable ‘potential power of schools to affect the life chances of their students’.

### School as a resource to parents and communities

Despite difficulties which may arise between home and school, especially in conditions of social disadvantage, American and Australian commentators argue that the school may still be able to serve as a support to parents (Garbarino & Gilliam 1980; Briggs 1997). It is important to recognize, as one American observer points out, that parents may still view the school ‘as a safe environment and a place conducive to the honest....discussions that are necessary in most situations in which children have problems’ (O’Callaghan 1993, p. 11).

Involvement with their child’s academic and extracurricular activities may help otherwise isolated parents to become part of adult neighbourhood networks through their association with their child’s (Thompson 1995, p. 175). Contact with schools may also encourage some parents to become involved in educational programmes themselves (Briggs 1997). In the case of mother of young children, a Norwegian researcher suggests that maternal involvement in education may play a secondary prevention role in relation to childhood problems (Borge 1996). Schools may also serve as a conduit through which hard-pressed parents can access group and other support relevant to their demanding circumstances (Greif 1994; Briggs 1997). It is argued that schools can be vital local resources in run-down neighbourhoods drained of other facilities and one of the most reliable social institutions available to needy families

(Thompson 1995, p. 174). Schools can also contribute in important ways to promoting and sustaining a sense of community in hard-pressed inner cities (Searle 1996a). The concept of schools as a hub for the delivery of a full range of social services to children and families is being promoted by many commentators in the US (Dryfoos 1994; Hooper-Briar & Lawson 1994; Zigler, Finn-Stevenson & Stern 1997). A comparable emphasis on the integration of schools and related services in disadvantaged communities is also evident in France and the Netherlands (Lewis 1996).

### THE POTENTIAL OF SCHOOL FOR SPECIAL CATEGORIES OF CHILDREN

Rutter (1991, p. 8) observes that while schools are helpful socially for any child, they are most important for certain subgroups experiencing stress. It is therefore fortunate that often those children 'who most need what good schools have to offer...seem to be the ones most likely to benefit from the broader aspects of schooling' (Rutter 1991). A strong case can certainly be made for the value of school for particular groups of at risk young people.

#### Young people in care or under supervision

In their study of teenagers in contact with social workers, Triseliotis *et al.* (1995) found that 'a positive view of self and comparatively favourable educational progress seemed to be important assets or protective factors in negotiating the initial crisis or problem' (p. 255).

There is evidence that school experiences may influence outcomes for children in care. A Danish follow-up study of adults formerly in care found that school experiences seemed to have been an important protective factor for those who had done reasonably well despite adversity (Christoffersen 1996, p. 37). The British Department for Education and Department of Health (1994, p. 9) describe school as a potential 'life-line' for young people in care whose lives may otherwise be filled with uncertainty and instability. If teachers can ensure their programme of study and teaching is developmentally appropriate, they may be able to influence how children in care try to solve problems, how they study, how they ask for help, how they value themselves, and how they deal with personal questions about their care status (Noble 1997).

One study has found that the prospects for foster placement stability were enhanced where the child did not change school when moving into the foster home (Berridge & Cleaver 1987). Educational progress may work alongside, and indeed enhance, a child's recovery and sense of achievement following trauma. Aldgate (1990, p. 48) reminds us that 'it is not necessary for the child [in care] to recover emotionally before attending to [their ] educational needs'.

#### Children at risk of delinquency

Good educational achievement was one of four protective factors against reoffending identified in a Canadian study of young offenders (Hoge, Andrews & Leschied 1996). A review of effective approaches to delinquency prevention found that good quality pre-school programmes and school environment and practices had a bearing on the pathways into or away from delinquency which a vulnerable youngster would follow (Yoshikawa 1994). Similarly a British review of the evidence has found that school can influence for good or ill according to their qualities, the propensity of vulnerable youngsters to engage in delinquency (Farrington 1996).

