The Wisdom of Teacher Involvement in School-Linked Social Services

Jane Clark Lindle
Clemson University, jlindle@clemson.edu

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"This debate focuses on the less well examined concern over the role of classroom teachers in school-linked service delivery."

THE WISDOM OF TEACHER INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL-LINKED SOCIAL SERVICES

Some Pros and Cons

For Teacher Involvement
JANE CLARK LINDLE
University of Kentucky

Against Teacher Involvement
KATHLEEN A. BOLLAND
University of Alabama—Tuscaloosa

Rebuttal by Lindle
Rebuttal by Bolland

Jane Clark Lindle is a former teacher and principal. Both positions exposed her to the family and community needs of students. Currently, she is an associate professor in the Department of Administration and Supervision at the University of Kentucky and is involved with implementation research on the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act.

Kathleen A. Bolland is an associate research educational psychologist in the College of Education’s Evaluation and Assessment Laboratory at the University of Alabama, where she is also a doctoral student in the School of Social Work. Her professional interests include program evaluation, research philosophy, and public policy.

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Recently, school-linked services phenomena have been examined through various implementation strategies. Most discussions are divided over issues such as points of delivery, institutional or agency territoriality, as well as financing and payment schemes. This debate focuses on the less well examined concern over the role of classroom teachers in school-linked service delivery.

FOR TEACHER INVOLVEMENT

One current school reform effort that recognizes vast changes in the needs and composition of school communities is the school-linked services innovation (Adler & Gartner, 1993; Dryfoos, 1994; Wong & Wang, 1994). Multiple family structures and economic conditions that allow parents and guardians less time at home and require more time in the workplace have an impact on child-rearing practices and educational opportunities. Many school people bemoan the rising diversity of classrooms provoked by these global changes. Teachers continually challenged by inadequate or poorly distributed resources often resist innovations that address noneducational student needs. As such, this argument illustrates the pivotal role of teachers in school-linked services and emphasizes that this capacity is neither new nor further expands the burdens of teaching.

Teachers must be included in the design and implementation of school-linked services for the following reasons:

- Teaching is a profession with a service ethic.
- The teaching-learning experience is a relationship in which teachers serve as guides to students.
- Teachers have a legal responsibility for students.

The second wave of current educational reform is highly touted for its push for professionalism in teaching (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Goodlad, 1990). Part of this campaign is a return to the definition of profession where a service ethic is a hotly debated footnote in reference to the "great professions" of medicine and law.

The recent literature stresses the ethic of teaching with a profound focus on caring. Indeed, this journal's existence is strong testimony to a general rebirth of concern about the service ethic in education (Noddings, 1984, 1988). All of this concern begs the question of where the service ethic of teaching may have been lost in the past. More to the point is that teachers, as members of a profession with a caring service ethic, are charged with the welfare of their students. Thus teachers are important members of school-linked services. As much as families have needs through their relationships to individual
members, teachers have unique relationships with students and, therefore, are in a singular position to identify student needs.

The teaching-learning experience is a relationship-based connection. Although much has been done to refine the technical aspects of teaching, the service ethic, coupled with hundreds of studies on teacher-student interactions, bolster the argument that no teaching and, by extrapolation, no learning can occur when the teacher-student bond is weak or nonexistent.

Teachers are more intimately connected to students than any other community members, including sometimes students’ relatives. As trained educationists, teachers are prepared to arrange, to sustain, and to create educative environments. Teachers’ distinctive relationships with students along with professional preparation for the profession are compelling arguments for teacher involvement in school-linked services. At the same time, teacher participation is also suggested by teachers’ legal duties to students, parents, and communities.

Traditionally, teachers’ unique position in the community relative to students has been upheld by law. Teachers serve in loco parentis (in place of the parents) to all students in varying degrees. As early as 1933, a Nebraska court clarified the concept of in loco parentis when it noted that

general education and control of pupils who attend public schools are in the hands of school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers. This control extends to health, proper surroundings, necessary discipline, promotions of morality and other wholesome influences, while parental authority is temporarily superseded. (Richardson v. Braham, 1933)

Although this description emphasizes the same supportive concepts as school-linked services in the areas of health and proper surroundings, it is important to note that the concept of in loco parentis historically had been interpreted to stress the powers of the teacher in discipline issues. With the rising recognition of students’ due process rights in the 1960s and 1970s, the use of in loco parentis was strictly interpreted for schools and teachers (Peterson, Rossmiller, & Voltz, 1978).

