

The Evolution of a Discipline:  
Re-creating Romanian Social Work

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## **Introduction**

This analysis presents the results of organizational assessments conducted for six Romanian social service agencies in May, 2003. The evaluations were performed using Burke's (1994) transformational model of organizational change, and have been presented within the context of the Romanian economic and political environment. The model was adapted for use with the agencies studied (Appendix A) and translated into Romanian (Appendix B).

Assessments were conducted through exploratory interviews with university scholars, government officials, social service agency directors, staff members, and users of social services. Additional information was gathered via observations within agency and foster-home settings. The project's aims were to characterize existing mechanisms for provision of social services; to share knowledge from American models of social service delivery; to outline economic and social policy impacts on agency practice; and, to identify potential areas for research collaboration and training.

Burke's (1994) transformational model was created as a tool to evaluate organizational practices using a strengths-based, appreciative inquiry approach. This method entails characterizing agency resources and strengths while engaging providers in a dialogue about areas for future improvement. The model examines the agency as it exists in an external political and economic context and how organizational practices are influenced by this context. It asks how an agency's mission translates into direct practice and how organizational culture affects interactions between staff members at all levels. The model takes a bi-directional approach by also examining individual workers' motivation and roles within the agency, and how workers' view of their roles impacts the agency's ability to achieve its objectives.

As an assessment tool, the transformational model considers the agency as a system within a system, acknowledging that all components of the organization influence each other and are simultaneously impacted by the external community as well as the political and social environment.

Three agencies were examined in-depth for this study: a community-based school program for children with disabilities, a public-private foster care program for previously institutionalized children, and a community-based program that provides services for children who are HIV+ or have AIDS. Three other agencies were interviewed briefly. These included a community-based mental health center for adults with chronic mental illness, a domestic violence prevention program and women's shelter, and an organization devoted to protecting children's rights.

Before delving into a more thorough discussion of the model's application, it is important to point out several limitations of the study. One of the ways in which application of this model differed from traditional organizational assessments is the timeframe in which the assessments were conducted. Given the number of agencies interviewed in a variety of locations, interviews lasted anywhere from one hour to three days. Typical organizational assessments are conducted over an extended period of time, allowing opportunities for in-depth, comprehensive interaction with interviewees and agency staff at a variety of levels. Additionally, interviews were occasionally conducted through translators, necessitating careful interpretation of the data given the drift in meaning that occurs across languages and cultures.

What we hope to do through the organizational assessments that follow is to present our perceptions, analysis of interview content, and impressions from conversations with academicians and practitioners. Woven into this discussion are thoughts about how to build

upon the existing strengths of the organizations. Much of our report focuses on areas for growth with an eye to societal changes that lie on the horizon for Romanian social services. Throughout our interviews, we became aware that the process of change will be made easier given the high quality of the organizations studied and the strong base from which they have to build.

While the service delivery needs of each organization differed, all of the organizations exist within the common political and economic context of Romania as a developing nation. The features of this shared external environment will be addressed as a whole before turning to an examination of individual agency resources and future areas for intervention.

### **Environmental Context**

The Re-birth of Social Work in Post-Communist Romania. Romania's evolution from Communism to capitalism and the corresponding legal, political, and economic changes have provided unsteady ground for social service agencies that depend on the philanthropy of individuals, the government, and foreign donors for their survival. Global attention was directed toward Romania's foundering economic system with the execution of Nicolae Ceausescu in December, 1989. Ceausescu's goal as the nation's leader was to position Romania as a world military and economic power. To achieve this end, he worked to establish a global image of the nation as a productive, formidable, economically viable entity able to compete in the same financial and military arenas as highly developed nations.

In his efforts to bring Romania into the ranks of dominating world powers, Ceausescu sought to strengthen his military base by increasing the number of people available to join the armed forces and requiring all men to enlist. To further his aim of gaining economic power, Ceausescu mandated that families bear a minimum of four to five children. The dictator also engaged in business deals with foreign investors, requiring that factory production be increased

to full capacity and that workers' salaries be cut. At the height of his desperation, Ceausescu placed Romanian citizens on a "diet" allowing them limited rations of food per day so that more resources could be directed toward military and industrial enterprises.

