

Abbie Turner:

This is Alumni Aloud, a podcast by Graduate Center students for Graduate Center students. In each episode we talk with a GC graduate about their career path, the ins and outs of their current position and the career advice they have for students. This series is sponsored by the Graduate Center's Office of Career Planning and Professional Development.

Abbie Turner:

I'm Abbie Turner, a PhD candidate in Educational Psychology at the Graduate Center. I work in the Office of Career Planning and Professional Development and I interviewed Naomi, who earned her PhD in Social Welfare from the Graduate Center. She is now Assistant Commissioner for Policy and Planning in the division of children and family wellbeing at the Administration of Children's Services for New York City.

Abbie Turner:

So, today in the office I have Naomi Schear, and she graduated from our PhD in Social Welfare. So, welcome to the office Naomi. So glad you could come. We don't have yet a Social Welfare PhD so it's going to be interesting. You definitely have a new perspective. So why don't you tell us what you currently do and maybe what those job responsibilities look like.

Naomi W. Schear:

So, hello everybody. I am an Assistant Commissioner for Policy and Planning in the administration for children's services in New York City. I work in the division of primary prevention, it's called child and family wellbeing. And our job is to create programs to help families so that they never come through the door of child welfare. So our goal is to prevent abuse before it occurs, which is exciting.

Abbie Turner:

Okay. So you're at a city government agency. So you're a government employee.

Naomi W. Schear:

I am. And a civil servant.

Abbie Turner:

Great. So why don't you walk us a little bit through the journey to this job? Because I think it started before graduate school or during graduate school.

Naomi W. Schear:

Sure. So I should say I've worked in child welfare my entire career, about 16 years. I started as a case planner in preventive services in Philadelphia, providing in-home prevention services to families who had a case of abuse or neglect with Philadelphia. And then my job, which it would be very similar in New York, was to go into the home and try to help the family learn how to parent differently or basically to become safe again.

Naomi W. Schear:

So, how can they parent their children in a way that would maybe make some changes? Typically, our cases, which is true across the system, are founded on neglect, which means that maybe there was a

lack of supervision, the parent ran out to the store and the kids were left home. Often it's because of poverty. And we're often working with families who, it's a single parent home, has multiple jobs and there aren't enough resources to meet the need and this is, I would argue not the best way to meet the need. So that's why I'm so excited about the position I currently have to help families so that they don't need child welfare to try to be the parent they want to be.

Naomi W. Schear:

All that said, I then went on to get my Master's degree in Public Policy and Public Administration, and I worked for the Senate for a little while, which was an interesting experience. I worked for Hillary Clinton, which was very different than working on the front line of social work. I then also went on to work with older youth in foster care. This was all in DC at the time. And then I came back to New York where I went to work with older youth in foster care, and then I went to work at a child welfare agency in New York City where I had the good fortune of being there at a time where everybody was working towards changing the culture at the agency and trying to improve our outcomes.

Naomi W. Schear:

At that point, I had enrolled in a PhD program here at the CUNY Grad Center, and really it's a program housed at Hunter College, and I absolutely loved it. I, at the time was a manager in the child welfare agencies, what's called a either quality assurance or policy and practice department, which was an amazing position to have while in grad school. I had the good fortune of getting to do research and use my lit review skills to try to figure out, okay, if certain outcomes are not what we want them to be, if young people in foster care are not meeting their educational goals or if children are moving foster homes too often, or if kids aren't going home to their parents quick enough or not enough in general, what does the research say is the best practice on how to work on these issues? Because everybody struggles with this in child welfare.

Naomi W. Schear:

Because of that research and because... I was so fortunate to have bosses at the time who were really supportive of that type of research, which was great. We got to make a lot of changes at the agency and it was really fun and we did it in a team and it was just exciting, and so we did lots of things to try to decrease the number of movements between young people moving foster homes, which is very detrimental for kids. Through the research that I was able to do, which I even did for my quantitative stats class to try to analyze why were kids moving homes, why were there high movers versus low movers and try to understand it.