#### Children with emotional, behavioural or other mental health problems

Schools may also influence favourably the level of risk of emotional and behavioural problems (Cox 1993, p. 698). Research findings suggest that the school factors which promote positive behaviour and good attainment in the child include:

'high expectations for work and behaviour, good models of behaviour provided by teachers, a respect for children and their achievements opportunities for children to be involved in the school as an organization, clear disciplinary rules, encouragement of good behaviour and sparing use of punishment, pleasant working conditions, good teacher-child relationships, and a supportive coherent structure for teachers' (Cox 1993, p. 698).

School achievement has been found to be one of a number of protective factors for children who are at risk of depression (Fombonne 1995, p. 572).

#### Children of divorce

American researchers have found that attention and warmth from teachers were positively associated with positive adjustment by the child after parental divorce

(Kelly & Wallerstein 1977; Hetherington, Cox & Cox 1979). In one large American study it was found that students who had experienced parental divorce benefited from an authoritative school climate which 'provided an organized, predictable environment with clearly defined and consistently enforced standards, expectations for appropriately mature, responsible behavior, and a responsive nurturant environment' (Hetherington 1993, p. 54). These benefits of the authoritative school were most marked for children who had experienced parental divorce and remarriage, high levels of marital conflict without divorce, or high levels of negative stressful life events. Conversely a 'chaotic/neglecting school environment had the most adverse effects on children' (Hetherington 1993, p. 55).

### **Children recovering from abuse or neglect**

Relationships with teachers may help young people compensate for lack of supportive relationships with other adults in their lives (Galbo 1996). The teacher may be able, for instance, to help a child recover from or cope with a stressful experience such as sexual abuse by gradually helping the child to (re)build self-confidence and identify and rehearse new ways of coping with stress (Robson, Cook & Gilliland 1995). The sheer normalcy, routine and safety of school may be powerfully therapeutic for a vulnerable child (Gilligan 1996). Enjoying school may have many positive effects for the young person at risk. A New Zealand study of women who had been victims of child sexual abuse in their adolescence found that those who enjoyed secondary school were likely to stay on at school longer, avoided early pregnancies and eventually occupied a higher socio-economic class than those who disliked secondary school (Romans *et al.* 1995).

### **Children from socio-economically disadvantaged homes**

School experiences may serve as a buffer for children against some of the worst effects of socio-economic disadvantage. The interest of teachers and other school staff may prove very beneficial. Researchers in one North American study found that '...for students who did experience one or more conditions of disadvantage, support received from school personnel was associated with a variety of positive academic and socio-emotional outcomes' (DuBois *et al.* 1994).

In a 20 year study in a poor rural area of Guatemala, researchers have established that length

of time at school acted as a buffer against any negative effects of cumulative social adversity on educational performance (Gorman & Pollitt 1996).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK**

While child protection has probably raised the profile of teachers and schools in the consciousness of many social workers, it is important that social workers recognize that teachers and schools have a wider role in the social development of children beyond an occasional 'bit part' in the opening scenes of any drama of child protection.

If the task is to broaden our appreciation of the potential of the role of schools and teachers, there is a parallel need to expand our conception of what social work can contribute – and not just on its own terms or solely in relation to its priorities. The challenge is to develop context – and culturally – appropriate models of social work in support of the educational tasks of teachers, children, parents and community (Kotze 1995). Social work must be seen by itself and policy makers as a key element of the infrastructure of education support services in the fullest sense and not merely as serving the role of a 'school bobby'.

