



Society for Research in Child Development

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SRCD and Social Policy 1976-2008

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Since its inception in 1933, The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) has been committed to the application of findings of research on children.¹ The dual principles of the Society are to foster research on child development from the perspectives of all the relevant disciplines and to encourage the implementation of findings for the betterment of society's children and families.

To understand why and how this dual charge is key to SRCD's legacy, one must consider its early history. The National Research Council (NRC) of The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) was only nine years old when it founded the Committee on Child Development (CCD). The purpose of the Council was to find ways to make the Academy responsive to the defense needs of the United States and to establish a way to stimulate and coordinate the research activities of government, industry, and academia (Dupree, 1957). Early in the 20th Century, there was a new direction in society, emphasizing that preventing social ills was preferred to providing continuing aid to those who were troubled, socially or economically. The social sciences were recognized as providing ways to facilitate reform (Bremner, 1960).

During World War I, the social sciences demonstrated that they could transform social practices, as the physical and agricultural sciences had done before this time. The NRC saw that philanthropy was shifting its focus from adults to children. Philanthropic monies supported most of the efforts of the NRC during the 1920's. Improving the lives of *all* children became a social movement with considerable success. There was a belief both within government and in the private sector that "the reconstruction of society must begin with the child" (Smuts, 1985, p. 110). However, it was also recognized that the practices of child welfare went beyond the research upon which they should be based.

Perhaps the most important event of the time was the explicitly stated commitment of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund (LSRM) to advance the welfare of women and children. Beardsley Ruml, appointed director of the Fund in 1922, convinced the board to broaden the goal, "the application of the social sciences for the purpose of reform" (Fosdick, 1952, p. 193). In 1924 the first Rockefeller child development institute was established at Columbia University, and the institutes at Minnesota, Berkeley, and Toronto soon followed. The CCD was specifically created to assure that the field of child development would have a respected scientific base, and its funding came from LSRM.

Perhaps the most important decision made by the NRC was the appointment of Robert S. Woodworth to the committee and later as the chair. A distinguished psychologist at Columbia, he was committed to making its mission a true scientific enterprise. Working with Lawrence K. Frank, the project officer at LSRM, the decision was made that child development was *not* child psychology, but rather an

¹ Wording from the Constitution of SRCD: Article I, Section I.

"The purposes of the Society shall be to stimulate and support research, to encourage cooperation among individuals engaged in the scientific study of child development, and to encourage applications of research findings."

interdisciplinary endeavor. In its work, including its early conferences and its publications, this commitment to bringing together the relevant disciplines was clear. They ranged from anatomy and anthropology to child welfare.

At the opening address of the CCD's first conference in 1925, Woodworth reiterated that basic research must be an essential part of the child development movement. However, "practical endeavor is certain to go on without waiting for a through scientific grounding....research and practice will react each upon the other" (CCD Proceedings, 1925, p. 3). This statement established the major theme for SRCD that continues today.

The years from 1925 through 1933 were somewhat tumultuous for the CCD and its leaders. However, a positive outcome was reached, and SRCD was formally launched. It was to be a new organization, but in fact it did not become completely free from the NRC until 1948. In June, 1933, 100 researchers met in Chicago to attend the fourth conference and to launch the new Society. Robert Woodworth continued to play a major role during the 15 years that the CCD was the parent organization. During the 1930's, the Society established itself with its journals, meetings, and activities. However, World War II had a pronounced negative effect on many such organizations, and SRCD barely survived this period. Both the CCD and SRCD remained true to the goals of its founders and early supporters, and the stage was set both for the success of a new field, child development, and for the commitment to research and application.

The aims of research and application, articulated by its founders, prevailed for many decades. However, the new direction research in child development took in the late 1950's and 1960's led to a shift away. The emphasis became experimental, psychological, and basic, and the direction of research and training programs moved towards psychology as the dominant discipline. Application was often viewed with a skeptical eye within this framework.

At the 1971 biennial meetings of SRCD, in Minneapolis, then President Harold Stevenson devoted his presidential session to a symposium rather than a presidential address. Titled "Child Development and the National Scene," the speakers were Senator Walter Mondale (Minnesota), Congressman Orval Hansen (Idaho), and Edward Zigler, who was then director of the Office of Child Development in Washington, D.C. The respondents were Stevenson, Eleanor Maccoby, John Flavell, Urie Bronfenbrenner, and Julius Richmond. The inclusion of persons in policy-making positions was unprecedented and opened the Society to new directions. A symposium presented at the 2001 meetings, again in Minneapolis, was a follow-up to this groundbreaking session which had occurred 30 years earlier. The commitment and accomplishments of the Society to policy and application were celebrated.