As his foreign business deals crumbled, Ceausescu ruled through fear rather than his former promises of economic success and military might. Unknown to the global community, Romania's sudden population growth and the government's inability to support it were hidden by the creation of large-scale institutions designed to house orphaned or abandoned children (Kerrigan, 1999). With Romania's borders closed to outsiders, thousands of children were warehoused in institutions until the public execution of Ceausescu and his wife, Elena. With their deaths, world attention became riveted on the plight of institutionalized children who received little more than basic sustenance.

Free of the shadow of Communism, Romania faced the daunting tasks of establishing a new economic system and redeeming itself in the eyes of the world. An influx of foreign donors initiated the establishment of social service agencies with the aim of helping children in institutions. The entrance of foreign donors gave rebirth to the field of Romanian social work, a forgotten concept among firmly established Communist principles. It is within this rapidly evolving political context that our evaluation takes place. While much of our work analyzes strengths and areas for improvement, it stands clear that an amazing transformation has occurred in a very short time, to the credit of many dedicated people.

From Communism to Capitalism: Social Services and Economic Volatility. From an economic perspective, large-scale transformation from a Communist to a capitalist market system is a monolithic effort with far-reaching consequences; this painful transition does not happen overnight. From volatile and unpredictable prices to long lines at grocery stores with empty

shelves, the consequences of economic overhaul at the national level can devastate governments, businesses, social service agencies, and families.

Adding to the complexity of economic transformation is the well-established “black market” that ebbs and flows with the legitimate market, capitalizing on and competing with its failures and successes (Zuesse, 1998; Goldberg, 1995). Controlling the black market is a daunting task as desperate people respond to a new government’s financial instability by obtaining basic resources through underground means.

In the context of our study, what does this financial turmoil mean? Following a review of Romania’s economic outlook, we will address several economic concerns which heavily impact child welfare services. These include taxation rates for non-profit organizations, the adoption black market and bribery, EU membership, and dichotomous goals in the provision of domestic vs. foreign adoption services.

Economic Outlook. With the deposition of the Ceausescu regime, Romania began the transition from a centralized communist government to a privatized market system. Although Romania’s economy was initially progressing at a similar rate to other transitional countries, their slow progress toward privatization in conjunction with an ineffective industrial base impeded the process considerably. Currently, Romania is considered to be a middle-income developing country still in the process of privatizing its economy (Romanian Human Rights Report, 2003).

In addition to the difficulties inherent in moving from the economic policies of the 1980’s, Romania faced an escalating poverty rate and the well-documented problems in the social sector. In 2000, as Romania emerged from a three-year recession, 41% of the population lived beneath the poverty line with unemployment estimated at 9.1%. In the last three years, the

situation has improved somewhat with an estimated 30% below the poverty line and unemployment estimated at 8.1%.

Romania is committed to simplifying governmental structure and privatizing industry-1,200 businesses moved to the private sector in 2001. Inflation continues to decrease, falling from 30.3% in 2001 to an estimated 14% in 2003. Additionally, Romania's economy grew by 4.9% in 2002. This rate far exceeded expectations and was the largest growth rate for countries seeking entrance into the European Union. Part of this development may be attributed to the European Union export markets and internationally funded infrastructure projects (Romania Economy, 2003; The World Factbook 2002: Romania). The budget deficit continues to improve as well, diminishing from 3.3% of the gross domestic product in 2001 to 2.65% in 2002. This economic growth is very encouraging as Romania looks to join the European Union 2007.