It is essential to stress of course that the potential of what schools and social services can offer children in need is heavily constrained by questions of ideology, governance and resource allocation. In many jurisdictions, resource shortages or ideologically driven policies create barriers or disincentives to persevering in the service of children with extra needs (Blyth *et al.* 1995, p. 17). Services may be withdrawn, children excluded, schools run down. The rolling back of the welfare state impinges directly on individual children and the services that teachers and social workers can offer them (Searle 1996b). Schools may have unequal access to facilities and supports, leading to poorly resourced schools in poor neighbourhoods (Wilson 1997, p. 211). While the true structural source of many problems must be cited, it is important also that the vision of what ought to be or can be is not lost. The fact that social workers or teachers are impeded in helping children in need renders even more important alternative visions of what is possible. Otherwise, children, parents, professionals and the public in many countries may succumb to the 'inevitability' of the status quo. Poorly run schools, oppressive behaviour by teachers or students, poor contact with parents, poor relations between sets of professionals, where they happen, are not inevitable.

They flow from choices made by people with power in relation to policies, governance and resource allocation. Challenging the negative effects of such choices necessarily involves various 'stakeholders' in the school system, including, it is argued in this article, social workers and social services. Specific ways in which social workers can help develop new possibilities are now explored.

### The child as client

It is important that social workers and their agencies are convinced of the importance of school and educational experience in the development of individual children (Briggs 1997). In particular, they must recognize the special protective value of education and the school for vulnerable youngsters in terms of their educational and social development (and destiny) and conversely the risks posed by educational failure, early school leaving or exclusion (Blyth & Milner 1996). Attention to educational progress and the child's experience of school must become a necessary part of social work assessment and intervention on behalf of children at risk. For children in state care, the value of educational plans has been stressed in order to combat a too frequent failure to focus on educational needs (Sinclair, Garnett & Berridge 1995, p. 288).

Social workers should attend to a child's perception of school and its likely influence on their interest, motivation and attainment. Simple exercises such as asking a child, even as young as 10 years, to complete sentences such as 'a parent is like a ...', 'a teacher is like a ...' and 'a school is like a ...' may yield valuable clues and insights as to whether the child sees school as being like a home, a place for business, or an unpleasant place (Sputa *et al.* 1996). The level of the child's engagement with the school community should be a concern in planning for a child's welfare (Wehlage *et al.* 1989). Matters such as homework, adjustment to new schools, liaison with teachers, parent-teacher meetings and the other paraphernalia of school life require more attention. Two specific forms of intervention may be especially worthy of social work interest and support: helping children with reading difficulties (Menmuir 1994), and after school study support schemes (Halpern 1991; McBeath 1993). Social workers must appreciate the value of continuity in a child's schooling. Changes of school may affect badly children's friendships, schoolwork and future education (Berridge 1985, p. 114-116; Buchanan 1995, p. 693). A Danish study

indicates a statistically significant higher risk of frequent changes of school among children in out of home care compared with two comparison groups (one randomly drawn and one drawn from disadvantaged backgrounds) (Christoffersen 1996, p. 31).

### Working with teachers

Social workers must appreciate the central importance of the professional role of the teacher in children's welfare. They must also consider it an essential professional function in child-centred social work to engage effectively with teachers and schools.

In working with teachers and in building professional partnerships with them, it is important for non-teachers to appreciate the harsh realities of life in high stress classrooms and schools. Non-school professionals need to be sensitive to the cost to teachers of personal exposure to the raw facts and personal and professional implications of abuse or other adversity in children's lives. The prospect of a lifetime of teaching in a community trapped in chronic poverty may sap morale and tolerance, especially in the absence of adequate specific training or support. Teachers may feel forced to adopt strategies which are ultimately counter-productive in terms of children's motivation and attainment and the teachers' own satisfaction. Non-school professionals should avoid premature blaming of such coping strategies and should appreciate that they do not represent the full repertoire of potential school-based approaches to vulnerable children's educational and social development (Dent & Hatton 1996; Hatton, Munns & Dent 1996).

