Is Social Work Education Relevant to Child Welfare Practice? A Qualitative Analysis from the Adult Learner Perspective

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Introduction

Partnerships between social work education and public child welfare have proliferated since the availability of Title IV-E funding of the Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) to support professional social work education (Zlotnik, 2003). Although the history of child welfare services is clearly within the professional scope of social work services, at this time it appears that the burden is upon the profession to demonstrate that professional social work education is relevant to the practice of child welfare (Folaron & Hostetter, 2006 Two factors have come together that make it increasingly important that evidence of effectiveness of Title IV-E-funded education is available: greater expectations upon state services delineated in the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105.89) and funding in this era of budget cuts for social services.

This study was conducted as a part of the expectation for one school of social work to provide evaluation of a newly developed partnership between the university and the public child welfare agency. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the consumers' satisfaction of the IV-E-funded partnership. A quantitative survey was developed to address the federal requirement for this aspect of program evaluation. A qualitative study was also conducted to ascertain the subjective experience of the public child welfare worker in a Masters of Social Work (MSW) program. The intent of this qualitative evaluation was to give voice to the student-employees so that their lived experiences as social work students and child welfare practitioners might be better understood. This article will focus on the key findings generated from the qualitative evaluation. These include content, process, and structure of the educational experience as well as the development of a conceptual model of how social work education influences worker retention.

Review of Literature

The expansion of the federal Title IV-E funding for agency-university partnerships has brought about the growth of research conducted to evaluate those partnerships. A recent volume of The Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment (Feit & Wodarski, 2003) was dedicated to "Charting the Impacts of University-Child Welfare Collaboration" (preface). Much of this research has focused upon workforce retention and job performance/preparedness including retention of workers during and after the receipt of the professional degree (Jones & Okamura, 2000; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992), and comparisons of job performance and preparedness of social work degreed and non-degreed workers (Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003; Jones & Okamura, 2000). Other studies emphasize the development of the specific competencies required for public child welfare practice and the development of both training and social work education to meet those identified needs (Brientenstein, Rycus, Stites, & Kelley, 1997; Fox, Miller & Barbee, 2003).

More recently, there is an emerging theme of organizational change exploring how the professionalization of public child workers may impact the structure and function of the public agency itself (Ellett, Ellett & Rugutt, 2003; Lawson, Anderson-Butcher, Petersen & Barkdull, 2003; Hopkins & Mudrick, 1999). Little is known, however, about the process by which social work education influences retention, increases job performance/preparedness, or contributes to organizational change.

Adult education is another area of literature reviewed for this study. Since some models of university/public child welfare IV-E partnerships involve students returning to school after beginning their child-welfare career. The concepts of andragogy (Knowles, 1980) as well as critical consciousness (Friere, 1973) are considered important to an educational partnership with these adult learners. Many IV-E students (those who

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become MSW students after employment in public child welfare) are non-traditional in that they bring a wealth of relevant child-welfare practice to the classroom. They are learners who typically are not interested in banking information (Friere, 1973), but desire to apply their learning to their everyday practices. Adult learning theories provide a context for understanding the student perspectives regarding the relevance of social work education for public child-welfare practice. The literature is further developed in the results section to enrich the specific findings generated from this qualitative study.

Methodology

The intent of this qualitative evaluation was to explore the subjective lived experiences of the student-practitioners who were both social work students and child-welfare practitioners. The study aims were to (a) evaluate the newly-developed partnership between the university and the public welfare agency specific to consumer satisfaction; (b) explore the relevance of foundational social work education (knowledge, values, and skills) specific to public child-welfare practice and; (c) understand what about their experience as a student in the MSW program created support or stress.

Questions were developed by the faculty curricula group responsible for the development and implementation of the child-welfare concentration. This process yielded eight questions. (See Appendix A.) Questions related to the impact of their learning social work values/ethics, knowledge, skills, and the application of this learning to their current child-welfare position. These questions also addressed the stresses and supports experienced with regard to graduate school and employment. Finally, the students were asked about the anticipated impact of their MSW on their career in child welfare.

The study criteria required that each participant be enrolled in the MSW program and also be receiving funding from the IV-E partnership. In order to receive funds from the IV-E partnership, students were required to maintain full-time employment in public child welfare. At the time of inquiry, two cohorts of students were completing between 12 and 30 semester hours of foundation coursework. Therefore, participants for the study would be at either the beginning or mid-point in their MSW studies. Students in the university-agency IV-E partnership had been taking required foundation courses at times specially designed for the IV-E cohorts (Table 1). In this IV-E program model, students complete their foundation courses as a cohort and then enter concentration courses, which are integrated with all other MSW student cohorts (full-time, part-time Saturday and evening, advanced standing).

