

# PROMOTING CLIENT AND WORKER COMPETENCE IN CHILD WELFARE

In the field of child welfare there is general agreement about the inadequacies and questionable effectiveness of the service delivery system. Study after study suggests that there is a wide gap between the promise of child welfare services and their performance.<sup>1</sup> For instance, while the goal of a permanent home for each child has become accepted at the philosophical level, it is still far from being realized in practice, for many children are drifting in temporary, inappropriate placements.

Various solutions to these problems are usually offered, including more staff, more and better training, improved practice technology, and social action or social reform. While all these remedies are important, none would deal adequately with a recurring problem, namely, the failure of the service delivery system to promote the competence of clients and social workers in carrying out their roles and coping with life challenges. Much could be accomplished if we reconceptualized and changed practice so that it might be more conducive to the effective functioning of clients as well as social workers.

Ways of achieving this objective are suggested by competence-oriented social work, an approach based on newer bodies of knowledge from anthropology, biology, ecology and psychology. In view of its emphasis on promoting the competence of clients and practitioners, this approach is especially suited to child welfare.

## Competence-oriented Social Work<sup>2</sup>

Two decades ago Allport described the drive toward competence as a most significant force in human development and behavior: "We survive through competence, we grow through competence, we become "self-actualizing" through competence"<sup>3</sup> Since then, competence has come to be regarded in various fields as an exciting and promising concept in understanding and working with human beings.

## Definition of Competence

Although theorists and researchers from other disciplines have contributed much to the study of human competence, it is still a vague concept with multiple meanings. However, most writers agree with White,<sup>4</sup> who defines competence in biopsychological terms as the person's achieved capacity to interact effectively with the environment. White sees the key manifestations of competence as self-confidence, trusting one's own judgment, and the ability to make decisions.

The problem with this definition is that it places the burden on the human organism.

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In other words, competence is simplistically regarded as a property or trait of the person. It would be more accurate to view it as a transactional concept and define it as an attribute of the transaction between the person and the environment. Such a definition is emphasized in particular by Sundberg, Snowden, and Reynolds,<sup>5</sup> who propose the notion of ecological competence. These authors assert that an adequate consideration of competence should take into account all relevant personal dimensions, such as someone's skills, qualities and expectations and their interaction with environmental stimuli and situational expectations.

## Components of Ecological Competence

Drawing from the formulation of Sundberg, Snowden, and Reynolds as well as related theoretical perspectives, I regard the major components of ecological competence as capacities and skills, motivational aspects, and environmental qualities. (This perspective on competence is similar to Ripple, Alexander, and Polemis's<sup>6</sup> "motivation, capacity, and opportunity" paradigm. However, it goes beyond it in such ways as emphasis on the dynamic interplay between people and their environments.

## Capacities and skills

This dimension includes capacities of the person in cognition, perception, intelligence, language, and physical health. It also encompasses a person's qualities in such areas as flexibility, tolerance for diversity, initiative or self-direction, reality testing, judgment, and tolerance for anxiety. In addition, it refers to specific proficiencies of an individual in areas such as athletics or interpersonal skills.

## Motivational aspects

This category comprises the person's interests, hopes, aspirations — in short, the set of drives or energies variously described as competence motivation,<sup>7</sup> intrinsic motivation,<sup>8</sup> or self-actualization.<sup>9</sup>

These terms in essence refer to the human being's drive to deal with the environment, to seek stimulation, to cope with challenges, to accomplish, and to master.

## Environmental qualities

The other major component of competence consists of significant environmental qualities impinging on a person's functioning at any given point. Examples include environmental resources and supports such as social networks, environmental demands, and institutional pressures and supports. Effective behavior requires a "goodness of fit" between personal abilities and environmental demands and supports. The complementarity or "goodness of fit" between people's needs and qualities and environmental demands and characteristics strongly influences adaptation and competence.