However, it is a disservice to children and their teachers to expect or claim too much for the role of teachers at times of crisis in a child's life. The problems at home may not be known to teachers or they may be too great for teachers to be able to engage with them effectively (Wallerstein & Kelly 1980, p. 44). The key lies in offering the requisite level of information and support to teachers faced with children's difficulties. Teacher confidence is a crucial factor. Training geared to the needs of teachers can help equip them to respond sensitively and effectively to the needs of children at risk (Lawlor 1993). Outlining clear information and clear expectations of teachers has been found to help clarify roles and assuage anxiety which is otherwise an understandable response to ambiguity and uncertainty (Peake 1995). The availability of sustained, structured consultation on a group or individual basis may influence teachers'



sense of professional effectiveness and their students' sense of competence and achievement (Goldman *et al.* 1997).

One step which is important in fostering understanding and goodwill between social workers and non-social work referrers is to offer a timely and appropriate feedback to the referral source about what broadly has happened to the referral. Failure to do so is a recurring theme in comments from other professionals and is an unnecessary irritant in key relationships (Briggs 1997). It may, for example, discourage the making of further referrals.

### Work with the wider school and community

Social workers and their agencies must recognize social work as a discipline with a knowledge base and skill set relevant to assisting (1) the development of individual schools and the school system more generally, and (2) the greater integration of the school into community, professional and children's services networks. Notwithstanding Specht's (1985) reservations about the capacity of social work's existing knowledge base in terms of how to work effectively with 'non-clinical others', it is likely that social work is still better equipped than most professions to contribute to efforts to link schools and other services in the interests of vulnerable young people who are their common concern (Franklin & Streeter 1995). Social workers must see the school as an essential partner in attempts to integrate more effectively services to vulnerable children and their families. In areas of multiple disadvantage, serving the learning needs of children must, on the one hand, involve 'parents as co-learners and co-educators' and, on the other, an alliance of all those institutions and interests concerned with the regeneration of communities and education in those communities (National Commission on Education 1996). School social workers particularly can play key role in promoting parental involvement in the life of the school (Smith & Carlson 1997). As a resource for community development, there are many developmental possibilities inherent in a broader role for the school in social support and community services networks (Hooper-Briar & Lawson 1994; Durrant 1997, p. 81). Clearly social workers and the agencies which employ them must be to the fore in initiatives aimed at enhancing communities, schools and ultimately the climate in which children live out their lives. Social workers can play a key role in helping schools to tap into existing 'primary services' in a community (e.g. libraries,

family support programmes, after school programmes, etc.), which may help to reinforce and support children's educational and social development (Wynn *et al.* 1994). Social workers can also support new models of provision for at-risk youngsters in the education/social services system (Stephenson 1996).

### Child and family social work and schools

As has already been stressed, social workers can only respond fully to the exhortations listed above if supported by appropriate policies and resource allocation within the social service and educational systems in each country. However, a key prerequisite for progress on this front is a conviction within child and family social work itself that the school-social work relationship is a part of its 'core business'. Accordingly, it seems essential that education and school issues be placed much higher up social work's professional agenda in terms of educational and training curricula and in terms of professional supervision. Social workers must be helped to see schools as potentially powerful allies in their work with children, rather than as a potential source of further pressures and demands which cannot be met. Social workers must appreciate the implications of (1) educational progress or failure for their child clients, and (2) the wider social value of school experience. Individually and collectively, social workers must also see it as part of their professional brief in the child welfare field to engage with the debates and policies affecting schools, and in particular to be concerned with how adequately schools are resourced to work with vulnerable children and in high risk communities. Their training must sensitize them to respect the importance of the role of the teacher and to understand the pressures that operate in that role. Failures by individual teachers or by certain schools should not obscure the positive potential of schools and teachers in children's lives.

Arguing the case for more effective linkage across service systems (health, education, social services, etc.), Lewis (1996, p. 12) observes that:

'the climate for service integration is influenced by whether there is mutual respect among professions and understanding of what skills and contributions other professions can make to the resolution of a child's performance or learning difficulties'.