Focus groups were selected as the ideal method of data collection for this project because they allowed respondents to express opinions in a casual, familiar setting. This method complemented the cohort model in that participants may encourage and influence one another (Krueger & Casey, 2000) as they do in their classroom and work settings. Three separate focus groups were offered at varying times on different dates, allowing participants to choose a convenient date and time for attendance. The facilitator was a faculty member who had not been an instructor for IV-E students and had prior experience conducting focus groups. Each group was scheduled for up to one and one half hours. Dialogue was recorded at each focus group meeting and transcribed verba-

Table 1. Foundation Curriculum

Year	Fall	Spring	Summer 1	Summer 2
Cohort 1	Intro to Social Work HBSE 1	Policy 1 Research 1	Practice 1	HBSE 2
Cohort 2	Policy 2 Practice 2: Macro	Practice 2: Micro Practice 1	Electives	Elective

tim by staff. No students were identified by name in the transcriptions. The study was approved by a university institutional review board.

The two researchers conducted independent content analyses for the key words and phrases by question, and the two analyses were merged (Weber, 1990). Final constructs were developed around the emerging themes associated with the educational experience in the MSW program. Results

Respondents attended one of the three focus group offerings. A total of 14 unduplicated participants attended the focus groups. The total number of respondents (14) represents 54% of the enrollment of Title IV-E students at the time of the study. All respondents were female, six African Americans and eight Caucasians. The focus group respondents were quite diverse as to their current job responsibilities, including a mix of case managers, supervisors, county-level and state-level administrators. They were also diverse in the number of years that they had been employed in public child welfare, ranging from two to twenty years.

The results are presented as five themes developed from analysis of the data. Two were in direct response to the focus group questions:

knowledge, values, and skills for child-welfare practice, and supports and stresses of being an IV-E MSW student. The additional three themes were generated from the content analysis of all the initial questions. They include: a) relationship of the cohort model to the enhancement of learning; b) education fostering commitment to public child welfare; and c) articulation of knowledge and praxis as central to the learning process. The voice of the participants and the supporting literature are woven throughout this discussion. A summary of the results is presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Knowledge, Values, and Skills for Child Welfare Practice

Specific questions (see Appendix A) focused on knowledge, values, and skills relevant to respondents' child-welfare practice. Respondents articulated core knowledge, values, and skills of the social work profession and highlighted the connections to their child-welfare practice. Knowledge for social work practice provided an understanding of policy analyses, political processes, and child-welfare practice. The history of child welfare provided knowledge about the context of their practice. Concepts such as strengths

Table 2. Knowledge, Values and Skills Identified by IV-Student/Employees

Knowledge	Values	Skills
Strengths Perspective	Empowerment	Collaborative Practice
Political Processes	Advocacy	Advocacy
Policy and Practice	Ethical Practice (NASW Code of Ethics)	Interviewing
Systems Understanding	Confidentiality	Reflective Listening
Empirical Evidence	Social Justice	Identify and Write Goals
Statistics	Advocacy	Professional Skills:
Cultural Diversity	Empathy	Presenting
Gender Awareness	Tolerance/Respect	Public Speaking
Research		Computer Competency
		Evaluation
		Articulating Knowledge
		Cultural Competency
		Self-Awareness
		Supervision
		Critical Thinking

Table 3. Supports and Stresses of being a IV-E Student/Employee

Supports	Stresses
University Roles • Knowledge that is applicable to current practice challenges (i.e. concurrent planning) • Knowledge of research in the child welfare field and its practical application • Knowledge of evaluation process – planning objectives and outcomes • Knowledge of values-base leading to best practices	**University Roles** • Professors don't understand multiple roles of child welfare workers • Course work demands are not reasonable given time constraints • Admissions decisions not made in a timely manner, limiting planning time • Professors are not always clear about expectations and course guidelines
Agency Functioning • Development of time management skills on the job • Opportunities to make a positive contribution to the agency • Opportunity to receive peer support from other students in IV-E program • Opportunities for peer learning from students in other positions and places • Opportunities to limit or reorganize participation in agency committees	**Agency Functioning** • Lack of clarity on expectations (what time counts, etc.) for employment • Lack of acknowledgement of level of commitment this program requires • Lack of support from organization and supervisors about participating in program • Lack of willingness in the agency culture to make changes
Personal • Validation of worth of workers • Increasing commitment to field of child welfare	**Personal** • Stresses of travel time to school • Stress in juggling multiple roles of student/worker/parent, spouse or partner • Guilt of not being in office to meet job

perspective, collaborative practice, empowerment, and how bureaucracy works were identified as relevant to the role of advocacy.

