

Editorial

“At the beginning I was only a little mass of possibilities. It was my teacher who unfolded and developed them. When she came, everything about me breathed of love and joy and was full of meaning.”

~Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*, 1903

Seventy years ago, a study conducted by staff at the Mary Crane Nursery at Chicago’s Hull-House challenged a prevailing assumption that poor children had innate defects in intelligence by comparison with children born into socially and economically privileged families (Kawin, 1933). The 1933 study, entitled *Intelligence and Poverty*, is a compelling example of how social work ideals, coupled with reflective clinical practice and solid scholarship, can change attitudes and change lives.

Studies on intelligence and socio-economic status conducted by other researchers at the time had purported to substantiate the defective intelligence of poor children by showing that they scored lower on Stanford-Binet intelligence tests than children from more privileged backgrounds. Based on their extensive experience working with children from both the Hull-House nursery and a nursery school in Winnetka, Hull-House researchers hypothesized that poor children’s lower test scores had more to do with language handicap and limitations of the home environment than with differences in intelligence. And when they analyzed previous studies, the Hull-House researchers identified that other researchers’ implicit and negative biases about underprivileged children’s mental capacities had caused them to choose tests of intelligence, such as the Stanford-Binet, that did not account for cultural and language differences. The Hull-House researchers addressed this bias by administering both Stanford-Binet and Merrill-Palmer tests in their own comparison of a group of sixty-two Hull-House toddlers from poor families and a group of sixty-two privileged Winnetka children. This second set of tests emphasized performance, as opposed to language, and was generally accepted as a reliable measure of mental development for preschool children at the time. As the researchers had predicted, the Hull-House study found no significant difference between the two groups of children on the performance-based tests. And while children from higher socio-economic groups performed markedly better on language-based tests, Hull-House children were found to perform better on certain non-verbal tests.

This finding provided the empirical basis on which to challenge the prevailing knowledge about the relationship between poverty and intelligence. According to the Hull-House researchers, with the exception of one

study on infants, all other studies of intelligence that had been published at the time – including studies of children *and* adults – had found superior intelligence for groups of people at higher socio-economic levels. The author of the Hull-House paper rebutted this fallacious belief that perpetuated social inequalities:

[We] question a social philosophy which sees the poor and their progeny as groups inevitably destined for inferior roles in society because of their own inadequacy. Any clear view of the place of education in a democracy...includes the task of discovering the real disabilities of the under-privileged and of giving them the opportunity to overcome, as far as possible, those handicaps which can be modified by training and environment (Kawin, 1933, p. 504).

An accompanying photograph of Jane Addams with Hull-House nursery children beautifully captures the humaneness of this research. Addams, 73-years-old when the picture was taken, devoted her life’s work to making the world a more compassionate, just, and peaceful place in which these vulnerable children could thrive. She believed that all children deserved the chance to pursue their unique potential, and she inspired others with similar ideals to use their own talents to speak this truth to the world.

Seventy years have passed since this study was published and the snapshot taken, yet the ideals that inspired Jane Addams and the authors of this research endure. Indeed, what continues to draw social workers into the profession is our deep conviction of the innate value and potential of every human being, and our desire to help our clients see and embrace this potential within themselves. We know that every human being discovers their identity – the answer to the question “who am I?” – through her/his experience in relating with others. And through these relationship experiences s/he comes to believe that “who I am” is “who *you* think I am.” Considering identity in this way, it is profoundly moving to know that when the children in the Hull-House photograph looked into Jane Addams’ eyes, they got a reflection for their identity – for “who am I?” – and also for who they could become, that was radically different than the reflection they got from the world outside of the Hull-House nursery in 1933.

In this third edition of *Praxis*, student authors once again express their passion for these very ideals, and this composite of articles portrays an understanding of human development that is a particular strength of social work. As social workers, we understand the