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Professional Education for Social Work in Britain: An Historical Account (A Book Review)

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Abstract

This article is a review of Marjorie J. Smith's book, Professional Education for Social Work in Britain: An Historical Account, 2022. We present a comprehensive historical expression of the evolution of vocational education for social workers in the United Kingdom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The focus was on the initial training methods in social worker institutions, the transition to formal training schemes, the establishment, and challenges of the School of Sociology, as well as the merger with the London School of Economics (LSE). This paper explores the ongoing tension between academic education and practical professional training in social work. As a valuable resource, this paper outlines the philosophical foundations, pedagogical approaches, and institutional challenges that shape social worker training. Through historical exhibitions, committee reports, and practical work reports, this paper provides a rich narrative that emphasizes the importance of comprehensive education that integrates theoretical knowledge with practical skills. The review assesses the content, structure, and contribution of this book to the field of social worker education, exploring the target audience, advantages, and potential constraints as well as their relevance in contemporary discussions on training and preparation of social workers. In conclusion, the merger of the School of Sociology with the London School of Economics is not only a strategic step to maintain the quality and coverage of social worker education but also depicts further reflection on narratives that integrate social thinking and action into a more sustainable institutional framework.

Keywords: Social Work Education History; School of Sociology Merger; Professional Training

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Introduction

This book is a comprehensive historical examination of the evolution of vocational education for social work in Britain during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This book digs into early training methods in social work institutions, the transition to more formal training schemes, the establishment and challenges of the School of Sociology, and eventually the merger with the London School of Economics (LSE). It also explores the ongoing tension between academic education and practical professional training in the field of social work. This book is likely to be an invaluable resource for those interested in the history of social work education, the professionalization of the field, and the development of educational standards and practices. This book provides a detailed explanation of the philosophical foundations, pedagogical approaches, and institutional challenges that have shaped social worker training. Through historical papers, committee reports, and practical work reports, the book offers a rich narrative that emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive education that integrates theoretical knowledge with practical skills. This review will assess the content, structure, and contribution of the book to the field of social work education. We will explore target audiences, strengths, and potential limitations and consider their relevance to contemporary discussions on social worker training and preparation.

Review

The book by Smith (2021) "*Professional education for Social Work in Britain: An historical account*," consists of five parts and addresses specific themes. The first part of the book deals with "early training within the agencies." The author explains that early training in social work institutions, particularly the Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.), was a period of significant development and transformation in the field of social work education. C.O.S. played an important role in recognising the need for a structured approach to training that balances theoretical knowledge with practical application. The Training Committee for C.O.S. emphasises the importance of instilling broader principles and understanding of social reform in learners. They advocate advances in training that prepare workers for greater responsibility and encourage intellectual curiosity. The Committee believes that training should not be approached as menial labour but as an educational experience, where understanding the wider issues and studying past cases are essential.

The C.O.S. proposes a comprehensive curriculum that combines broad university preparation with technical knowledge and practice. In 1903, the Committee on Social Education submitted a confidential report outlining a two-year course for students interested in the social sciences and practical work in social administration. The course covers a wide range of topics, including social theory, social economics, and the history and methods of aid and charity of the Poor Law, complemented by practical work in the offices of the COS and the Poor Law Union. The Training Committee also recommended a shift towards a more formally organised training scheme, leading to the establishment of a School of Social Sciences in Liverpool. The Training Committee emphasized the importance of training leaders in technical and broader development and expressed concern about the lack of attention given to educational theory. Ms. Bosanquet's practical work in the Office of Charitable Organisations exemplifies a hands-on approach to training, involving case work, district work, and organization. This includes studying case papers, visiting homes, conducting investigations, preparing relief plans, reporting applications, and encouraging interagency cooperation.

The era of professional education for social work really began with the establishment of the School of Sociology, which aims to provide a comprehensive education in social sciences and practical

applications for social workers. The school offers courses in social theory, administration, and specialised practical instruction and emphasises the need for teachers to be qualified social workers. It also recognises the importance of disseminating social knowledge to the general public and reaching young people through primary and secondary schools. Despite these advances, the School of Sociology faced financial difficulties and eventually merged with the London School of Economics due to financial constraints. The transition to more formally organised training schemes in social work marks a significant evolution from the initial less structured approach in institutions such as the Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.). During this period, there was an increasing recognition of the need for a more systematic and comprehensive educational framework to prepare social workers for the complexity of their roles.

The C.O.S., which had been at the forefront of social work training, began to see the limitations of existing methods. The Training Committee within the C.O.S. recognised that while initial training focused on practical aspects of relief work, there was a need for deeper engagement with community principles and progress towards more responsible and complex roles. The Committee emphasized the significance of training progress, guiding learners from simpler tasks to more complex and responsible ones, thereby preparing them for future leadership roles.

Furthermore, the realization that ad hoc methods in the past were insufficient has also driven the shift towards more formal training. Previous C.O.S. employed methods similar to hospitals' probationary periods, overloading startups with work to test their endurance. Surviving this ordeal allows them to learn at their own pace, potentially leading to a limited understanding of the wider issue. Critics argue that this approach potentially fosters a tendency to work by rote rather than by understanding and applying life principles. In a 1919 report, social work advocates expressed the need for a different type of institution that would provide adequate training for social workers through an endowment fund. This led to the establishment of the School of Social Sciences in Liverpool, which aims to provide a comprehensive education in the social sciences and practical applications for social workers. The school offers courses in social theory, administration, and specialised practical instruction, emphasising the need for teachers to be qualified social workers. The success of the new certificate course in Charitable Organisation Society training, combined with lectures at Bedford College, convinced the Society that proper training for social work was indeed a professional education scheme. This period saw the development of technical training schemes sponsored by government departments and voluntary agencies to meet the need for new social services for qualified practitioners.