Social services and schools can offer each other much mutual support (Asp & Garbarino 1983). The

message about the importance of school as a key resource and partner must be reinforced through professional supervision, social work education and agency policy (Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990). Agencies and educational institutions must promote opportunities for interprofessional courses between centres providing educational and professional development programmes for social workers and teachers (Allen-Meares 1994). They must also draw on evidence about good practice in this regard (Hooper-Briar & Lawson 1994; Guthrie 1996). It seems reasonable to hope that such joint training and closer professional cooperation can help generate more satisfying professional roles for those practitioners involved, more integrated support of individual children, and new models of provision better geared to the social and developmental needs of vulnerable children and young people.

## REFERENCES

- Aldgate, J. (1990) Foster children at school: success or failure? *Adoption and Fostering*, **14**, 38–49.
- Allen-Meares, P. (1994) Social work services in schools; a national study of entry-level tasks. *Social Work*, **39**, 560–565.
- Asp, E. & Garbarino, J. (1983) Social support networks and the schools. In: *Social Support Networks: Informal Helping in Human Services* (eds J. Whittaker, & J. Garbarino), ch. 9. Aldine, New York.
- Bassuk, E. (1997) Towards a restructuring of the schools editorial. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, **67**, 342–343.
- Benard, B. (1992) Fostering resiliency in kids: protective factors in the family, school, and community. *Prevention Forum*, **12**, 1–16.
- Berridge, D. (1985) *Children's Homes*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Berridge, D. & Cleaver, H. (1987) *Foster Home Breakdown*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Blyth, E. & Milner, J. (1987–8) Is education welfare social work? *Practice*, **4**, 339–354.
- Blyth, E., Dunkley, A., Hodgson, A., Milner, J., Platt, C., Stubbs, S. & Taylor, J. (1995) *Preventing Behaviour Problems - Practice Issues in Education Social Work*. Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, London.
- Blyth, E. & Milner, J. (1996) *Exclusion from School: Inter-professional Issues for Policy and Practice*. Routledge, London.
- Borge, A. (1996) Developmental pathways of behaviour problems in the young child: factors associated with continuity and change. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, **37**, 195–204.
- Botvin, G. (1995) Drug abuse prevention in school settings. In: *Drug Abuse Prevention with Multiethnic Youth* (eds G. Botvin, S. Schinke & M. Orlandi), ch. 9. Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Briggs, F. (1997) The importance of schools and early childhood centres in child protection. *Journal of Child Centred Practice*, **4**, 11–23.
- Brooks, R. (1994) Children at risk: fostering resilience and hope. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, **64**, 545–553.
- Buchanan, A. (1995) Young people's views on being looked after in out-of-home-care under the Children Act 1989. *Children and Youth Services Review*, **17**, 681–696.
- Champion, L. (1995) A developmental perspective on social support networks. In: *Social Support and Psychiatric Disorder* (ed. T. Brugha). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Christoffersen, M. (1996) A follow-up study of out-of-home care in Denmark: long-term effects on self-esteem among abused and neglected children. *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare*, **1**, 25–39.
- Cochran, M. (1990) Factors influencing personal social initiative. In: *Extending Families: The social networks of parents and their children* (eds M. Cochran, M. Lerner, L. Gunnarsson & C. Henderson), ch. 16. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Comer, J. Haynes, N., Joyner, E. & Ben-Avie M (eds.) (1996) *Rallying the Whole Village The Comer Process for Reforming Education*. Teachers College Press, New York.
- Consortium on the School-based Promotion of Social Competence (1994) The school-based promotion of social competence: theory, research, practice and policy. In: *Stress, Risk and Resilience in children and adolescents Processes, mechanisms and interventions* (eds R. Haggerty, L. Sherrod, N. Garmezy & M. Rutter), ch. 8. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Cotterell, J. (1996) *Social Networks and Social Influences in Adolescence*. Routledge, London.
- Cox, A. (1993) Befriending Young Mothers *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **163**, 6–18.
- Deen, N. (1995) Schools make people grow: notes on the supportive school. *Pastoral Care in Education*, **13**, 19–25.
- Dent, J and Hatton, E. (1996) Education and poverty: an Australian primary school case study. *Australian Journal of Education*, **40**, 46–64.
- Department for Education and Department of Health (1994) *The Education of Children Being Looked After by Local Authorities Circular 13/94*; DH LAC (94) 11. Authors, London.
- Dryfoos, J. (1994) *Full Service Schools - A Revolution in Health and Social Services for Children, Youth, and Families*. Jossey Bass, San Francisco.
- DuBois, D., Felner, R., Meares, H. & Krier, M. (1994) Prospective investigation of the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage, life stress, and social support on early adolescent adjustment. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, **103**, 511–522.
- Durrant, P. (1997) Mapping the future? – A contribution from community social work in the community care field Ch. 3. In: *Social Action with Children and Families - A*