## Competence-Oriented Social Work

In conjunction with related formulations such as the life model of social work practice,<sup>10</sup> the concept of ecological competence leads to an approach that views the promotion of competence in human beings as a significant function of social work intervention. The approach reflects themes that are common to other perspectives on practice, but it is characterized by integrated emphasis on a number of features that have been discussed elsewhere<sup>11</sup> and are outlined here.

*Humanistic perspective.* Human beings are viewed as striving, active organisms capable of organizing their lives and developing their potentialities as long as they have appropriate environmental supports. The humanistic perspective leads to de-emphasis of pathology and recognition of each person's multi-potentialities, that is, actual as well as latent resources, strengths, and creativity.

*Redefinition of human problems.* Emphasis on coping and adaptation as transactional phenomena results in viewing human difficulties as 'problems in living' or as manifestations of the poor fit or lack of mutuality between people and their environments. Problems are conceptualized in terms of the outcomes of transactional processes that create stress and place demands on the person's coping capacities.

*Competence clarification.* Assessment or diagnostic evaluation is reformulated as competence clarification, that is, as the process of identifying and understanding the person's competence in dealing with the environment at a particular time. Specific purposes are: (1) clarifying the unique capacities, skills, motivations, and potentialities of the client system; (2) clarifying

the characteristics of the impinging environment that influence the client's coping and adaptive patterns; and (3) clarifying the 'goodness of fit' between the client system and its impinging environment.

*Redefinition of client and practitioner roles.* Clients are viewed as partners in the helping process and as resources rather than carriers of pathology. Social workers are defined as enabling or change agents who play diverse roles and use varying approaches in order to provide the conditions necessary for clients to achieve their purposes, engage in their developmental processes, and carry out their tasks.<sup>12</sup>

*Redefinition of client-worker relationship.* To be effective in promoting competence, the relationship should be characterized by encouragement of client autonomy, reduction of the authority and power invested in the worker, and elimination of hidden agenda.<sup>13</sup> Workers should reduce social distance and nurture 'a relationship that manifests openness, authenticity, honesty, and human caring.'<sup>14</sup>

*Focus on life processes and experiences.* In intervention there is explicit use of the client's own life processes (such as life tasks and developmental crises) and life experiences (such as life events that unfold in the natural course of living). 'Life itself is viewed as the arena of change: Life experiences, events, and processes can be exploited for their 'therapeutic value' ... Clients' own situations are used to generate opportunities for the productive use of coping, striving, and goal-directed action.'<sup>15</sup>

*Using the environment.* Competence flourishes through a nutritive environment that is suited to the person's needs and qualities and that supports the natural life processes. Consequently, there is emphasis on understanding the environment with all its complexities and restructuring it in a purposive and systematic fashion.

*Regular use of client feedback.* The final feature is the use of client feedback, that is, having workers obtain, on a regular basis, the views of clients concerning their helping efforts. As discussed elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> client feedback can have a variety of positive consequences, such as providing opportunities for decision-making, reducing the social distance between client and practitioner, and increasing the client's sense of control over his or her life.

In short, competence-oriented social work practice essentially consists of changing the person-environment transaction so as to support and/or enhance the competence of individuals, families, and groups to deal effectively with the environment.

## **PROMOTING CLIENT COMPETENCE<sup>17</sup>**

Child welfare is an ideal context in which to implement the competence-oriented perspective, since it is a field of practice in which social workers are clearly at the 'crossroads of life'<sup>18</sup> and thus have



opportunities to influence people-environment transactions.

### **Expanded Definition of the 'Case'**

To implement the competence-oriented perspective, we need to begin by defining a child welfare 'case' more broadly than we do currently. Meyer suggests what might be involved in such an expanded definition:

... a boundary might be drawn around a certain number of city blocks, or, in rural areas, around a certain number of square miles. Within that area, all the components of child welfare transactions would be located — natural parents, child, foster parents, group home, crash pads, counselling center, administrative office, and so on.<sup>19</sup>

At present the comprehensive view of child welfare services proposed by Meyer is not widely reflected in practice. Consequently, as concluded in a nationwide survey of policies and programs for children in out-of-home care, the service delivery system is so fragmented and inadequate that it appears that families and children 'don't count'.<sup>20</sup> By redefining a child welfare 'case' as Meyer indicates, we can provide services to children and families in the context of their natural life situations. We may thus have a better opportunity to help clients in mobilizing or creating resources in their own environment.