American legal tradition has followed the political and social mores of its institutions. School-linked social services represent the reinvention of school and social institutions, and the legal structures supporting these new institutional contracts will follow (Knight, 1993).

Teachers’ professional, practical, and legal responsibilities point to an important role in the adoption of school-linked services. The current literature on school-linked services should be expanded to examine optimal uses of teachers’ expertise in school-linked services.
AGAINST TEACHER INVOLVEMENT

Links between public education and social services are now advocated as a solution to the risk of failure in both school and life for large numbers of children. Two broad reasons support the proposed links: First, children who are hungry, unhealthy, or unhappy are unable to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available in schools. Second, the school is the most appropriate delivery site because social services should be coordinated rather than fragmented and because the school provides a logical, accessible site for service delivery. Models vary, but the key point is some coordination between educational and social service agencies, with one-stop service delivery at or near the school site.

Critics of school-linked services include those who want to minimize government-provided social services, regardless of the site, and those who approve of government-provided social services but are convinced that schools are never the best sites for provision of most social services. I do not join those critics. Other critics neither object to government services nor to the concept of schools as sites for provision of social services. Rather, they focus on practical problems and the lack of evidence on how well, or what aspects of, such programs work. I share some of these criticisms. Thus, for the sake of this discussion, I will focus on the role of the teacher.

If services are to be provided on or near the school site, and if coordination of services and collaboration among providers is a key element of successful
school-linked programs, one would think the teacher must have a major role. Yet, beyond comments that it is important to involve teachers, the role of the teacher is rarely discussed. Placing social services in schools raises a number of issues about the role of public school educators, especially teachers, in identifying children in need of services, cooperating or collaborating with social service providers, maintaining their primary role as educator, and interacting with parents. In addition, if teachers take on these duties, professional preparation becomes an issue.

Dryfoos (1994) noted that although only about 20% of schools require full services, all schools need to be able to refer children and families. This means that all schools need educators capable of identifying children and families in need of social services. It is relatively easy to comment on extremes regarding this issue. Surely, some concerns are so apparent that teachers do not need any special preparation or experience in their identification. Conversely, some needs may be so difficult to recognize that even well-prepared and experienced social service providers can fail to accurately identify them. The issue for school-linked services is not at the extremes.

Teachers typically are not prepared to identify social service needs. If they are to do so, they will need preservice or in-service preparation, a period of time to learn to apply knowledge on the job, and time during the school day to identify and document needs and to make and document referrals. To ask how teachers can be prepared, or when they will accomplish identification, referral, and documentation tasks, does not deny the importance of identification. Teacher education curricula are already packed, as is the teacher’s day. It is unreasonable to ask teachers to learn and implement a new skill when school social workers are professionally prepared to identify children in need of services (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1986). It would be more reasonable for schools to employ professionals prepared for the task than to add it to the duties of teachers.

Many advocates contend that school-linked social services should be coordinated, not fragmented, to treat the whole child in the context of the family and community. Against the image of a child obtaining multiple services from providers who are unaware of the other services the child is receiving, the image of team members working together in the child’s interest is appealing. However, in our modern times, coordination that is not hampered by political, bureaucratic, or fiscal problems can occur electronically or over the phone. Coordination of this type is rarely facilitated just by locating service providers in the same place. In fact, it could be made more difficult as turf problems become larger (Stallings, 1995). Dryfoos (1994) claimed that schools, in contrast to social service agencies, have “enough viability and strength to organize comprehensive delivery systems” (p. 139). Others, however, note that the model of a comprehensive, full-service school requires coordination of
services among bureaucratic, professional agencies that are not organized for the task (Mitchell & Scott, 1994).

When agencies successfully collaborate or coordinate services, it is often because of the efforts of individuals in those agencies rather than because of their professional roles. Shaw and Replogle (1995) found that evaluations of school-linked initiatives tended not to document external factors that might have affected the outcomes—including community support, economic conditions, and existing boundaries between schools and social service agencies. Documentation of collaboration tended to be the creation of agreements rather than descriptions of the joint activities that occurred or the changes in procedures, financing, organizational patterns, and attitude. Again, this raises the question of the teacher's role.

What do the terms coordination and collaboration mean with regard to the duties of teachers? Commenting that principals and teachers are overburdened with academic duties and are not ready to or expected to provide child care and support, Zigler and Finn-Stevenson (1994) recommended a site coordinator to direct the activities of professionals involved in providing school-based services to preschool children. They noted that it is best if the site coordinator and the professionals are supported by the principals and teachers; however, they did not provide a description of what that support entails. Jehl and Kirst (1992) suggested that teachers and support staff need to be actively involved in assessing needs for school-linked services and in planning and developing the programs. Yet it is not clear what the teachers are to do once the services are planned.