- Community development approach to child and family welfare.* (eds C. Cannan. & C. Warren). Routledge, London.
- Farrington, D. (1996) *Understanding and Preventing Youth Crime* York: York Publishing Services.
- Fergusson, D. & Lynskey, M. (1996) Adolescent resiliency to family adversity. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, **37**, 281–292.
- Fitzherbert, K. (1980) Strategies for prevention. In: *Linking Home and School – A New Review*, 3rd edn (eds M. Craft, J. Raynor & L. Cohen), ch. 23. Harper and Row, London.
- Fletcher-Campbell, F. & Hall, C. (1990) *Changing Schools? Changing People? The Education of Children in Care* National Foundation for Educational Research, Slough.
- Fombonne, E. (1995) Depressive disorders: time trends and possible explanatory mechanisms. In: *Psychosocial Disorders in Young People – Time Trends and their Causes* (eds M. Rutter & D. Smith), ch. 11. Wiley, Chichester.
- Franklin, C. & Streeter, C. (1995) School reform: linking public schools with human services. *Social Work*, **40**, 773–782.
- Galbo, J. (1986) Adolescents' perceptions of significant adults: implications for the family, the school and youth serving agencies. *Children and Youth Services Review*, **8**, 37–51.
- Garbarino, J. & Gilliam, G.G. (1981) The role of schools in child maltreatment. In: *Understanding Abusive Families*, ch. 7. Lexington Books, Lexington, Mass.
- Garnezy, N. (1991) Resiliency and vulnerability to adverse developmental outcomes associated with poverty. *American Behavioral Scientist*, **34**, 416–430.
- Gilligan, R. (1996) The role of teachers and schools in protecting children at risk of abuse or neglect. *Oideas* [Journal of the Irish Department of Education], **44**, 26–45.
- Goldman, R., Botkin, M., Tokunaga, H. & Kuklinski, M. (1997) Teacher consultation: impact on teachers' effectiveness and students' cognitive competence and achievement. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, **67**, 374–384.
- Gorman, K. & Pollitt E (1996) Does schooling buffer the effects of early risk? *Child Development*, **67**, 314–326.
- Greif, G. (1994) Using family therapy ideas with parenting groups. *Journal of Family Therapy*, **16**, 199–207.
- Guthrie, L. (1996) *How to Coordinate Services for Students and Families*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.
- Hallett, C. & Birchall, E. (1992) *Coordination and Child Protection: A Review of the Literature*. HMSO, Edinburgh.
- Halpern, R. (1991) *The Role of After-School Programs in the Lives of Inner-City Children: A Study of the Urban Youth Network After -School Programs*. Discussion Paper No. 044. The Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, Chicago.
- Hannan, D., Hövels, B., van den Berg, S. & White, M. (1995) "Early Leavers" from education and training in Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Education*, **30**, 325–346.
- Harris, T. (1993) Surviving childhood adversity: what can we learn from naturalistic studies. In: *Surviving Childhood Adversity: Issues for Policy and Practice* (eds H. Ferguson, R. Gilligan & R. Torode). Social Studies Press, Dublin.
- Hatton, E., Munns, G. & Dent, J. Teaching children in poverty: three Australian primary school responses. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, **17**, 39–52.
- Hawkins, J., Catalano, R. & Miller, J. (1992) Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychological Bulletin*, **112**, 64–105.
- Hetherington, E.M. (1993) An overview of the Virginia longitudinal study of divorce and remarriage with a focus on early adolescence. *Journal of Family Psychology*, **7**, 39–56.
- Hetherington, E.M. Cox, M. & Cox, R. (1979) Play and social interaction in children following divorce. *Journal of Social Issues*, **35**, 26–49.
- Hoge, R., Andrews, D. & Leschied, A. (1996) An investigation of risk and protective factors in a sample of youthful offenders. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, **37**, 419–424.
- Home Office, Dept. of Health & Dept. of Education and Science and Welsh Office (1991) *Working Together under the Children Act 1991 A guide to arrangements for inter-agency co-operation for the protection of children from abuse*. HMSO, London.
- Hooper-Briar, K. & Lawson, H. (1994) *Serving Children, Youth and Families Through Interprofessional Collaboration and Service Integration: A Framework for Action*. The Danforth Foundation and The Institute for Educational Renewal at Miami University, Oxford, OH.
- Jackson, S. (1994) Educating children in residential and foster care. *Oxford Review of Education*, **20**, 267–279.
- Jenkins, J. & Smith, M. (1990) Factors protecting children living in disharmonious homes: maternal reports. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, **29**, 60–69.
- Kelly, J. & Wallerstein, J. (1977) Brief interventions with children in divorcing families. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, **47**, 23–39.
- Kotze, F. (1995) Education support services: a proposed model for school social work. *Social Work/ Maatskaplike Werk*, **31**, 183–194.
- Lawlor, M. (1993) Assessment of the likelihood of primary school teachers believing children's disclosures of sexual abuse. *Child Abuse Review*, **2**, 174–184.
- Lee, C. & Bobko, P. (1994) Self-efficacy beliefs: comparisons of five measures. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **79**, 364–369.
- Lewis, M. (1996) *Integrating Services for Children at Risk Denmark, France, Netherlands, United Kingdom (England and Wales)*. Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris.