European Union Membership. As Romania works to re-establish its national identity, membership in the European Union wields a major influence on child welfare and other national policies. In many ways, EU membership will help to stabilize Romania's economy by linking its currency to that of economically stable nations (Feist, 2001). EU membership will also promote Romania's image in the world, increasing its presence in the global community. On the other hand, Romania will undergo a rocky transition as it moves toward currency conversion and restructures industrial sectors to coexist in the Western European business community. Furthermore, differential impact may be expected for various geographic locations within Romania upon accession. Those areas with larger industrial capacity and proximity to Western members of the EU may experience distinct economic advantage as a result of ease of economic exchange with those nations. Depending on their geographic locations, some cities may experience more tangible benefit from accession than others (Petraikos, 2001).

In order to gain acceptance into the European economic community, Romania must fulfill several requirements placed upon it by the European Union. Among these requirements is the establishment of more progressive child welfare practices (Dickens, 2002). Amidst political pressure to improve its membership position, government officials have engaged in accelerated legal reform to satisfy EU child protection demands; however, the new laws contain few provisions for enforcement and lack financial resources to support their implementation.

Taxation Rates. Governments increase financial viability by creating and maintaining stable tax bases. In the U.S. model, non-profit agencies are exempted from heavy tax burdens. In contrast, Romania has established a 50% tax on all foreign donations received by social service agencies. This heavy tax burden necessitates that agencies aim to collect twice their operating budgets as they plan fundraising efforts. For agencies that struggle for every dollar, generating revenue for the government threatens their long-term financial viability.

On the direct service level, many of the staff members interviewed noted that direct services are sometimes interrupted as agency staff deal with budgetary emergencies. Smaller agencies with little funding do not have the resources to hire full-time fundraisers, so they allocate percentages of clinicians' time to participate in this effort. This is time that is taken away from direct service activities.

The Adoption Black Market. With the opening of Romania's borders came an influx of foreign families who were desperate to adopt children. As rapidly occurs in economically desperate environments, the black market expanded its avenues to include the field of adoption. Under Communist rule, the bribe became a long-standing business practice. Ceausescu himself "openly demanded payment from foreign families in return for permission to adopt" (Dickens, 2002). This practice continued after the Ceausescus were deposed, with potential adoptive parents

paying exorbitant fees to orphanage administrators in return for a child (Groze & Ileana, 1996). As some children were placed with the highest foreign bidder and others were adopted out from under their families, child advocates voiced concern that child welfare was being subjugated to economic desperation.

Subsequently, a moratorium was placed on inter-country adoption and placement practices were re-visited (Dickens, 2002). The consequence of the moratorium is that although it was designed to advance the rights of children, many abandoned children remain suspended in a legal gray area.

Dichotomous Domestic vs. Foreign Adoption Practices. As a corollary to the adoption black market, administrative policy mandates agencies to provide domestic services while simultaneously providing them with financial incentives to promote foreign adoptions. In establishing the “point” system, the Romanian Adoption Committee allocated points to agencies that delivered domestic direct services, such as facilitating Romanian adoptions (which are free of charge) or providing reunification services for biological families (Dickens, 2002). However, agencies receive far greater income from facilitating foreign adoptions than they do under the point system, creating economic motivation to prioritize foreign adoptions. In essence, the financial gain from foreign adoptions allows agencies to cover the cost of providing domestic services (Dickens, 2002); however, it also sends more Romanian adoptees out of country. This competes with the closely held national value of retaining Romanian children within the country. This led to a crisis in 2002 that resulted in suspension of all foreign adoptions. The moratorium is still in place.

Public Awareness and Stigma Associated with Minorities. The Roma officially comprise 1.8% of the Romanian population, but unofficially have been estimated as high as 7.9% (O'Grady &

Tarnovschi, 2001). Thought to have originally come from Northern India, the Roma migrated to what would become Romania by the 11<sup>th</sup> century where many were enslaved. As slavery was abolished worldwide, the Roma were freed, but without the ability to possess land; they were delegated to low-paying occupations that required little to no education, perpetuating their marginalized place in society.