Naomi W. Schear:

We also then... I, with the team, was able to do research on casework practice models, which were very novel at the time in New York City, and really across the country. It was a method for how to work with a family. So often in child welfare we send case planners, I was that case planner, often who are young or just have a bachelor's degree, into a home to work with families with a lot of needs. And we don't necessarily give them a roadmap for how to work with a family or how to set a goal with a family and have the family give voice to what do they want to see for their family.

Naomi W. Schear:

Oftentimes instead, we send families to services and hope that fixes the problem. But just because a family goes to, let's say parenting class, does it mean they've now learned how to maybe discipline a

little bit differently with their teenager, especially if the parenting class only covers babies. So, you could imagine it's not the most effective way to do our work. And so after doing quite a bit of research, I stumbled upon solution-based casework, which is a great model, for how to work with families and how to codesign with family's goals that they want to see for their own family so it's not being dictated to them, which makes no sense.

Naomi W. Schear:

Long story short, I got to help with the implementation of this model across the agency, and then the model spread to many other agencies in the city. And I got to be part of an implementation team with other agencies figuring out how to implement a case or a practice model in child welfare.

Abbie Turner:

And this was your dissertation?

Naomi W. Schear:

And this became my dissertation.

Abbie Turner:

Was it your dissertation before you knew this was going in or you were implementing it at work and he said, "Oh, I've got research that I'm doing. This can be a project."

Naomi W. Schear:

No. In no way did I think this was going to be my dissertation. I actually, to be honest at the time, thought implementation, how dry and boring. But it became such a large part of my job and I found it so, in the end, interesting. So it's like you could have the best model in the world, but if you can't implement it, it doesn't much matter. And so there was such little research on how to do it well, I became interested in it. Because every agency went about implementing the model differently, it was such a great way to figure out, okay, what were the experiences of staff at the different agencies?

Naomi W. Schear:

So I did a qualitative research study for frontline staff all the way up to the executive directors to learn about their experiences with various implementation methods. It was actually really fun in the end.

Abbie Turner:

Wow, okay. And you're also doing double duty getting stuff done in school and at work.

Naomi W. Schear:

I always worked full time, so yeah. And I taught, so it was a lot.

Abbie Turner:

So, in social work and social welfare, it's really common to just stop at the MSW, the Masters of Social Work. So what made you... Well wait, you didn't actually say you had a MSW.

Naomi W. Schear:

I have a Bachelor's of Social Work, Masters of Policy and then a PhD in Social Welfare.

Abbie Turner:

Okay. And so what pushed you to get the PhD and become a researcher?

Naomi W. Schear:

Sure, so at the time I was working with older youth in foster care when I applied to the program, and I was so struck by the fact that we had such little funding, and I wanted to understand how could we help older youth in foster care with our limited resources in the best way possible. Because I felt like we were making decisions not based on any information. And I could see some of our young people not have any outcomes in the way that we'd hoped they would. I wanted to go to research to actually fix that problem. I was very idealistic, it was great, I'm going to get a PhD and then I'm just going to fix it.

Naomi W. Schear:

But yeah, I mean he really interested in how can we make decisions that are based on, and also build up the research, on also positive research. We often focus on child welfare and all the problems and not a lot of solutions, which I also fell to be very useful in practice.

Abbie Turner:

Okay. And so for other people in your field, thinking about the PhD, what would you advise? How do you know it's time for a PhD versus sticking with your masters?

Naomi W. Schear:

It's such a great question. I would say quite honestly if you really enjoy practice and want to become an administrator, you don't need a PhD. It's a long journey and one that you don't need to go on, and a Master's in Social Work will get you very far in the field and you could probably pursue all the practice dreams you ever wanted to. I would say a PhD is useful if you want to do research, if you want to do evaluation, if you want to teach. I will say I've gotten to have the positions I've been able to have, I think because I'm a PhD, so it certainly has open doors for me. I think that's been a benefit for sure.