### **The Family as the Unit of Service**

The ecological emphasis on the dynamic transaction between people and their environments highlights the crucial importance of the biological family in the growth and functioning of children involved

with the child welfare system. As Laird indicates, the starting point in child welfare should clearly be the biological family. There must be aggressive and systematic efforts to help children and parents preserve their connectedness and maintain family identity and continuity.<sup>21</sup>

In child welfare, of course, there has long been conviction about the significance of biological parents; but this has not been fully translated into practice. Most of the attention has been devoted to the children and/or their surrogate parents or caretakers. Limited work has been done with the parents, who have tended to be considered 'hard-to-reach, multi-problem, and unresponsive.' We have tended to fragment our helping efforts by concentrating variously on the children, the parents, or the foster parents, rather than working with the children and their parents as interacting components of one family system. Obstacles such as high caseloads, emergencies, and complex family problems have prevented us from fully incorporating into child welfare practice new knowledge about families and new approaches to intervention with family systems. Other factors such as rescue fantasies have complicated our efforts to provide adequate services.

But new and promising developments are emerging. For example, there is growing emphasis on the active involvement of parents of children in foster care. Thus, a child care agency makes flexible use of 'family residential centers', that is, group homes where parents are given almost unlimited visiting privileges and encouraged to participate in their child's placement.<sup>22</sup>

Evaluation of this program has shown that the results help not only the children but also the parents. With agency support of continuous interaction between parents and children in placement, it is possible 'for parents with severe problems to increase, sustain, and improve upon their parenting role'.<sup>23</sup>

In other settings, selected foster parents have been trained to serve as role models for biological parents. The latter are actively involved in their child's care and, through close contact with the foster parents, are helped to learn more effective interpersonal and parenting skills.<sup>24</sup> Other agencies have experimented with the use of parent-child foster placements, in which single mothers and their abused or neglected children are placed for limited periods in specialized foster homes. In addition to meeting the need for immediate protection of the child, the placement facilitates assessment of the mother's functioning, offers the 'parenting' which she herself needs, and helps strengthen her parenting roles and capacities.<sup>25</sup>

Full involvement of families requires a redefinition of the relationships between parents and foster parents or other substitute caretakers such as child care staff. In particular, parents, foster parents, and child care workers must view themselves as partners with common goals and mutually supportive and complementary roles. Boundaries between the various components of the helping system should be more permeable. The roles of foster parents, for example, should be sufficiently flexible to allow them to relate more comfortably to the biological parents and to be of help to them, rather than regard them as adversaries.

### **Restructuring the Environment**

The environment of most parents and children who come to the attention of child welfare workers is not sufficiently nutritive; that is, it does not support their coping and adaptive efforts. On the contrary, frequently the environment is so impoverished and depriving that it interferes with their strivings toward growth and competence.

A major function of social work intervention, therefore, is to help clients to restructure their environment, to modify or enrich it so that it is more suited to their needs and qualities and more conducive to their positive functioning. Children and parents need to have 'an average expectable environment'.<sup>26</sup>

Based on the particular needs of each family, restructuring of the environment can be accomplished in a variety of ways. In many cases, it involves helping parents to identify actual or potential resources in their social networks, such as neighbors, friends, members of the kinship system, or informal helpers. With certain ethnic groups, for example, the extended family may provide resources to help a parent care for a child so as to avert placement in an institution or foster home or to shorten the placement.