During World War II, they were considered to be an impure race; so the Romanian government officially deported 50,000 Roma to Germany, where an estimated 19,000 died (Nicolae, 2002). After World War II, Romania endeavored to address the Roma problem by assimilating them into the rest of the population. However, their culture was assumed to be defined by poverty and unworthy of recognition. Subsequently, the Communist government tried to destroy their mobile way of life, confiscating artisanal tools in an effort to stamp out all privately owned Roma businesses (O'Grady & Tarnovschi, 2001). The Roma then turned to the agricultural sector for employment, continuing to occupy low-paying jobs.

During Ceausescu's reign, the Roma faced relocation, and many lost their jobs, forcing them into the black market and perpetuating racial stereotypes. Unfortunately, things did not improve for the Roma with the fall of the Ceausescu regime. As Romania transitions to a market economy, the Roma face high unemployment—estimated between 80 and 90%—with escalating discrimination. Violence against the Roma increased during the early 1990's and the police now conduct intermittent raids in Roma communities. Additionally, many Roma children cannot attend school because residency permits are required for admission and their mobile lifestyle prevents them from obtaining the necessary documentation. High unemployment rates and forcible removal from their communities have forced many Roma into extreme poverty. Additionally, health care is a significant issue for the Roma. Many children suffer from

preventable illnesses; there are high rates of premature births and infant mortality; as well as high rates of respiratory and cardiac disease with life expectancy estimated to be 15-20 years below the national average.

Another major factor in the external environment is the lack of public acceptance of those with special needs. For example, although many Romanians have rallied to support children who are released from institutions, strong stigma still surrounds children with disabilities. Disabled children have difficulty integrating into the traditional public school system, motivating many parents to keep them at home. For fortunate families who are able to find school programs for children with disabilities, outcomes for their children have improved. For others who lack transportation or awareness of the capabilities of their disabled children, little is done to enable the children to achieve their fullest potential. According to our interviews, it is not uncommon for some families to keep a developmentally delayed child at home under the assumption that they will never be able to work or learn. Without appropriate interventions, these children are not able to socialize and cultivate valuable work and daily living skills. Education and public awareness efforts are sorely needed to inform parents about the potential of their developmentally delayed children.

Similarly, significant numbers of newborn infants continue to be abandoned in maternity hospitals by mothers who lack the necessary resources to support them. This ongoing abandonment accounts for a large percentage of children who still enter institutions despite the strong national effort to close them. As such, agencies not only cope with large numbers of children who are awaiting foster care placement, but also must provide services for a substantial influx of newborns. It is clear that education directed toward pregnancy prevention and

increased social support for new mothers are of paramount importance in decreasing the institutionalization of children.

## **Organizational Assessments**

Our discussion now turns to a closer examination of the agencies studied, and the specific interactions each has with its internal and external environments.

### **Special Education**

#### ***Casa Minunata***

Casa Minunata is a community-based education program for children with disabilities. It provides an alternative to public schooling for many disabled children who are denied access to regular classroom settings. Started in 1994 by the Swedish Lions' Club, the school has grown from a specialized kindergarten to a therapeutic milieu that includes education, counseling, physical therapy, and job skills training for students. The agency's mission is to enable children to integrate into mainstream society through education and skills-based training. The organization also hopes to dispel social stigma surrounding people with disabilities by increasing their interaction with the local community and creating public awareness about the capabilities of disabled people.

The organizational assessment was based on group and individual interviews with two Assistant Directors, a classroom teacher, and a physical therapist. The Assistant Directors were temporarily assuming the responsibilities of the Director who was on maternity leave at the time of study.

The agency began with ten children and has built its capacity to serve eighty-three children. Seventy children are in the primary school, while thirteen attend kindergarten. Casa Minunata accepts students with a wide range of disabilities, from mild developmental delay and

ADHD to cerebral palsy. The majority of the children have mild to moderate disabilities, while a few exhibit severe impairment in cognitive, emotional, and physical functioning.