"I'm interested in legislative bills that are going to affect my everyday child welfare practice….I now have the skills to look for them… thinking about that does make you plan a little bit more in a macro level…."

"I think all of the classes have focused on being strengths-based which I don't find in our jobs…it has to be a conscious effort, I mean I'm not so sure I thought much about whether our system was strengths-based…."

Respondents discussed linking their practice experiences with knowledge, values and skills in a way that makes for an immediate praxis—the merger of theory and practice (Schon, 1983). The abstractions that often elude students in the here and now of classroom education were applied directly to their employment, making for immediate, practical knowledge-building. The results are summarized in Table 2.

" …instructors took whatever you were learning and tried to force you to apply it to whatever we were doing…we have that immediate connection."

Supports and Stresses of Being an IV-E Student/Employee

As part of the focus groups, respondents were asked about how being an MSW student both supported and created stress for them as a child-welfare worker. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. Categories emerged in three areas: academic knowledge and the costs and benefits of being a student, (entitled "University"); skills and opportunities as well as challenges that impacted their function at the agency, (entitled "Agency"); and finally, the personal issues that highlighted both the costs and benefits to them as a person (entitled "Personal"). This data has been used for revisions in the administration of the program, including clarifying expectations of university, agency, and students in the partnership.

Cohort Model

Respondents commented upon the positive impact of being a member of the IV-E cohort. The cohort model segregates the IV-E students from other MSW students during their Foundation coursework (with the exception of electives, which may be taken at any point in their MSW studies and are available to all students). IV-E students are then integrated with all the other students upon entering their concentration coursework in child welfare. Bringing together workers at different levels (family case managers, supervisors, county office administrators and state administrators) as well as from different counties was perceived as a very positive experience.

"One thing I want to say that is good about this group, though, is that we are good together. And that has been a good thing about keeping us together as a cohort in just about every class....Because this group is my peer, but they're also my support."

"I'm learning a lot about counties in the position I'm in. See, I came from a very small county when I did CPS and it is a different universe for a lot of my classmates that have a

different perspective on child welfare than I did."

"...it's been helpful for me to sit in a room with case workers, and there are a couple of supervisors, and it's been really helpful to realize that they don't have that information and maybe there was some arrogance in me in thinking that everyone did know that.. that has helped me to go back to my staff and say here is why I'm on that committee...."

This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of collaborative relationships in the workplace to support child-welfare worker retention (Bednar, 2003; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Silver, Poulin, & Manning, 1997). However, this finding also highlights the need for further research that focuses on the structure and format of IV-E education, identifying the strengths and limitations of integrated vs. cohort model of education as well as the combining case managers with supervisory and administrative workers in the education process.

Commitment to Child-Welfare Practice

Another theme articulated at many points during the focus groups was the respondents' firm commitment to children and families, and public child-welfare practice. Traditional concerns about the IV-E funding have included the issue of worker retention: the fear seems to be that once workers have completed their MSW coursework, they will leave the public agency for "better" positions elsewhere (Dickinson & Perry, 2002). Contrary to this view, respondents articulated that MSW education strengthens their commitment to child welfare and to imagine career ladders within the agency. It also helped them identify areas where they may be able to make a positive contribution within the agency, which will benefit the agency itself as well as the children and families it serves.

"I have no intention of leaving state government. This is what I should be doing. And I hope that those people that, we have had some debate in our agency that if we educate people with an MSW that they'll leave the agency, and I have found that just the opposite is true."

"I've looked around the room many a time and I think about the classmates that I have and I think there's no one I would rather work for than one of these people, knowing who they are and what they have brought to child welfare historically and what I know they would do in the future based on their commitment…."

"I can't imagine doing anything other than child welfare. I mean, I still absolutely love my job. I mean, I come in here and I complain and I say some negative things, but I absolutely love my job. And I think being in this program helps me appreciate my job so much more. I may not always be in child welfare but I will be attached to child welfare I think professionally in some way."

"I don't have to do it. It's not a career move for me. It's not going to make more money for me. It's not going to give a promotion to me. Will I be a better worker because of it, or a better supervisor, or better director? Yes. I am hoping that will happen and I can give that back."

"I do think that those people who are in the MSW program will be the managers that we hire in our agency, that get noticed, that move up the chain of command and I'm hoping that they get some understanding of what it means to do this work, and that maybe they can effect positive change in the agency."