The governance of SRCD took seriously the challenges set forth in the 1971 symposium, and by 1976, it was clear that the Society had renewed its commitment to application--to policy and practice based on sound theory and research. Two entities were established by the governing council of SRCD at this time, and each has played an important role in carrying out the commitment to application of research through social policy and communication. The reader should keep in mind each of these to understand how SRCD's commitment to social policy evolved over the past three decades. The first is the policy and communications committee (with its various names over the decades) which is made up of volunteer members of the Society. The second is the Office in Washington, D.C., also operating under various names over the years (beginning as the Washington Liaison Office) which has a physical space and paid staff to carry out its duties.

The governing council first established the Social Policy Committee in 1977, with a charge of formulating positions and recommendations for the Society about issues of social policy that affect children. The first chair, James Gallagher of the University of North Carolina, recommended the

establishment of a newsletter on social policy and children. While not implemented immediately, the *Washington Report* became a product of the newly established liaison office of the Society, in Washington, D.C. This report later became the *Social Policy Report*, which continues to be a major publication of SRCD.

The first meeting of the new committee was held in June, 1977, in D.C. The newly hired liaison for the Washington, D.C. office, Elizabeth Ruppert, was in attendance. She was charged with exploring efficient ways of operating her office and implementing its mandate. Mary Ainsworth, then President of SRCD, traced the history of this committee and stated three objectives. The committee was an outgrowth of the interdisciplinary committee, a subcommittee on long range planning, and a study group on child development and social policy. The three objectives were: to advise the President on social issues; to set up mechanisms for anticipating action on issues so that they will not be responded to on crisis basis; and finally, using these mechanisms, the Society would be able to deal with issues with insight and well-prepared positions.

In his comments at this first meeting, Chair Gallagher said the role of research in a democratic society is not well understood or accepted, and this is partly the fault of the scholars themselves. Thus, a purpose of the committee must be to address the “marketing” of the value of research findings to society. The decision was made to include sessions arranged by this committee at the biennial meetings (which began as a social policy pre-meeting at the 1977 Biennial Meeting in New Orleans) and to begin preparation of the newsletter from the Washington liaison office.

In 1978, Eileen Blumenthal replaced Ruppert as the director of the liaison office, and a major new responsibility was undertaken: the program for Congressional fellows. Funds came from the W.T. Grant Foundation and the Foundation for Child Development (FCD). Clearly this program has become one of the most successful and important endeavors to bridge the gap between the research and policy communities that the committee, and the Society, had undertaken.² Additionally, Blumenthal gave high priority to working to improve funds for behavioral research at the relevant national funding agencies, and especially at National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), where a branch on human learning and behavior recently had been established.

In 1979, Alberta Siegel became the new chair of the Social Policy Committee. A subcommittee to select the Congressional fellows was chaired by John Conger, followed by Luis Laosa. The years 1979-80 were a time of rapid turnover in staff for the Washington D.C. office, and Barbara Everett became the next director. This was also the beginning of the administration of President Ronald Reagan (1980). An assault from the executive branch was made on funding in the behavioral and social sciences. Both the Consortium for Social Science Associations (COSSA) and the Federation of Behavioral, Psychological, and Cognitive Sciences (FBPCS) were formed as new organizations to combat the loss of funds for behavioral research, and SRCD became an active member of both organizations. It was a time of unprecedented hard work and cooperation among the many professional research associations in the behavioral sciences, and SRCD's Social Policy Committee and its Washington liaison office were recognized as major players.

A very positive event in 1982 was the formation of the House Select Committee in Congress, and Deborah Phillips, then a Congressional fellow of SRCD in the office of George Miller (California), devoted considerable time and talent to establishing this important force.

² During the 1980's, additional funding was obtained for the Congressional Fellows Program. The Ester Kapps Rosen Fund supported a portion of the Fellowship Program in 1987-88, and FCD provided carry-over funds in 1989-90. Small amounts came from the Smith Richardson and Lilly Foundations as well. SRCD also directed some of its own funds towards the program for the first time. In 2005, SRCD began to provide its own support for a second Congressional fellow, which continues today.

In 1983, the name of the committee was changed to the Committee on Child Development and Social Policy. Harold Stevenson served as chair and it became active on several new fronts. Summer institutes, funded by FCD and the W.T. Grant Foundation, were established. The first of these highly successful endeavors was held at Cornell University. By this time, Lindsey Chase-Landsdale, former fellow, was now associate director of the Washington Office. The office had a total of five grants during this time. While things were going extremely well, it became apparent that it would be difficult to obtain new grants, especially for the Congressional Fellows Program, when the current grants ended in 1987. Thus, in 1985, another Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC), chaired by Francis Horowitz, was established. Members included Francis Graham, Eleanor Maccoby, and Julius Richmond. After conducting a survey of 1,000 members, a report was issued that pertained to the Washington activities of the Society. Basically, it indicated that new sources of funding appeared highly unlikely and the Washington office, and thus policy activities, would likely have to be scaled back. A conclusion regarding the Congressional Fellows Program said, "it does not seem feasible for the Society to commit itself to the maintenance of this program" (p.3).