A typical day for Casa Minunata students involves engaging in coursework using computers or through classroom-based instruction. Many attend speech and physical therapy sessions. Classroom placement is determined by developmental rather than chronological age, and each child has an individual plan to document and measure progress. Frequent breaks are provided for the children, including lunches outside in peer groups with teachers. Significant effort is devoted to giving the children personalized attention and mealtimes are structured in a family-style format. For young adults aged eighteen to twenty years, teachers conduct vocational training to increase their employability in the job market. The length of the school day matches that of public facilities, beginning at 9:00 am and ending at 3:00 pm. Bus transportation is provided for children who require it.

Extracurricular activities are frequently planned, involving the participation of students, their parents, and their families. Events center around exposure to nature and group socialization, taking the form of weekend camping trips or hiking and fishing outings. Teachers use these opportunities to observe parents and children interacting with one another and to provide supportive feedback and parenting skills coaching to families.

The agency plans to open a day care center for disabled children with working parents, or for older children who aren't able to care for themselves or maintain employment. Active construction of the day care is currently on hold as the agency's financial situation prevents extra expenditures at this time. The agency has stemmed recent financial losses by asking that families pay for services on a sliding fee scale.

Four years ago, Casa Minunata received official accreditation by the Ministry of

Education, a significant accomplishment for the organization and its community reputation. A second review will be conducted within the next year for renewal of the accreditation. The Assistant Directors shared that passing governmental inspection is difficult, as the evaluators maintain an extensive list of requirements the school must satisfy. The Assistant Directors noted that some of the requirements do not account for the agency's financial capability or realistic developmental expectations for their students; however, agency staff does its best to meet the strict criteria.

Several external factors affect not only the daily functioning of Casa Minunata, but the long-term outcome of its students. Despite legal provision that all children have the right to attend school, public schools do not accept students with disabilities. Casa is seen as an alternative to staying home for many disabled children. This presents the agency with a double-bind, in that it only has capacity for eighty-three children and cannot currently meet the demand for a large number of underserved students.

Governmental assistance for the agency is minimal. This aid consists of a small, \$3,000 stipend that does not make a significant dent in operating expenses for the agency. Despite receiving this financial support from the government, the agency is still required to pay the fifty percent tax on all foreign donations. Additionally, staff acknowledged that each worker pays individual income tax, a system that represents double-taxation on the part of the government and reduces agency and staff financial resources. Staff members shared their belief that the system is fraught with inequalities, as the agency shoulders significant government responsibility by providing services to the disabled, yet receives no tax break.

Social stigma continues to surround children and adults who have disabilities. Despite improvement in cognitive and social functioning as well as job skills training, many students are

unable to find employment upon graduation. Some graduates have been hired by the agency as teaching assistants after spending time unemployed in the regular job market.

Of particular concern in our interview were the Roma children who have significant disabilities, yet are underserved by social service agencies. Although overtly stated agency policy endorses extension of services to Roma children, no Roma children have been served in the agency's history. The Assistant Directors explained the lack of Roma students by stating that foster families are reluctant to take disabled Roma children from orphanages and therefore do not seek services for them. They report that they cannot engage Roma families in some locations. It is clear that Casa Minunata needs to have a varied racial composition in the selection of its students.

Referrals come through a variety of avenues, including special education seminars, contact with government officials, media coverage of special school events, and word of mouth by parents at commissions. Commissions are joint meetings with government evaluators and parents to examine the existence of a child's disability and to provide families with subsidized telephone and other services if their children qualify.

Casa Minunata is surrounded on all sides by residential apartment buildings; upon initial construction of the school, residents were angered because the school occupied what had previously been parking space. Over the years, the agency has created the reputation as a positive presence in the community, although there are still a few negative interactions with surrounding residents or businesses. The agency receives little support from the corporate sector except for funds garnered by allowing a local business to use the gym as a lunchroom and meeting area. Romanian law does not help this problem, as there are no tax incentives for corporations to donate funds to NGOs. Additionally, rapid changes in law and public policy

generate a continual state of flux for agency administrators and staff. The physical therapist shared that following the Revolution in 1989, it has been difficult to keep pace with frequent policy changes.