In other cases, enriching the environment may mean introducing a new person such as a homemaker or parent aide. Various interesting programs have been established involving paraprofessionals to educate and support parents.<sup>27</sup> The parents' environment is enriched so as to provide better opportunities for skills learning, need fulfillment, and competence development. For instance, the introduction of a supportive person such as a paraprofessional aide or an accepting grandparent figure can offer nourishment to the parents themselves, thus enhancing their capacity to give to their own children. As another example, enriching the parents' environment through participation in the activities of a residential treatment center can help to strengthen their parenting skills.<sup>28</sup>

In nearly all situations coming to the attention of child welfare agencies, parents need concrete services and institutional supports. In various demonstration projects it has been found that the number of children who return to their own homes increases significantly when parents are given intensive help along with adequate supports.<sup>29</sup>

### **Empowering Clients**

Child welfare practice should also stress approaches that serve to empower clients — parents or children — that is, to help them to enhance their competence in dealing with environmental challenges. Various themes should be highlighted in this connection.

Knowledge from ego psychology, biology, ecology, and other fields can guide practitioners in finding ways to help clients develop their competence in dealing with life challenges. Above all, there should be de-emphasis of pathology, especially psychopathology, and greater emphasis on clients as active, striving human beings. In child placement, for example, there is a tendency to view the problems leading to foster care as reflecting primarily the psychopathology of the parents. There is inadequate attention to societal conditions that limit the power of parents and interfere with their coping efforts.

In the competence-oriented perspective, on the other hand, there is emphasis on the resources and supports needed by parents. 'Human problems, needs, and conflicts need to be translated into adaptive tasks providing the client with opportunities for growth, mastery, and competence development.'<sup>30</sup> For instance, a parent who is labeled abusing or neglectful can be helped to learn or relearn skills in child care. To accomplish this, the problem has to be redefined, not as one of child abuse or neglect but as a situation involving lack of knowledge or inadequate parenting skills. In short, the focus is on identifying and removing obstacles that interfere with the parents' coping capacities.

Empowering clients also means redefining them as resources. As they are given adequate opportunities, parents as well as

children can mobilize their own potentialities and natural adaptive strivings. As demonstrated in recent years by the success of various self-help groups such as Parents Anonymous, parents can be recognized as resources who can help each other. It has been shown, too, that parents' organizations can lead to new roles for parents, new participation in rewarding activities, and ultimately a new sense of mastery as human beings and improved competence as parents.<sup>31</sup> Social Work intervention should aim toward empowering clients to accomplish their purposes and meet their needs through individual and collective efforts.