Naomi W. Schear:

But yeah, so if you want to go into the higher levels of government, if you want to run an agency, a PhD really is useful, but that doesn't mean you have to have one either. So, I'm glad I got it. I think that-

Abbie Turner:

You got to do what you wanted to do in your position. Yeah. Okay. So that allowed for that freedom. Great. So now let's talk about working government in general. What do you find are the best parts of working for a city government? I know we've encouraged those jobs in this office and we've heard good things and you were in nonprofit, so why don't you just say some of those pros and cons of those different sectors?

Naomi W. Schear:

I personally loved working in nonprofit, but I was very fortunate to work at an organization that had an amazing culture. And so I would say when interviewing or considering where to go, culture really matters. And so considering questions about what is the work life balance, what's turnover like at

particularly a director level up, that those are questions to see if people like it here. I had a great team and a wonderful executive director, so it was a wonderful place to work.

Naomi W. Schear:

I probably would've actually just stayed there for many years to come. I was there for a long time except I had a baby. And the hours, particularly in child welfare are pretty untenable if you have a baby. And so I was working nights and weekends and I was running a program at the time in Brooklyn, Bronx, Harlem, and then Westchester. So I just could not continue. So I stayed until my daughter was about one and then decided I just couldn't do it. So, I switched to government, quite honestly, because I knew it'd be hours, and I have had that. It is incredible work life balance. I have great benefits. As a parent, I value that greatly and it really matters to me. Now I have two young children.

Naomi W. Schear:

But there's also exciting things about government that I'm enjoying too. It's really fascinating to see how policies get made. It's exciting to be in my current position because I get to, one, help develop new programming for the entire city, which it's just a gift to get to do that. Obviously a team... It's exciting to figure out how to work across... One major complaint that families bring to us, and it is very valid, that often to get their needs met, they have to go to so many different agencies and it's really challenging for any family, but let alone a family who's poor and working multiple jobs or potentially living in a shelter and your kids are going to school in another borough. It's just impossible.

Naomi W. Schear:

And so figuring out how to work with other agencies... Like right now we're working with health and hospitals on initiatives, working with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. And it's so exciting to provide families with holistic care that actually meets their needs.

Abbie Turner:

And that respond to their needs, yeah.

Naomi W. Schear:

Yeah. I get to use my degree every day. I have done qualitative research on the job to actually have family voice of practice, which is something that I'm pushing at my level, which is exciting. And that's starting to pick up. I'm also trying to push that we should evaluate all of our programs and hire PhDs to do that so that we're making good decisions with our funding and limited resources, and that's happening more.

Abbie Turner:

That they're informed.

Naomi W. Schear:

Yeah. I try to build into the contracts that that has to happen, so it's fun.

Abbie Turner:

Wow. Very exciting that you get to be involved in all of these things, especially purposes that you're really behind. So that's what she probably get out of this nonprofit and government work, right?

Naomi W. Schear:

I feel very blessed to have had both experiences. I feel very lucky.

Abbie Turner:

Great. Let's see. What's a typical day like for an assistant commissioner?

Naomi W. Schear:

Well, it is so varied, which I do really enjoy. It can be anything from going to city hall to meet with... I'm part of an interagency council there, to go into a hearing, to literally conducting research, to looking at data and outcomes and evaluation. I sit on our IRB review group, so doing that.

Abbie Turner:

The IRB for children?

Naomi W. Schear:

ACS.

Abbie Turner:

For ACS.

Naomi W. Schear:

Yeah. I also help to head up some of our new programmatic initiatives, so it could be meeting out in the field with program directors and non profits and agencies and figuring out what's going well, what's not, and how can we work together to make it better. Things of that nature.

Abbie Turner:

So, your every day is different.

Naomi W. Schear:

Very. Which I would loathe it not to be. I prefer the variety.

Abbie Turner:

Okay. And you make your way all around the city.

Naomi W. Schear:

I do, which I also enjoy.

Abbie Turner:

Awesome.

Naomi W. Schear:

Yeah. And I also oversee a data team. It's fun.

Abbie Turner:

Oh, great. And so you briefly touched on this. What are the kind of educational requirements for being in these different positions that you've held?