In response to the heavy government tax burden and the loss of their single largest donor, Casa Minunata demonstrated a forward-thinking mindset by delving into earned income ventures. Although non-profit agencies walk a fine line between “earned income” and “profit generation” in the US, no such laws exist to quantify the boundaries between the two for Romanian NGOs. Consequently, agency administrators have taken advantage of this legal loophole in generating income that can be re-invested into facility operations.

A portion of our interview covered stakeholders in the school’s immediate environment. Parents form an important part of this environment, often acting as decision-makers for students. The agency continually welcomes parent participation, and parents were overwhelmingly receptive when the organization initially introduced the fee-for-service structure that replaced the free services previously provided. Some parents offered to pay for additional children other than their own, while others volunteered their time to mow lawns and take care of the facility. The social workers manage a delicate balance with parents, negotiating their continued support of the agency while helping them to frame realistic assumptions about their disabled children. This process can be arduous as parents have pre-conceived ideas and expectations about the achievements their children can make.

In the professional domain, medical collaborators have significant input into the decisions made about children’s treatment. Every child at Casa Minunata has a community-based physician or specialist. In Romanian society, physicians are considered the final authorities regarding the treatment and progress of disabled children. Families and other professionals often

defer to the physicians, despite lack of agreement about the ultimate potential of each child. Currently, physicians tend to believe that disability is a concrete limitation past which most children cannot proceed. Consequently, doctors offer little encouragement for education and therapy for the severely disabled. Agency philosophy, on the other hand, is that no matter how severe a child's disability, his life can be improved. This sets the stage for substantial disagreement with community physicians and the need for a delicate professional stance with families who have been told that their children cannot make developmental gains.

One of the agency's primary missions is to remain self-sufficient and independent of the government. Management devotes substantial effort to maintaining this independence. This year, the agency budget fell short of actual need by approximately thirty percent. The Lions' Club provided financial assistance to bridge this gap; however, Casa Minunata must develop alternate means to establish a stable base of financial support if it is to avoid dependence upon government funds. The Assistant Directors frequently travel to other countries to increase awareness of the school and to attract the support of additional donors.

Although she was not present, the general impression of the Director was that she operated in a friendly, democratic, effective manner. She organized regular weekly staff meetings and facilitated group discussion of administrative issues and clinical cases. For serious clinical issues, all clinical staff meet together to address the concern. Additionally, direct interaction between employees as peers was commonly reported, with the benefit of cross-pollination of professional expertise.

Upon interview with one of the teachers, she described the Director's main functions as liaison with the Swedish donor, facilitating group activities with children, and rotating teachers to ensure effective communication and amelioration of burn-out. The Director is seen as

buffering other staff members against substantial stress, taking many major issues upon herself.

Many staff members had difficulty conceptualizing the entirety of the functions that comprise the Director's job.

Apparent in the agency interview was a healthy reliance on team work with cross-functional interactions. Staff members made significant efforts to know each student and to have a positive personal relationship with all of them. Organizational culture seemed well-defined, with emphasis on teamwork, friendly relations, and informality in meetings with the Director and senior staff. Services were enhanced by the use of an attractive building donated by the Lions' Club. Cheerful pictures and brightly colored interiors provided a vibrant environment for the children and their teachers. The environment was stimulating and interesting, creating an atmosphere conducive to learning.

Casa Minunata exhibits a well-established hierarchy, with the Director at the head followed by the two Assistant Directors. The Director currently shoulders the bulk of the fundraising, followed by the Assistant Directors. One of the Assistant Directors has a social work background, while the other was trained as an educator. Classroom teachers and physical therapists report to them.

Three drivers take responsibility for transporting children to and from school, as well as tending to the gardens and grounds. Each driver was allowed to choose additional tasks that appealed to him and were well-suited to his capabilities. This particular division of labor evolved over time, and was a natural consequence of the drivers' investment in contributing to organizational well-being during their "down time". Two cleaning ladies ensure that the building remains neat and orderly.