The LRPC concluded that the question of social policy was important. "We are mindful of the issues of social responsibility in our time. Almost all our members maintain affiliations with their primary groups" (p.5). Yet, it was felt that without substantial external support, SRCD could not afford to maintain a major commitment to the Washington liaison office or the fellows program. Members of the Committee on Social Policy reacted quickly to this report and urged the governing council to continue an office in Washington. In 1985, Jeanette Goodstein was hired as director and a new effort to obtain outside funding was undertaken. There were several successes, with some new funding from the American Psychological Foundation for a fellow, an additional summer institute, and a legislative testimony program and manual. However, substantial outside funding for the fellows program was not secured.

Dorothy Eichorn retired as executive officer in 1989, and John Hagen began as executive officer in September, 1989. The decision was made earlier that summer to discontinue the Washington office. One of Hagen's first negotiations was with Alan Kraut, the first executive director of the newly established American Psychological Society (APS), to form a liaison with that organization to represent SRCD in Washington and to deal with federal matters, both executive and Congressional. This arrangement proved to serve the Society well and continued until September, 1999, when a Washington, D.C. office was re-established, as the funding situation had improved.

One of the first successes of Dr. Kraut and his staff was setting up a new type of fellow-- these were fellows funded by and working in various federal offices, including the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) that houses Head Start, the Children's Bureau, and other branches, and several of the relevant institutes within the National Institutes of Health. With this step in 1991, the SRCD Executive Branch Fellowship Program began. A regular Washington column also appeared in the *SRCD Newsletter* during the decade of the '90s. Members of the SRCD governance met regularly with the heads of various funding agencies, and the goals and purposes of SRCD were heard. Often specific connections or activities occurred as a direct result of these meetings.

The committee, now under the name Committee for Child Development, Public Policy, and Public Information, also achieved considerable success during this time, under the successive leaderships of Richard Weinberg, Sharon Ramey, Lonnie Sherrod, Aletha Huston, Lawrence Aber, and Connie Flanagan. Due in large part to the successes and the urgings of this committee, a decision was made by the SRCD governing council to re-establish a Washington, D.C. office, which opened in September, 1999, with Lauren Fasig as the director. A second staff person was added in the summer of 2000. A new grant from the W.T. Grant Foundation allowed the Congressional Fellows Program to be revived, and the program of fellows working in federal funding agencies was expanded, especially because of a

substantial contract with ACF, so there have been eight to ten fellows each year for the past eight years or so. The *Social Policy Report*, currently edited by Lonnie Sherrod, became a regular publication of the Society after many years under the editorship of Nancy Thomas. The committee, now named the Committee for Policy and Communications, undertakes a wide range of activities and is one of the most active and successful of the various committees of the Society. Since 2003, Mary Ann McCabe has served as director of the SRCD Office for Policy and Communications, and she has two other full-time staff members. Dr. McCabe and her staff have expanded the activities of this office, including wider dissemination of the *Social Policy Report*, new fellowship placements in the executive branch, and routine press releases on SRCD publications. They work closely with the Policy and Communications Committee in both broad areas.

Lonnie Sherrod became SRCD's new executive director in 2007. He and the governing council began to implement the new strategic plan. One of the five goals of the strategic plan concerns application and dissemination. One outcome was a task force on dissemination, which made several recommendations. The new *Social Policy Briefs* were begun in 2007 to make information from the *Social Policy Reports* even more accessible to wider audiences. It is sent to Congressional offices, federal agencies, and state policy makers, as well as other policy audiences for developmental science. Further, an outreach to state policy makers was launched in 2007, with consultation with the committee. Another of the goals is to increase international activities within SRCD. A collaboration between SRCD and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was established in 2007, and consideration is being given to establishing a policy fellowship program in which fellows will be placed outside the United States.

There is no doubt that the role of research in child development is much more prominent in the policy arena than has ever been true in the past. As SRCD continues to devote its resources in this area, this commitment is expected to continue. The knowledge base resulting from three decades of theory and research is now substantial and promises to become even stronger in the decades to come. The membership should be proud of the role that our leadership and members have played. New challenges continue in many areas including integration of research across a wide range of disciplines, continued stress on the societal institutions that impact children and families, especially health and education, and the increasingly international context in which research and policy are pursued.

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