Naomi W. Schear:

So you certainly can get to my level and have a Master's in Public Administration or Master's in Social Work with enough years of experience for sure. I think I got there quicker because I had a PhD. And I also think it changes the lens in which I do the work. I think I bring evaluation and a research lens to the work. I also would say though that I think my practice experience for years of working as a case planner, as a supervisor, as a director and working on the ground and working up through the ranks of that was absolutely invaluable. I think it would be hard to do my job without having both. I would highly encourage any student to get both experiences because-

Abbie Turner:

Yeah, well most of our PhDs in social welfare will probably have that, correct?

Naomi W. Schear:

Typically, yes at CUNY. Other schools, no. Other schools folks go straight through school and I would not recommend it. I really like CUNY and Hunter's outlook that you have to have experience. I think it's invaluable.

Abbie Turner:

Great. How about we explore your job application processes. What is it like to get a position at your level? I know sometimes these hiring processes can go on for months, right?

Naomi W. Schear:

They really can. I think all the stereotypes of government I have learned are real, and it's true, and probably particularly hard right now. So if you don't have a... I would say step number one, take the civil service exam. If you want a director title or above, you need to still be civil service right now, for a lot of reasons, which I won't bore you with, but there are reasons. Until you have a civil service title, it's pretty much impossible at this moment in time to get to the government. The exams come out monthly and you can check to see to take them. So, that's one.

Naomi W. Schear:

We used to not use that practice, but that has since changed. The next is I would go on informational interviews. They could not be more valuable. So, if you want to get into government, nonprofit, for profit, I imagine, just meeting with people and hearing their story and finding out from them, without a real ask of, "Hey, do you have a position?" You meet tons of people in the field and make connections, and really that's a lot of the time how you get a job, because somebody knew of an opening somewhere else and then they... It's very helpful to go get a cup of coffee and do an informational interview.

Abbie Turner:

Also get to learn about the culture you mentioned. You can find out what the culture is like at that organization.

Naomi W. Schear:

Or others that they know about.

Abbie Turner:

Yeah.

Naomi W. Schear:

So, get advice on the field that you're interested in going in and what's the landscape look like is just so useful.

Abbie Turner:

And so what was your hiring process like?

Naomi W. Schear:

Actually that. So for my current position I actually came in not as a assistant commissioner, I came in as a director and that happened because when I was at [Graham 00:17:15], I worked with tons of different people from all over the place and I knew someone who was a very high up in foster care at ACS, and she was kind enough to meet me for coffee and talk to me about her experience and find out like, do I want to come work at ACS? And she knew of the position that was opening. She was like, "You should apply for it." I was like, "All right." Then she forwarded them my resume and then I got an interview.

Naomi W. Schear:

Then I got this position kind of the same way. So I was like, I'd love to do something a little bit different. I'm excited to kind of take my next step. I saw this position and reached out to a colleague and was like, "Hey, I saw this position. Do you know about this division? Would it be good to work in? Is it interesting?" And then I got an interview. So I've been very lucky, but I'd say informational interviews could not be more... They have helped my entire career.

Abbie Turner:

Great. We definitely recommend those as well.

Naomi W. Schear:

Because also in government, to be honest, for every position I post for I get hundreds of applicants. I have actually, I will say though, of all the positions I've hired for, they've come out of the pool. They have not been recommendations. I've been really lucky to find really great people in the resume pool.

Abbie Turner:

And so, since you are informed on this and we've done it in one other episode, but it's been awhile, let's go back to the best way to fill out these applications. Because there's systems reading for keywords, right?

Naomi W. Schear:

That's true. We don't do that.

Abbie Turner:

Oh okay.

Naomi W. Schear:

So I will say though, there's humans reading for keywords, and so when I get two to 500 applications, and I am not exaggerating my number, I have two piles that I do first. Pile one, you get to move on to be considered at all, at any level. Pile two is no. To know what to avoid; spelling mistakes will knock you out of my pile, because if you have hundreds of applicants, you have to have a weeding process. So have someone check your resume. If formatting is lousy or if it doesn't look neat, you won't make it to round two. So even simple things make a huge difference.

Abbie Turner:

When there's such a large volume.