- Lorenz, W. (1992) School-based social work in Germany. *Journal of Education Social Work Autumn*, 1, 47–51.
- McBeath, J. (1993) *A Place for Success An Evaluation of Study Support in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland*. The Prince's Trust and the Royal Jubilee Trusts, London.
- Menmuir, R. (1994) Involving residential social workers and foster carers in reading with young people in their care: the PRAISE reading project. *Oxford Review of Education*, 20, 329–338.
- Mortimore, P. (1995) The positive effects of schooling. In: *Psychosocial Disturbances in Young People Challenges for Prevention* (ed. M. Rutter). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- National Commission on Education (1996) *Success against the Odds Effective Schools in Disadvantaged Areas*. Routledge, London.
- Noble, L. (1997) The face of foster care. *Educational Leadership*, April, 26–28.
- O' Callaghan, J. (1993) *School-based Collaboration with Families*. Jossey Bass Publishers, San Francisco.
- O'Donnell, J., Hawkins D, Catalano, R., Abbott, R. & Day, E. (1995) Preventing school failure, drug use, and delinquency among low-income children: long term intervention in elementary schools. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 65, 87–100.
- O'Moore, A. (1995) Bullying behaviour in children and adolescents in Ireland. *Children and Society*, 9, 49–66.
- Peake, A. (1995) Dealing with the suspicion of child sexual abuse: the role of the teacher. In: *The Child Protection Handbook* (eds K. Wilson & A. James), ch. 13. Balliere Tindall, London.
- Quinton, D. & Rutter, M. (1988) *Parenting Breakdown: The Making and Breaking of Inter-generational Links*. Avebury, Aldeshot.
- Robson, M., Cook, P. & Gilliland, J. (1995) Helping children manage stress. *British Educational Research Journal*, 21, 165–174.
- Romans, S., Martin, J., Anderson, J., O'Shea, M. & Mullen, P. (1995) Factors that mediate between child sexual abuse and adult psychological outcome. *Psychological Medicine*, 25, 127–142.
- Rutter, M. (1991) Pathways from childhood to adult life: the role of schooling. *Pastoral Care in Education*, September.
- Rutter, M. (1985) Resilience in the face of adversity protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 147, 598–611.
- Saleebey D (1992) Introduction: power in the people. In: *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (ed. D. Saleebey), ch. 1. Longman, New York.
- Searle, C. (1996a) A different achievement: excellence in the inner city. *Forum*, 38, 17–20.
- Searle, C. (1996b) The signal of failure – school exclusions and the market system of education. In: *Exclusion from School: Inter - professional Issues for Policy and Practice* (eds E. Blyth & J. Milner), ch. 3. Routledge, London.
- Seidman, E., Allen, L., Aber, J., Mitchell, C. & Feinman (1994) The impact of school transitions on the self-system and perceived social context of poor urban youth. *Child Development*, 65, 507–522.
