

Social Work Practice: A Response to the Urban Crisis



reviewed by [Maxine Greene](#) — 1971

Title: Social Work Practice: A Response to the Urban Crisis

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This book about social work practice in the modern city holds a startling relevance for the educator in the city schools. There are obvious differences between the social work and the teaching professions; but both are caught up in the process of reconceptualizing themselves in the face of crisis, and both are concerned with the survival of individuals in an increasingly impersonal, technological world. Carol Meyer's radical approach to the individualization of practice provides an opportunity for those of us in education to view our own situation from an altered vantage point, through what Dr. Meyer calls a "transactional lens." To look at familiar phenomena from a new perspective is to find that new aspects and dimensions are disclosed.

Educators are familiar (from their reading of John Dewey) with the notion of transaction; but they normally think of it as a process of interchange between "individual" and "environment." This author speaks of "a system of interweaving forces" and "the individual in his several social roles, interacting with his intimate relationships, usually his family, but *in addition* die dynamic environment of which he is a part."

She says this in connection with a redefinition of "the case" in the context of social work. The educator, particularly the one engaged in individualizing teaching and learning, may well find that it enriches his conception of "student." Too frequently, when we try to break with faceless abstractions like

"the disadvantaged" or "the slow learner," we imagine ourselves focusing upon persons who are discrete, private creatures detached from their family and cultural affiliations. Doing so (with the best will in the world), we begin to resemble the caseworkers Carol Meyer describes, those in the 1920s who "sought individual solutions to social problems." We overlook the child's condition outside of school: the strains and fulfillments in his family life; the pressures of the urban environment as it engages him; the effects of the restlessness and rebelliousness which characterize our time.

Dr. Meyer devotes one of the most eloquent chapters on the subject we have read to what she calls "the urban condition," something of which every city teacher *must* be aware. Not only does she draw together the strands of significant recent research; she manages to communicate something of the way in which individuals experience the city. Few urbanologists have been able to do that; few social scientists have cared to do it. Indeed, the skill with which the overview is handled may testify to an important difference between the behavioral scientist and the professional committed to practice. The practitioner, social worker or teacher, cannot afford the detached, statistical view, even

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though his or her practice depends for much of its expertise on knowledge "borrowed," as Miss Meyer says, from the social and behavioral sciences. *Social Work Practice* is clearly the work of a scholar as much at ease with terns theory as with Erik Erikson's work on maturation; but it is also the work of a person *engagee*, highly sensitive to the plight of modern man.

Although she makes explicit the primary concern of social work practice with the poor, she cites sufficient evidence to show that that plight is universal. Building on the work of Alfred Kahn (*Theory and Practice of Social Planning*) and Richard Titmuss (*Commitment to Welfare*), she stresses the susceptibility of all urban people to the pain of crisis and change, and the consequent need of all human beings for services to allay such pain. But this, of course, poses a dilemma for social workers, as it does for educators. Just as some children, because of deprivations at home *and* at school, do not have equal access to even the richest educational opportunities, so thousands of adults (as well as children) do not have equal access to opportunities provided by the city because they cannot compensate for the terrible deficits in their lives. Such people, quite naturally, have a prior claim on the services of social workers; but Dr. Meyer qualifies this recognition of priority by warning that the social worker's "unit of attention" should be defined "broadly enough to include all people who would make use of social work services, inclusive, and flexible enough, to account for all categories of need, and open enough to respond to continually changing expressions of need." Teachers who are aware of the priority attention given to the so-called culturally deprived in Head Start, Follow Through, Upward Bound, and other compensatory programs might profit by a confrontation of the dilemma as well as by a recognition of what Miss Meyer calls "the burden of differentiation through a diagnostic or distinguishing process of assessment." The problem for teachers, as well as for social workers, is to individualize while—at the same time—adapting to the fluid social context.

The argument in this book culminates in a proposal that attention be paid to crisis intervention theory and that necessary interventions be carried out by differentiated teams. Crisis intervention, Carol Meyer explains, "makes necessary the accessibility and availability of the practitioner at all potential crisis points in the individual's life." Karl Menninger, Erikson, and others who have developed theories of crisis intervention place their stress upon the need for cognitive understanding of crisis situations and cognitive mastery of crisis when it arises. It strikes us that nothing could be of more significance for the teacher in the urban classroom. We talk often of liberating young people to think and to learn, with the end in view that they will be equipped to cope with life's eventualities and to make the kinds of choices that are sound. Because we seldom come to terms with the fact that teaching *is* a type of intervention at climactic points of maturation, and because we often overlook our students' multiple transactions outside the school, we have not thought seriously enough about crisis or about its meanings within the school. Nor have we thought about the kinds of cooperation which are possible in attempts which must be made to meet the maturational crises which so directly affect the ability to learn.

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The urban educator would do well to heed Dr. Meyer's conception of the team oriented to work in a particular community. She describes it as a group of professional social workers and various technicians (usually and rather insultingly called "aides," "paraprofessionals," or "preprofessionals") whose function it is to individualize within the urban environment. Attempting to do away with the old hierarchical concept, which implies that professional status is the only one that is valuable, she talks in terms of differentiated, well-defined, and dignified jobs, each reflecting "the total social work scheme of intervention." We would like to see teachers adapt such an approach to their classrooms and their schools, especially where *their* "paraprofessional" help is concerned. But we are also tempted by the notion of occasionally extending Miss Meyer's social work teams to encompass certain educators who see themselves within the same transactional field.

Social Work Practice is aimed at the graduate student in social work, social policy, and social welfare. If we are to eradicate the arbitrary separations which so often interfere with our services to individuals, we in education ought to herald the relevance of a book like this. It is well-written, alive with new ideas, and altogether suggestive; and it contains none of the *esoterica* of the overly defensive specialist. We recommend it to our fellow educators. We need as many new lenses as we can find.

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