### **PROMOTING WORKER COMPETENCE**

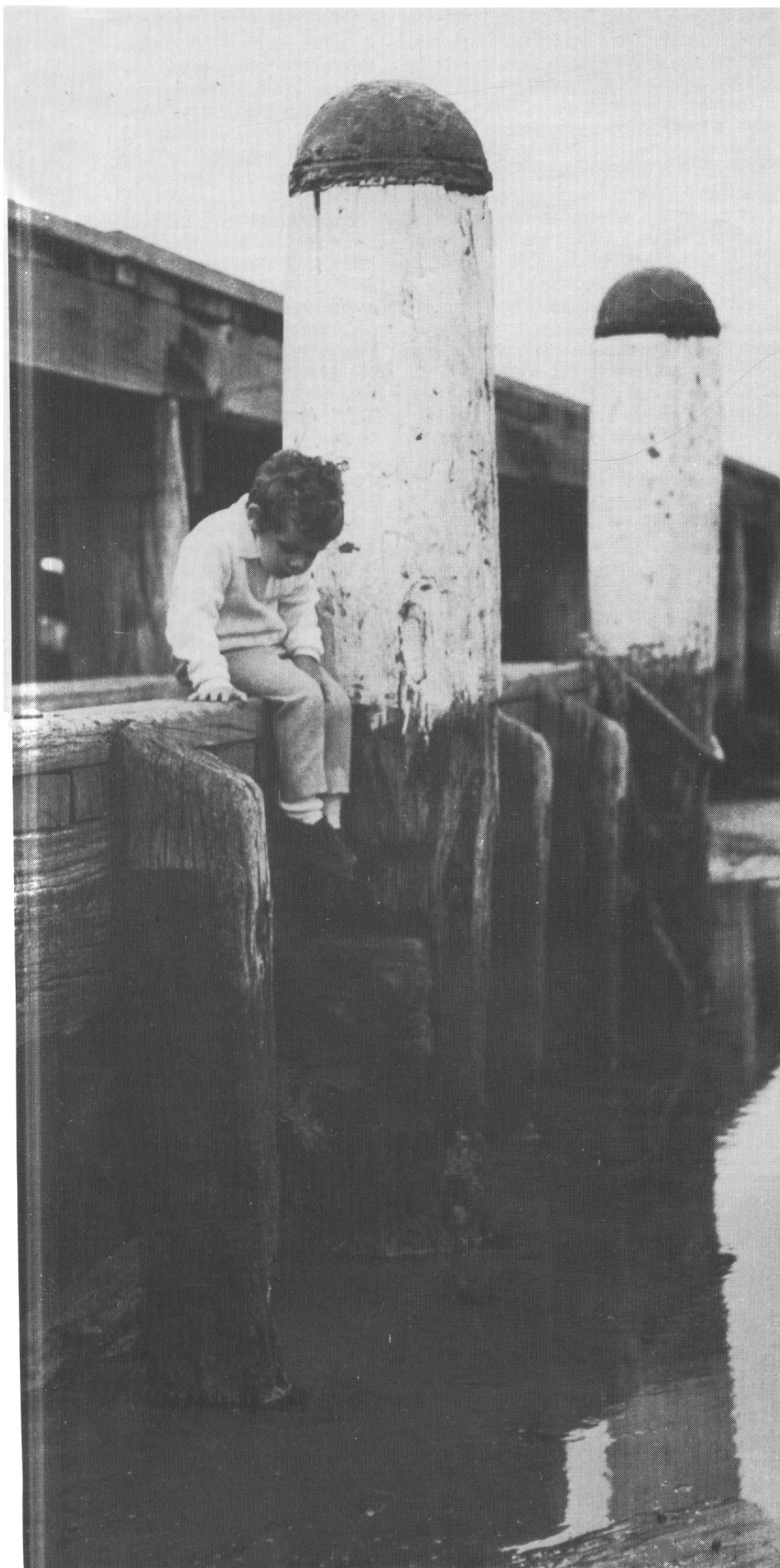
The principles suggested by the competence perspective essentially apply to workers as well as clients. As human beings, workers also need an 'average expectable environment'<sup>32</sup> in order to be able to carry out their roles and use and develop their potentialities.

Critics of child welfare services increasingly place on the workers the burden for various actual or supposed failures of the service delivery system. For instance, there is much talk about changing workers' attitudes and improving workers' skills through training. There is much concern about burn-out, which is attributed largely to workers' personality factors or difficulty in dealing with job pressures. All of this may represent yet another effort to blame the victim.

Although there is no doubt that worker performance in child welfare needs to be strengthened, the solution to this problem lies not so much in the workers themselves as in their working environment. If one follows a competence-oriented perspective, there is much that is suggested in the way of changing the environment so as to promote the competence of workers.

### **Restructuring the Work Environment**

There has been wide recognition of the strains and stresses that workers experience in child welfare practice, as they are confronted with complex demands and conflicting claims on their cognitive, emotional, and physical energies. In general, the problem has been attributed to the pressures of working with difficult, demanding cases. Increasingly, we have also realized that various systemic factors put additional burdens on workers — factors such as limited resources, ambivalent societal opinions of their roles and the functions of child welfare agencies; the political context, with frequent investigations and exposes of public child welfare agencies by governmental and legislative bodies and the media; limited administrative support; insufficient recognition of their efforts; and so on and on. It is not an exaggeration to say that most child welfare workers function in an environment that is not conducive to their growth, their satisfaction, or development of their competence. It may be



argued, indeed, that those who manage to cope effectively do so in spite of the system, in spite of the environment.