Existing research supports the relevance of this finding. In another qualitative study, Samantrai (1992) found that the MSW social workers employed by the public agency "stated a definite commitment to staying in the system to change it from within so it would be more responsive to clients" (p. 456). In two studies focusing upon the factors that impact the employment retention of child-welfare workers, Rycraft (1994) and Reagh (1994) identified factors including a sense of mission or spiritual calling, as well as some combination of personal and professional values relating to child well-being that support continued employment in public child welfare. Ellett, Ellett & Rogutt (2003) used survey data to conclude that the strongest predictor of job retention was professional commitment. Bednar (2003) concludes that "it would appear that workers most likely to remain in their child-welfare positions despite burnout and other negative factors would tend to be those who come to the work with a sense of personal and professional mission.…" (p. 10). If social work education can foster and facilitate a "steadfast and abiding dedication" (Rycraft, 1994, p. 77) for child-welfare practice that protects children and strengthens families, the likelihood for improved retention rates is increased.

Transfer of Learning

The third and most pervasive theme that emerged from the analysis is specific to the process of MSW education for the child-welfare workers, and the opportunity to provide what the learning literature has called "transfer of learning" or "transfer of training." In addition to many (in some cases more than twenty) years of employment experience and required agency training, respondents were aware that they were not just learning new information, but learning how to apply knowledge in new ways. A key part of this process involved the ability to "name" what they had been doing in their practice, as well as the ability to connect specific theory or knowledge with that practice. The ability to name the knowledge validated and built confidence in practice. Confidence is an aspect of perceived self-

efficacy, the belief that one can produce actions that influence events (Bandura, 1994). Again, evidence supports that through classroom and practicum experiences, respondents were involved in the reflection-application-reflection process known as praxis (Schon, 1983).

"It's giving a name to those processes; it's giving a name to (things) even though you kind of always were living it, you just never knew what it was."

"It's putting a name on stuff you've always done. You know that you don't do certain things, or you feel like you want to do certain things and it just validated it."

"I think it's a way of working professionally that I feel like I can speak with a little more confidence, that there is a purpose for why we're doing things the way we're doing them."

"Those two instructors that said, well how do you know it? You know, how do you convince other people? … It's not just a textbook thing. We focused on how do you know, how do we convince others that knowledge that we have?"

"So I think although I didn't learn anything overwhelmingly new, I did have to stop and think about how all those pieces fit together historically and then how are they translated, how they came into being and then how we have administered them today…So that has helped me with my job."

Research in the area of transfer of learning from social work education and other professions supports the relevance and importance of this finding. "Transfer of learning needs to be a concern to all who plan, teach, evaluate, attend, and support educational and training programs for adults" (Ottoson, 1994). Given that Curry,

Caplan & Knuppel (1994) found that only 10 to 13% of learned skills are transferred to employment, facilitation of the transfer of new skills and knowledge is a critical issue for the child-welfare sector. Agencies expend considerable time and financial resources into preparing workers, many of whom do not bring education specifically relevant to child-welfare practice to their initial employment.

An advantage of the classroom setting with sessions over a semester provide the ability to implement strategies that facilitate transfer of learning before, during, and after the educational program which are vital to the process (Ottoson, 1994). Quality educational programs should encourage faculty members to plan courses that facilitate the transfer of learning. Strategies include activities (e.g., readings, role plays, class discussions, reflection papers) that aid in transfer of knowledge to the field.

The articulation of knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge to child-welfare practice may well be critical to the supervisory process. Kadushin (2002) identifies the educational component as central to effective supervision. "The intent of educational supervision is to transform information into knowledge, knowledge into understanding, and understanding into action" (Kadushin, 2002, 150). Previous research findings indicate that the quality of supervision is an important factor in the retention of public child-welfare workers (Bednar, 2003; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992). In a study with 296 pubic child-welfare workers, Smith (2005) found that "supervisor support is significantly and positively related to job retention" (p. 164).

In addition, Gregoire, Propp & Poertner (1998) found that the quality of supervisory support in the training process of child-welfare workers had a significant impact on worker's perceived impact of training. Wehrman, Shin & Poertner (2002) state that "supervisor is key to structuring opportunities to practice new skills as well

as creating a work climate that promotes peer support for applying new learning" (p. 34). The quality of supervision has the potential to maximize the effectiveness of existing training programs, as well as increase worker retention.
Discussion

Based on the key findings of this research and the subsequent review of the literature, a conceptual model was developed. (See Figure 1.) This model seeks to integrate key findings to hypothesize the process by which social work education may increase worker retention. The fact that MSW-educated supervisors developed skills in articulating knowledge as well as the ability to facilitate praxis in child-welfare practice bodes well for their ability to provide the necessary administrative, educational and supportive supervision (Kadushin, 2002) that is requisite to support front-line public child-welfare workers.