Casa Minunata seems to have strong community and professional contacts in terms of

obtaining technical assistance and access to funds from large donor communities. Both of the Assistant Directors demonstrated the knowledge and sophistication to interact effectively with large donors and to market the school. They also exhibited in-depth knowledge about whom to contact for specific needs and where funding sources reside.

The operating budget is determined based on the number of children to be served in a year along with their specific disabilities. A profile of the student population is created at the end of each school year. No annual report was available, and the budget information presented was general. The Assistant Directors appeared to be uncomfortable with requests for financial information.

Staff members were hired via personal interview. Employee attitude was considered an important criterion for the managers. They stated that concrete knowledge is teachable and significant experience is gained from hands-on training. However, a positive attitude is viewed as an intrinsic characteristic of applicants. The administration said that they would rather teach a new trainee concrete skills than attempt to modify a negative attitude or uncommitted work ethic.

The school currently selects new students from its waiting list, which is forty children long this year. They can only provide services for eleven new students this fall. Admission is on a first come, first served basis, and is prioritized chronologically rather than in terms of developmental impairment. Administrators attempt to locate alternative schools for children who cannot be accepted in a given year. Children past the age of fourteen are not eligible for admission and are referred elsewhere. School staff noted that turning applicants away is one of the most difficult aspects of their work. Part of the rationale for maintaining such a small student body is the high teacher to student ratio (1:8).

The gender structure of the teaching staff is predominantly male, given that many of the

children must be lifted frequently. Female teachers are typically assigned to pre-school and elementary classes, in which the children are easier to handle physically.

At the start of each academic year, evaluations are conducted for teachers, teachers' assistants, therapists, administrators, and other staff members. Meetings are conducted during the week prior to the beginning of the semester. Employee job descriptions exist, with structured rules about task responsibilities and expected professional behavior. When the administration encounters difficulties with an employee's job performance, efforts are made to identify the reason behind the problem and to reassign the individual if necessary. Termination is a rare occurrence at Casa Minunata.

As children begin the school year, they are assessed with the Psychological Education Profile, an instrument that assesses their level of cognitive development. Re-assessment is conducted at the end of the school year in order to document progress. Individual student files are kept for every student, each of whom has goals based on his/her developmental abilities. Collaboration with parents is solicited by teachers and administrators in the goal-setting process. Part of the social workers' task is to educate parents about realistic expectations for their children and to address unrealistic expectations. A regular school newsletter is sent to sponsors and families to note ongoing events at the school.

School staff maintains regular progress notes for the children, documenting their progress and difficulties they may encounter. This file is mandated by law to be kept for a minimum of fifty years and is strictly confidential. Only parents, teachers, the students themselves, and their physicians have access to this information. A portable folder travels between teachers and parents to facilitate daily communication. While basic progress notes are required by the school's supporting donor and the government, some staff members create additional notes to

enhance their care of the children.

Physical therapists establish separate therapeutic goals for each child. Physical therapy sessions last from twenty to forty minutes, depending on the physical and emotional endurance of the child. One therapist noted that he was unrealistically ambitious at the start of his career, expecting that with enough effort, every child could walk. He admits that he is more realistic now, and sets goals in smaller steps. He also acknowledges that some children will not walk, but believes that every child can improve his physical capacity. He routinely consults with other colleagues and teachers for children who have multiple disabilities and to provide simple exercises children can do in the classroom.

The administrative managers noted that they take a strengths-based approach for employee and student evaluations and in goal-setting. All levels of management appeared to work well together in an atmosphere of mutual trust and collaboration. One primary school teacher expressed the opinion that the project has “grown nicely” and is a wonderful opportunity for regular school teachers to work with children who have disabilities.

An employee day care program was created to enable employees to be close to their children while at work. This effort was initiated so that employees could feel that their children were safe and so that female workers would not be forced to choose between work and leaving their children with another caregiver during the day.