The environment of workers therefore must be restructured and enriched. Adequate opportunities must be provided to enable them to function productively. These include not only material resources and supports, but also opportunities for recognition, gratification, and positive feedback. They include opportunities to participate in policy-making and program-planning processes, to have an impact on the environment, and to exercise one's decision-making function. They include respect for workers on the part of administrators and the community in general. In short, the environment must provide conditions for competent functioning: opportunity, such as supports and resources; respect from others, which enhances self-respect; and power, which supports professional decision-making.<sup>33</sup>

These conditions hardly exist in practice today. For instance, while child welfare workers are required to make 'life-and-death' decisions involving children, in most agencies they have to go through various channels to obtain access to a resource such as day care service for a client — if they can even do so.

#### **Redefining the Roles of Workers**

The notion of changing the environment is abstract and global. Furthermore the service delivery system is complex and difficult to restructure. One possible avenue for change lies in the area of workers' roles.

In most child welfare settings, workers often are overwhelmed by the complex and intense demands placed on them as they attempt to work with children and parents. A major problem is that the social worker is often required to be all things to all people: therapist for child and biological parents; consultant or supervisor with foster parents; case manager, advocate, and so on. Moreover, these multiple roles have to be carried out despite insufficient training, high caseloads, and limited resources.

Although the worker should play a central role in all child welfare cases, he or she cannot be expected to be omnipotent. His or her major role should be redefined as that of a catalyst or enabling agent, someone who helps the client to identify or create and use necessary resources. The worker uses a variety of approaches and calls on a variety of resources in order to help provide the conditions necessary for clients to achieve their purposes, to meet life challenges, to engage in their natural life developmental processes, and to carry out their tasks.

The redefinition of workers' functions goes together with the redefined roles of foster parents and biological parents. In child placement, for instance, it has been shown that the goal of achieving permanent planning for each child is facilitated when foster parents are considered to be resources for biological parents.<sup>34</sup> Through role

redefinition, parents, foster parents, and workers can unite to create new helping systems that are ultimately more effective and rewarding for everyone concerned.

This stance means that child welfare workers should de-emphasize insight-oriented, psychotherapeutic methods. It means that they should become expert in the use of community resources and natural helping networks as well as in the creation of new resources when there are service gaps in the community. It means that they should reallocate their own time and energies; for example, instead of putting excessive time into unproductive investigatory tasks such as home-finding, they could put more energy into working with parents. It means that they could adopt more educationally oriented roles aimed not at treating clients but at teaching them more effective ways of coping. It means that they would put more emphasis on home-based services<sup>35</sup> and reverse the historical trend of child welfare as a separation device.

### Changing the Thrust of Education and Training

Efforts to restructure the work environment and to redefine worker roles should be complemented by a different thrust in education and training for child welfare practice. To begin with, we need to re-examine the pervasive emphasis on pathology — especially psychopathology — in our theories and our teaching. As shown in studies of client and worker perceptions of service,<sup>36</sup> the preoccupation with pathology manifests itself in numerous forms: in workers' determined quest for specific causes of their clients' difficulties; in their tendency to uncover intrapsychic conflicts; in their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the service and their accomplishments or those of their clients; and in their persistent doubts about their clients' capacities to cope with future life challenges.

Practitioners, moreover, are effectively conditioned by the emphasis on pathology that permeates most theories of human behavior or personality development and

most approaches to interpersonal helping. As with social work education in general, there is a need in child welfare to shift the focus from pathology to human strengths, resources, and potentialities. For instance, there should be more emphasis on the varieties of human coping strategies and creative ways through which human beings deal with life demands and expectations. In contrast to the typical normative stance, there should be full appreciation of the different capacities, styles, and qualities of people in different contexts. If this shift occurred, 'practitioners would be more likely to view clients as proactive human beings who are capable of organizing their own lives to one degree or another.'<sup>37</sup> They would then be better able to place emphasis 'not on exploring pathology, but on finding, enhancing, and rewarding competence.'<sup>38</sup>

It is also urgent to teach students and workers ways of helping human beings to create or build on resources in their own ecological context and to develop their competence and power in transacting with the environment. For example, education should place more emphasis on such aspects as social networks, the role of natural helping systems, and linkages between informal helpers and the professional helping system.