The transition to more formally organised training schemes is a response to the increasing complexity of social work and the need for a more educated and professional workforce. The School of Sociology, which was founded in 1903, pioneered the professional education of social workers. It was created with the aim of encouraging a thoughtful approach to social work and encouraging individuals to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations. Schools are not just academic institutions; they were designed to integrate practical work with academic study, offer courses in various branches of social economy, and organise classes with practical work in connection with the district committees of community charitable organizations. The school's curriculum is divided into three distinct departments: social theory and administration, sociology, and specialised departments of practical instruction in poor legal administration. Each department caters to different student interests, from those focused on social improvement to those intending to enter poor legal administration. This structure allows for a customised educational experience that can serve a diverse range of social work vocations. The School of Sociology also emphasises

the importance of disseminating social knowledge to the general public. Founders such as C.S. Loch and Dr. James Bonar recognised the need to educate residents and teachers in primary and secondary schools about social issues, similar to how the medical profession educates the public about health. This approach aims to recruit young people early on to become concerned and interested in social questions and methods for addressing social problems. Despite its innovative approach and breadth of curriculum, the School of Sociology faced financial challenges that eventually led to its merger with the London School of Economics. This merger formed the new Department of Social Sciences and Administration, which continued the educational mission of the School of Sociology. The new department is intended to provide students with hands-on experience in social work, following methods that have been used in the School of Sociology for nine years.

However, the transition to the London School of Economics did not fully carry the practical emphasis of the School of Sociology. There is no indication that tutors from the School of Sociology are moving into the field to teach practical work, which would ensure the educational value of the practical component of the curriculum. The curriculum gradually became more theoretical, and there was an increased emphasis on training practitioners in the Society of Charitable Organisations even before the incorporation. The merger of the School of Sociology with the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1906 was a landmark event in the history of social work education. Although the available records do not fully detail the exact reasons for this merger, financial constraints were cited as a major contributing factor. The School of Sociology has been successful in its educational endeavours but faces limitations in terms of its physical space and financial resources. The principal, Mr. B. Bosanquet, acknowledged the quality of the work done but noted the inadequacy of facilities and financial support. He stressed the importance of practical work associated with the school, which he believes will continue under the auspices of the LSE.

The Council of the Society of Charitable Organisations (C.O.S.) was informed of the merger, and it was hoped the LSE would recognise the value of the C.O.S. library, which contained a wealth of material on social questions. The Council of the Society of Charitable Organisations (C.O.S.) hoped that the merger would maintain and possibly enhance the educational mission of the School of Sociology, despite its financial challenges. The LSE calendar for the 1912–13 academic year outlined the policy that the school would pursue after the merger. The need for additional accommodation made the establishment of a new Department of Social and Administrative Sciences very important. The Department of Social and Administrative Sciences was tasked with continuing the work that the School of Sociology had done for the previous nine years. Its aim is to preserve the legacy of the School of Sociology, which has been instrumental in providing a comprehensive education integrating theoretical knowledge with practical social work.

The merger was a strategic step to maintain the quality and scope of social work education at a time when the School of Sociology could not sustain itself independently. By joining the LSE, the educational programme of the School of Sociology can continue, albeit within a different institutional framework. We hope to maintain the practical emphasis that has been the hallmark of the School of Sociology's approach and for LSE to build on the foundations laid over nearly a decade of innovative educational practice.

The merging of the School of Sociology with the London School of Economics, while a strategic move to preserve the quality and scope of social work education, also serves as an afterthought for a broader narrative integrating social thought and action. This merger underscores the

importance of not only maintaining but also advancing the mission of social work education within a more sustainable institutional framework.

Merging responds to the increasing complexity of social and economic issues in an increasingly interconnected world. The need for a well-rounded education that equips future leaders with theoretical knowledge and practical skills is more urgent than ever. The challenges of time require versatile minds that are trained to think critically, imagine creatively, and act effectively in addressing social problems. The School of Sociology's initial vision of combining social thought with practical action resonated with ancient Greek traditions aligning thought with action, a principle that remains relevant in modern times. The merger with LSE continues this tradition in a contemporary context, where integrating intellectual and practical pursuits in social work education is essential to address today's complex social challenges.

In conclusion, the merger serves as a reminder of the enduring need for educational institutions to adapt and thrive in response to societal changes. It highlights the importance of fostering an educational environment where the next generation of social workers can develop the skills necessary to navigate and influence the intricate web of social and economic relationships that shape our world.

As a suggestion, the Muslim community can contribute by establishing or supporting the establishment of educational institutions that focus on the development of social and religious skills. These institutions should be able to provide educational programmes that integrate social knowledge with a deep understanding of Islamic values and religious practices. As previously explained, effective social education not only teaches general theories but also prepares individuals to address the complexities of social issues with a deep understanding of religious and humanitarian principles. Therefore, the recommended educational institutions can organise courses on social theory and administration and provide practical instruction that emphasises the application of Islamic values in real social situations.

Furthermore, these institutions can promote a better understanding of Islamic principles in social work through educational and training programmes for social workers, both experienced and novice. This can include seminars, workshops, and professional development programmes that emphasise the importance of ethics, empathy, and social responsibility in accordance with Islamic teachings. By supporting the establishment of such educational institutions, the Muslim community can ensure that they have a trained and qualified workforce to address the social challenges faced by their communities while remaining steadfast in Islamic values and principles.

Reference

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