The model focuses on the delivery of academic knowledge situated within the world of practice. The sequence of knowledge building begins with the ability to articulate knowledge, leading simultaneously to increased commitment to child-welfare work, the respect and support of colleagues in the shared learning, and expanded self-efficacy in practice. These three factors have been previously shown to have a direct influence on retention (Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005). However, the model developed here posits that these factors may also influence the ability to provide positive supervision which also leads to worker retention (Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005). Research is currently being conducted to identify whether and how clinical supervision influences the transfer of training and retention of quality front-line public child-welfare workers (Collins-Camargo & Groeber, 2005).

Implications for Social work Education
In times of cutbacks in government support for public services, it is increasingly necessary to demonstrate the effectiveness of professional social work education for public child-welfare

workers. Tracking employee recruitment and retention for IV-E education is a part of the equation for effectiveness, and that research has shown good promise. However, researchers are struggling with other means to determine and demonstrate this effectiveness. The development of relevant competencies is a step in the process; however, this calls forth questions for educators about the difference between "training" and "education." There is consensus that outcome studies are needed, but the challenges are legion as to how to accomplish this, given the fiscal constraints, combined with ethical issues and difficulty in controlling variables in a complex and ever-changing system (Chavkin & Brown, 2003). These outcome studies must be undertaken but will require extensive funding and longitudinal designs; the data will not be available immediately.

In the interim, it will be vital for IV-E partnerships to provide information to state and federal funding sources to support the continuation and expansion of the programs. This study, which sought to provide information specific to the IV-E partnership in which students were current employees of the public welfare system, provides key information about the relevance of foundational social work education to public child-welfare practice. The qualitative method gave voice to a number of issues that may well explain why social work education seems to increase employee retention, providing clues as to how social work programs may be structured, the importance of theoretical content in the areas of macro practice, the strengths perspective, issues in the development of commitment to children and families, and the primacy of teaching a process of combining theoretical and practical knowledge – an emphasis on praxis (Schon, 1971). Findings led to the development of a conceptual framework to hypothesize the relationships between and among themes identified in this research.

Based on this study, foundational social work education provides a knowledge base relevant to public child-welfare practice (prior to specific

concentration content on child welfare). This research also supports providing MSW education to public child-welfare supervisors who may then be better prepared to give educational and supportive supervision to front-line workers.

Study Limitations

It is important to identify the limitations of this study, which focused on one specific IV-E partnership and utilized qualitative methodology. Findings may not be generalized to all state situations or MSW program structures. Caution should be exercised in application of these findings in that (a) child-welfare workers already enrolled in IV-E funded education may have inherent bias in maintaining partnerships to further their education; (b) all respondents were seasoned child-welfare workers and (c) students in this study were at the beginning or mid-point in their foundation year and cannot fully synthesize the value of their MSW education. However, the research provides cogent information for universities and public child-welfare agencies related to planning and developing partnerships, given some of the consistency between these findings and existing research on university-public child-welfare partnerships. Findings point to opportunities to develop surveys for future quantitative research and utilize issues to consider curriculum development for relevancy to child-welfare practice.

Conclusions

Demands for effective public child-welfare services are growing while state and federal budgets are shrinking. Social work education and public child welfare are challenged to justify the expense of professional education for the public child-welfare workforce. Although social workers have traditionally considered child welfare as being clearly in the purview of social work education, given the deprofessionalizion of public child welfare, it does not seem that this has been the dominant public view. This research offers support for the relevance of social work education to public child-welfare practice, and it calls for continued research to highlight relevance in evaluating the effectiveness of university/public child welfare partnerships.

Appendix A. Interview Guide

What knowledge has been helpful to you in your current position in the child welfare system?

What specific skills have been helpful to you in your current position?

Have there been instances when classroom material was especially relevant to your current employment? Can you give a specific example?

What has been the impact of learning about social-work values and ethics on your current work as a child welfare worker?

In what ways have you utilized knowledge, skills and values of social work in your work as a supervisor?

In what ways has being an MSW student supported your work in child welfare?

In what ways has being an MSW student created stress as a child welfare worker?

How will the knowledge, values and skills from your MSW education impact your career as a child welfare worker?

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