Various approaches are emerging that should be useful: the ecological perspective on social work practice, with its focus on the mutuality and dynamic interaction between people and their environment;<sup>39</sup> task-oriented modalities, with their emphasis on formulation of client and/or worker tasks and stimulation of the clients' own cognitive powers and processes;<sup>40</sup> and educationally oriented practice models, such as 'relationship enhancement',<sup>41</sup> that highlight the teaching and learning of interpersonal skills and other coping strategies as means of preventing as well as treating problems.

Most of these approaches also involve resources and concrete services that are necessary to help clients make their environment more nurturing and more conducive to their growth and self-fulfillment.

This suggests that educators need to stress a more active orientation toward the environment; they need to give more weight to nonclinical activities such as advocacy, situational intervention, and environmental manipulation — all of which have traditionally been neglected or have had limited prestige in the hierarchy of treatment modalities.

At the same time, there should be more emphasis on accountability to clients, not just to agencies or to funding bodies. This involves, among other aspects, training workers to act not only on the basis of their professional judgment and knowledge, but also in response to the client's definition of the 'problem' and the client's ideas about what will be helpful. In essence, it involves teaching them to respond flexibly on the basis of their clients' needs, expectations, and life styles.

Finally, as a most important means of promoting competence, educational programs should stress preparation for autonomous practice. It is crucial to help develop workers' own capacities to think and to act professionally so that they may be ready for whatever tomorrow may bring.

### CONCLUSION

In the face of diminishing resources, increased demands for service, and questions about the effectiveness of the service delivery system in child welfare, there is a danger of over-preoccupation with techniques and a narrowing of our vision. The competence-oriented perspective reminds us that, beyond concern with technology, we need to develop a grand design for service delivery that takes into account the many forces that help shape the functioning of clients and workers. It reminds us that, although the world's physical resources are limited, human resources are underutilized and can flourish in a nutritive environment.

Through an explicit focus on competence in education as well as in practice, child welfare in the 1980s could well become a major component of a revitalized social work profession.

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come to Norway for intercountry adoption and of these, we have had only ten breakdowns. Our families are thoroughly assessed on rigid criteria.

**John Williams, Holt International, USA.**

International adoption is not a remedy. It is only an interim measure.

Some consideration needs to be given to joint guardianship of the child between the Agency and the family, or the Agency instead of the family.

Holt conducts adoption studies as opposed to family home studies. The family needs first to undertake what it is to adopt a child transracially.

Adoption should only be conducted through approved agencies and not individually and certainly never by consumer groups. Social Workers only

should work with children for adoption, the lawyer has no professional knowledge in this area.

Holt views itself as a children's agency. We facilitate adoptive placements only to help the child. We do not find a child to help the family.

**Jane Baun, Society for International Adoption, Denmark.**

In Denmark, individual adoptions are forbidden by law. We have no consumer agencies. there are three licensed Government Agencies, one for each region of Denmark. The Minister has ruled that only one Agency can work with each orphanage in an overseas country. The name and address of the orphanage must be registered with the Minister for his approval before any programme can commence. The Minister meets yearly with

the Agencies to discuss problems etc.

Approximately 500 children are adopted from outside Norway each year. Strict investigation lasting 6 - 12 months is conducted on the applicants by a Social Worker and a Psychologist. The same Social Worker works with the family from the initial interview to the end.

The allocation is sent to the Agency and we insist on a thorough Medical Report and Social History. The Agency considers the placement and if we believe it is suitable, the Social Worker tells the family. We have had no breakdowns.

\* Rosemary Calder. Paper delivered at the Intercountry Adoption Seminar of the ICSW Asia & Pacific Region Conference Melbourne. August, 1979.

*Cont'd from p. 12*

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FOURTH INTERNATIONAL FOSTER CARE CONFERENCE**

**KEYNOTE SPEAKER:** Jane Rowe

**VENUE:** Lincoln College — Christchurch

**DATES:** January, 1985.

**INFORMATION:** Mrs. A. Price, 17 Mottram Street, Christchurch, New Zealand.