Significant trust centers around personal time off, with the requirement that employees call in if they are ill and the expectation that someone will cover for them. Originally, they did not ask employees to sign in and out; however, the Ministry of Education subsequently imposed this requirement. The Assistant Directors often teach classes when a teacher is away, including changing diapers and feeding children if necessary. In this respect, job descriptions can be fluid

when needed.

The primary school teacher shared that one of the challenges of her job is the variety of disabilities represented in her classroom; this requires her to seek a wide range of knowledge so that she can structure her interventions accordingly. Although she had worked previously in a school for mildly disabled children, she was not prepared initially for work with children who require substantial physical assistance.

Staff members within the agency must exhibit the ability to communicate with children who have multiple disabilities, including language deficits. They must cultivate an attitude of patience with unrealistic parent expectations regarding their children's development, and must supportively contend with the children's frustration when they reach difficult developmental obstacles. Physical agility and strength are required when dealing with students who are unable to support themselves physically. Additionally, staff must be able to tolerate disruptive behavior when children aren't able to negotiate the stresses of the school day.

Agency staff expressed several direct practice needs for improving current services. These include additional classroom materials, more staff members who can provide one-to-one attention for hyperactive children, and additional training so that teachers may serve children with a wide range of disabilities.

In order to enhance employee education, regular trainings and seminars are conducted at least yearly. New intervention methods are discussed in these seminars, as well as learning via the Internet. Visitors and scholars are frequently invited to present ideas and to become involved in problem-solving.

School staff value self-sufficiency along with open collaboration. Each of them expressed the need to help the children, even if only in small ways. Many staff members

communicated the desire to improve the lives of children in some small measure and to help them get the most out of their lives.

Staff composition has remained relatively stable since the organization's beginning. Employees value personal initiative and the willingness to help in multiple capacities. In order to re-vitalize staff energy, the school invites lectures from the professional association of Social Workers (Social Assistants). Mutual helping is highly valued and the school is considered to be a "team" environment.

The primary teacher we interviewed expressed that the best aspect of her work is the chance to see the children progress in accomplishing their developmental goals. She noted that it is both encouraging and sad when children graduate from the program. One of the Assistant Directors spoke of the satisfaction he derives from witnessing seemingly small achievements, such as a child being able to use the bathroom independently or eat with a fork.

The agency conducts self-initiated performance evaluations. One of the Assistant Directors expressed regret that the community is not more interactive with the school, as they could be important constituents to involve in an overall evaluation of client impact.

The agency appears to be competent in managing financial and technical functions. They prioritized learning new therapeutic techniques, soliciting expertise from visiting professionals and donor contacts. Interestingly, both staff and students were accustomed to receiving foreign visitors and we were immediately greeted as "English people". This is important to remember in the interpretation of our data, as the visit was well-orchestrated and employees seemed polished in their presentation.

Agency-Specific Recommendations. Upon reviewing the interview data, several agency-specific recommendations presented themselves as possibilities for improving service delivery at Casa

Minunata. Foremost on the list involves encouraging administrators to evaluate the strength of current agency culture and its readiness for change. The culture appears to have been stable for a significant period of time; often, staff becomes accustomed to a particular organizational mentality and has difficulty adjusting to new modes of thinking. Only administrators in collaboration with staff members themselves can assess the potential that exists for organizational change at Casa Minunata.

We also recommend that the agency re-evaluate its overhead structure. Significant expense is outlaid for building space and staff salaries. Potential savings may be realized by analyzing the cost in overhead per student served and determining if the high teacher/student ratio is optimal for the agency. While a high teacher to student ratio is helpful for provision of supportive services, making use of volunteers or interns may present the opportunity for substantial savings. Casa Minunata may also consider partnerships with local universities to gain access to volunteers and interns.

Another avenue for training and cost-savings may be collaboration with other agencies which provide similar disability services. Sharing ideas and cost-saving advice may be an important resource for generating ways to optimize the agency's use of limited funds. This would also increase the base of clients in the referral network, allowing more visibility for the agency and a steady stream of clients which improves marketability and concretizes evidence of community need when presenting programming to potential donors.