Naomi W. Schear:

And so that's step one. I would also look at what are the qualifications for this particular job and if you have them, make sure your resume highlights those. In government in particular, we're not allowed to hire for a particular position unless the qualifications match the resume identically.

Abbie Turner:

That's true at CUNY as well.

Naomi W. Schear:

Yeah, and so you have to even use the words. So like, we need someone who has research experience. You have to literally put research experience. So then I can say, "Oh look..." That's really important. And so enclose a cover letter that again makes sense. So doing things like applying for a job and then your cover letter is actually to another organization will not get you further along in the interview pool.

Abbie Turner:

True. Yeah, and these are all services that our office also offers. Resume reading, revisions.

Naomi W. Schear:

Take advantage. I always have other folks read my writing and everybody needs that.

Abbie Turner:

Yeah, definitely. Great. Do you have any other advice that maybe you'd want to share with current graduate students, whether they're social welfare or not, or master's or PhD?

Naomi W. Schear:

I think really the only advice I can offer would probably be for social welfare I imagine or maybe public policy folks. I would say the other reason to do informational interviews is that I found, particularly early in my career, not now, but early in my career I had a vision for what a job would be like and it didn't match reality. So it's also good if you're ever able to, to shadow somebody to see what is their day like. Does that sound like... Do I like to sit at a computer? Do I like to move around the city? Do I like to meet

with a lot of people? Do I only want to stare at numbers? All those things are good things. We need all those people in our system and it helps to figure out who are you, what brings you joy, and then figure out how to maximize your strengths, and once you observe somebody on their job, you could have a sense of like, oh, that seems great or that seems like something I would loathe, like good to know that.

Naomi W. Schear:

So shadowing is also, if possible, is a great thing to be able to do.

Abbie Turner:

Do you find that people in say your department are open to those kinds of things?

Naomi W. Schear:

For sure.

Abbie Turner:

Okay. Yeah.

Naomi W. Schear:

What we don't allow is if we're meeting with families, we can't allow shadowing because you need someone who's had a background check and a family who's comfortable, as you can imagine. But no, I actually meet with interested people all the time. I also, because people have done it for me, get coffee with students all the time.

Abbie Turner:

Great. Awesome. So is it pretty normal, the schedule that you had with your program where everybody's working like that? Do you want to talk about how you juggled that?

Naomi W. Schear:

Not well. So I think in child welfare, because it can be crisis oriented, if you're working on the... There's two sides in child welfare. There's like an evaluation department who usually works pretty regular hours. And then there's the program folks who usually do not work regular hours. And typically it is fairly expected to be on call. There's some more programs I found out in hospital settings that I think have much better hours than maybe child welfare. Child welfare in particular is notorious for the hours because it's just what the job is.

Abbie Turner:

When it happens you have to be there.

Naomi W. Schear:

Yeah. Looking back on it, I think now that I've grown, I think I could've done it differently and probably have like, I'm on call this night and someone else is... There are probably ways to figure it out, but the culture of child welfare is typically not lend itself to that. Culture at a hospital social work setting is much more hourly in that you could have really intense, exciting work, I like intense work, and then leave and it's done. I think that's something to be mindful of. I enjoyed those hours before I had kids. And if you're looking for that level of intensity, it can be exciting, but it depends what you want in a job.

Abbie Turner:

These are decisions that current graduate students can make about where they're going to spend their experience hours, right?

Naomi W. Schear:

I would ask people in an interview what hours are.

Abbie Turner:

Yeah. That should be a big part of it. Great. Okay. Well, if that's everything, it's been really informative, and I want to thank you for coming in. It's been great to hear from you.

Naomi W. Schear:

Thank you so much.

Abbie Turner:

Thank you again to Naomi for coming into the office and speaking with us about her career. The Graduate Center's Office of Career Planning and Professional Development offers many of the services Naomi recommended in preparing for the job market. Make an appointment to speak with one of our career advisors at CUNY.is/careerplan. You can find a list of our upcoming events there and also follow us on Twitter [@CareerPlanGC](https://twitter.com/CareerPlanGC). Thanks for listening.