Collaboration is more complex than coordination. It involves negotiations of priorities, roles, and responsibilities by representatives of the agencies involved. White and Wehlage (1995) found that workers in different social service agencies do not easily cooperate in delivering services to young people. The workers disagree about problem definitions, causes, and remedies while tending to protect their own turf. If collaboration within a discipline is difficult, it must be more difficult among professionals from multiple areas. Before teachers are asked to take on a collaborative role, the nature of the collaboration must be specified and its benefits must be made clear.

Many educators, parents, and taxpayers believe the primary purpose of schools is to provide an academic education. Regardless of the variety of perspectives on exactly what that means, for many it does not include caring for children's social needs. On the other hand, schools increasingly are being called upon to meet social needs (Zastrow, 1993). New teachers focus their attention on learning the ropes of day-to-day teaching, classroom management, and other professional duties. They are likely to be overwhelmed if also asked to collaborate with other professionals in providing social services. More experienced teachers may be better able to collaborate but may prefer to refer
children to other agencies where they will get the services they need. Without compelling evidence that collaboration improves educational outcomes, teachers should not be forced to take on these duties.

Regardless of their location, services provided during the school day take the children away from classes. Granted, this should not be seen as a weakness if a child is not benefiting from those classes. However, at some point, one must consider whether a child would benefit more from increased educational or social services. If a child must “make up” missed educational activities, the value of school-linked services is diminished. If a teacher is absent from class while taking part in coordination of services, other students may also lose some educational opportunities. If services are provided at school but not during traditional class hours, problems regarding the teacher’s educational role may not arise, but the benefits of having the teacher involved may be lost.

Often, a priority expressed in teacher needs assessment surveys is parent conferences. Many teachers do not believe that they are prepared to conduct these conferences or to work with parents in meeting children’s educational needs. Introducing the duties of a social service collaborator into the teacher’s role can only exacerbate this problem.

Although the role of the teacher in school-linked services programs is not clear, it is evident that interprofessional collaboration is essential. At a minimum, teachers are expected to play a part in identifying children who need social services. Yet interprofessional collaboration and identification of children at risk are not aspects of most teacher education programs.

Professional education programs tend to be based in institutions of higher education (IHEs) where the curricula are determined by several factors, including accrediting and licensure or certification criteria, the discipline-specific knowledge base, personnel needs of the agencies likely to hire graduates, and characteristics of the program faculty and available practicum or clinical experience sites. The University of Washington has developed a program to prepare individuals in several professional schools for interprofessional collaboration. Discussing their experiences after the project had been in operation for 2 years, Knapp et al. (1994) concluded that although there are many challenges, they can be met. Their optimism, however, is cautious, rather than enthusiastic. They emphasize that professional schools must be willing to take on the challenges.

Tellez and Schick (1994) discussed an additional barrier. Nearly 40% of teachers earn their degrees at nondoctoral-granting IHEs where teacher education may be the only professional program. Students cannot learn interdisciplinary collaboration in an IHE where there are no other relevant disciplines. They also note that because many prospective teachers are interested in working in suburban schools, they do not foresee the need for interagency
collaboration in meeting the needs of students at risk of school failure. One solution these authors pose is required volunteer work in community social service agencies. The authors comment that although students appreciate the chance to learn about social service agencies, many IHEs do not have access to appropriate field sites.

Many of the barriers to appropriate preservice education also apply to in-service education programs based in IHEs. Even though it may be easier to develop an in-service program that does not involve changing the professional curriculum, a successful one needs to be based in the interprofessional collaboration it seeks to promote.

The literature includes many reports of school-linked service programs with positive outcomes. Evaluative evidence regarding what aspects of these programs work best or how to increase the likelihood that these will work is lacking. Another concern may be that the positive impact on some children will not translate into large schoolwide gains.

Although I agree that social policy and practices in the United States would benefit from a closer partnership between public education and social services, the goal must be improved services and outcomes for children, youths, and families—not the proliferation of school-linked service programs. Having multiple services at one site may make them more accessible. The school is not the only possibility for a one-stop service facility, and other locations in the neighborhood may be even more accessible for some in need. If the school is to be the site, the key benefit must be in the collaboration between the educators and the social service providers. The collaboration between public education and social services necessary for effective programs cannot occur on demand.