- Sinclair, R., Garnett, L. & Berridge, D. (1995) *Social Work and Assessment with Adolescents*. National Children's Bureau, London.
- Smith, C. & Carlson, B. (1997) Stress, coping and resilience in children and youth. *Social Services Review*, June.
- Specht H (1985) Managing professional interactions. *Social Work*, 30, 225230.
- Sputa, C., Marchant, G., Rothlisberg, B. & Paulson, S. (1996) My school is like home: using metaphors to assess students attitudes toward parenting, teaching and schools. *Psychological Reports*, 768, 619–623.
- Staudt, M. & Powell, K. (1996) Serving children and adolescents in the school: can social work meet the challenge? *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 13, 433–446.
- Stein, M. (1994) Leaving care, education and career trajectories. *Oxford Review of Education*, 20, 349–360.
- Stephenson, M. (1996) Cities in schools a new approach for excluded children and young people. In: *Exclusion from School Inter-professional Issues for Policy and Practice* (eds E. Blyth & J. Milner), ch. 17. Routledge, London.
- Sylva, K., (1994) School Influences on Children's Development *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 35, 135–172.
- Thompson, R. (1995) *Preventing Child Maltreatment through Social Support A Critical Analysis*. SAGE, Thousand Oaks.
- Triseliotis, J., Borland, M., Hill, M. & Lambert, L. (1995) *Teenagers and the Social Work Services*. HMSO, London.
- Wallerstein, J. & Kelly, J. (1980) *Surviving the Breakup How Parents and Children Cope with Divorce*. Grant McIntyre, London.
- Wehlage, G., Rutter, R., Smith, G., Lesko, N. & Fernandez, R. (1989) *Reducing the Risk Schools as Communities of Support*. Falmer Press, Lewes.
- Werner, E. (1990) Protective Factors and Individual Resilience. In: *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention* (eds S. Meisels & J. Shonkoff). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Werner, E. & Smith, R. (1992) *Overcoming the Odds High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Wilson, W. (1997) *When Work Disappears – The World of the New Urban Poor*. Vintage Books, New York.
- Wynn, J., Costello, J., Halpern, R. & Richman, H. (1994) *Children, Families and Communities A New Approach to Social Services*. The Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, Chicago.
- Yoshikawa, H. (1994) Prevention as cumulative protection; effects of early family support and education on chronic delinquency and its risks. *Psychological Bulletin*, 115, 28–54.

- Zimmerman, M. & Arunkumar, R. (1994) Resiliency research: implications for schools and policy. *Social Policy Report – Society for Research in Child Development*, **VIII**, 4.
- Zigler, E., Finn-Stevenson, M. & Stern, B. (1997) Supporting children and families in the schools: the school of the 21st century. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, **67**, 396–407.