The role of the teacher in school-linked service initiatives has received little attention in the literature. Questions about what the role of the teacher would be and should be and how teachers can be prepared for roles in school-linked service programs must be resolved before any community or neighborhood implements a program. School-linked services should be instituted only with sufficient support for planning, implementation, and evaluation. Systemic change is a difficult process that should not be undertaken lightly. Teachers must be a key part. The focus of efforts to coordinate educational and social services should be on the goals of helping the children rather than on implementing the programs themselves. Programs begun in good faith by individuals devoted to making them work are too often copied by others without the same level of commitment and understanding. School-linked service initiatives can fail just as some open classrooms failed because they were imitated superficially and symbolically, albeit with good intentions.
REFERENCES


REBUTTAL BY LINDLE

The need to clarify the role of teachers in school-linked services is clear from our discussion. Yet this rebuttal reiterates the contention that teachers are already serving in a social service capacity. First, teachers, next to parents, are the most ubiquitous adults in students’ lives. Second, social service needs are typically so basic as to require little specialized training. Third, because the profession traditionally has compelled teachers to meet students’ social needs with little or no community resources, the move to school-linked services might actually lessen the burdens of teachers.

Despite the sad statistic that suggests that children spend less than 20% of their lives in schools, youngsters’ worlds are dominated by two groups of adults: parents and teachers. Equally sadly, parents are often less prepared and less well situated socially than teachers to recognize or identify social service needs. Further, some children’s most dire social service needs are a direct result
of parental neglect or abuse. The service ethic of the profession as well as teachers’ position in students’ lives designates educators as the most viable link in school-linked social services.

The argument that teachers would find the identification of social services so arcane as to require specific training is particularly disingenuous. Social services may offer a vast menu of support for the needs of children and their families, but most of them are entirely basic. Typically, teachers are highly sensitive to the needs of their students. It is hard for students of any age to hide the effects of hunger, homelessness, or abuse. Those who argue that teachers cannot readily identify such needs are perhaps more surreptitiously arguing that teachers ought not to get involved. For reasons of opportunity and ethics, teachers, by fact more than choice, are involved most deeply in both identifying as well as addressing students’ needs.

Generations of teachers have searched for clean clothes and underwear for needy children. Scores of teachers have discreetly received hand-me-down toys, clothes, and books from friends, relatives, and churches to pass on to children without such riches. The story of teachers giving up their own lunches to children who come to school hungry has almost mythical proportions. With the implementation of school-linked services, teachers no longer need to shoulder these responsibilities alone. Not only is there a role for teachers in school-linked services but educators might find these services a welcome respite in their professional responsibilities to students and communities.

REBUTTAL BY BOLLAND

The value of school-linked services, beyond the questionable one of logistics, is the involvement of the teacher. I do not question that the teaching profession includes a service ethic wherein educators not only serve as guides to but have legal responsibilities to students. The renewed emphasis on teacher caring in the educational literature is a welcome sign. Some teachers may be more connected to their students than any other members of the community. When this happens, formal school-linked services should not be necessary. If comprehensive social services are not available for the children, efforts should be expended to improve the social service system and to ensure that teachers understand how to link students and families to it.

In some cases, teachers may be no more connected to students in need than are other members of the community. If this is the case, a change in the school system is one possible remedy. Teachers who see each of their students, even in elementary grades, for 50 minutes per day are not as likely to develop connections with them as are those who teach each child for most of the school day.
Teachers who feel pressured to cover a curriculum that is ever increasing probably find it more difficult to establish connections with their students than do teachers who have more professional freedom. In other situations, children have such serious needs that they may not easily connect to teachers in the best of educational circumstances. Those children deserve the accessible services of professionals who have chosen and prepared for social service roles. The children and the teachers in such cases would be better served by having social service professionals in the schools to facilitate a link to comprehensive programs.

If they had unlimited resources, the public education and the social service systems could do a better job of meeting the needs of children at risk. However, limited resources are a fact of our society. Attempts to reduce the burden on teachers to meet children’s social service needs should not be viewed as attempts to deny their legal or ethical roles in caring for children. Rather, they should be seen as attempts to use limited resources in the best ways. Social service workers tend to have caseloads so large as to prohibit them from carrying out their professional duties effectively. Allocating more resources to help them do their jobs makes more sense than setting up complex systems of collaboration between professionals who are not prepared to work together and who are already overburdened with their own duties.

Efforts to help teachers and social workers perform their unique roles will likely free them to work together more. Children in need will benefit. Forcing collaboration in undefined ways is likely to increase their burdens to the detriment of their abilities to accomplish their unique duties. Children in need will suffer.