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Introduction

Pennsylvania's public child welfare system employs approximately 4,000 workers in 67 county-administered children, youth, and family-serving agencies. In the Commonwealth, as well as throughout the nation, the level of educational preparation required of child welfare workers varies greatly. For example, some Pennsylvania counties require as few as 12 college-level social science credits, whereas others require a master's degree in social work (MSW) as a prerequisite for employment. Addressing this discrepancy, Breitenstein, et al (1997) maintain, "While workers with undergraduate social work degrees are reported to be better prepared for child welfare practice, fewer than 25 percent of all child welfare workers nationally receive pre-service education ... Continuing opportunities for in-service and on-the-job training is essential to meet this need" (p 14).

Pennsylvania's Title IV-E Programs have greatly expanded educational opportunities for child welfare practitioners. Funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services through Pennsylvania's Social Security Title IV-E Plan, the Department of Public Welfare, the University of Pittsburgh, and six other colleges/universities with graduate social work programs have formed a statewide consortium to offer a specialized, graduate-level, child welfare curriculum. To date, 389 child welfare workers have enrolled in the curriculum, and 255 have completed the requirements for

their MSW.

While child welfare training is available through the existing Title IV-E curriculum, accessibility to training sites and other issues have prevented some workers from utilizing this training. It is important to note that 18 of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania do not participate in these educational opportunities for child welfare workers. In addition, many smaller county agencies that employ as few as three staff (Breitenstein, et al, 1997) have difficulty granting educational leaves. These and other agencies simply cannot afford to provide services in the absence of vital staff people, even for a day. And though travel reimbursements are available, staff with family and other personal and/or professional obligations may find it exceedingly difficult to travel to a university setting to receive training.

Prospective students—child welfare practitioners who desire to upgrade their knowledge and skills—with limited access to these educational/training facilities may benefit from nontraditional methods of course delivery (Petracchi & Morgenbesser, 1995). Both emerging and existing technologies provide the potential to expand educational opportunities to these students.

Review of the Literature

Distance education refers to instruction that occurs when students are located some geographic distance from the instructor/trainer (as opposed to traditional methods of face-to-face instruction, where both student and instructor are at the same site). Distance education is a historical successor to correspondence study, refined by the field of adult education (Lehman, 1991). Distance learning is the delivery of educational material via electronic media². The virtual explosion of telecommunication technology facilitates the delivery of competent curriculum to students utilizing a variety of media. Advances in this technology have also made dis-

¹ Internal funding was secured from the University of Pittsburgh's Central Development Research Fund to support administration of this survey. The author gratefully acknowledges the efforts of Christine Smith, MSW, whose work was essential to the success of this project.

² Therefore, distance learning is just one form of distance education.

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tance learning more versatile and cost-effective. Multimedia technology has the potential to be used for a wide range of educational applications. Computers, telephone lines, fax machines, the Internet and email, satellite networks, videocassette recorders (VCRs), as well as one- and two-way broadcasts, are available to deliver educational curriculum to distant students.

The literature demonstrates that social work education is making an increasing investment in teaching with information technology. Both graduate and undergraduate students have benefited from a core curriculum infused with distance learning components. However, the empirical literature addressing distance learning opportunities for child welfare workers is limited, with only three articles discussing course delivery to these potential students.

Rooney and Bibus' (1995) study compared student outcomes in a graduate course titled, "Child Welfare Work with Involuntary Clients." Eighteen students attended the course on-campus, while 49 students participated in the course at five remote sites throughout the state. These students were linked to the instructor through a one-way television monitor, allowing students to see the instructor and communicate via telephone. The results of an assessment of student experiences indicated that televised instruction was effective in promoting student learning, though students at the five off-campus sites rated the training as slightly less useful than the on-campus students.

Petracchi and Morgenbesser (1995) conducted an evaluation of student midterm and final exam grades in a course on alcohol and other drug abuse. The course was open to students at the University of Wisconsin as well as to human service workers from the community. One group of students received traditional, face-to-face instruction (N=214), while the other group received televised videotaped instruction of the same course (N=248). Students in both groups improved their grades from midterm to final exams; however, statistically significant differences were found in the final grades

of the two groups of students. That is, the students taught via televised videotapes performed better than those receiving live instruction.

More recently, Hollister and McGee (2000) evaluated the utilization of interactive television (ITV) for delivering a graduate course on the linkage between substance abuse and child welfare. This study evaluated five offerings of the course; three conducted in the traditional in-person, on-campus format; and two delivered via ITV to three sites, one on-campus and two at distant sites in the state. In their evaluation, the authors report that no statistically significant differences were found between students in the traditional course and those enrolled in the course delivered via ITV. Study measures included: instructor-student communication, instructor assessment of student performance, comparability of the ITV course with the course delivered in the traditional in-person format, student performance, course grades, and overall effectiveness of the course to student learning. Hollister and McGee assert these results are encouraging because they suggest, "... for this course, ITV delivery compromised neither the quality of instructor-student communication nor the amount students learned, and [it] greatly increased access to social work education for distant audiences" (p. 426).

The Petracchi and Morgenbesser (1995) study evaluated televised and videotaped instruction, the Rooney and Bibus (1995) study assessed one-way broadcast technology, while the Hollister and McGee (2000) study examined ITV as the primary method of course delivery. Together, these studies suggest that numerous media can be employed to facilitate distance learning, from videotapes to ITV technology, without compromising student learning outcomes. Many child welfare agencies may have technology onsite that could be incorporated into a viable distance learning strategy. The virtual explosion of these cost-effective multimedia technologies is encouraging.

Given the increasing availability of multimedia technologies in general, an assessment of the techno-

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logical capacity of child welfare agencies in the state was undertaken to determine if it would be possible to provide distance learning opportunities onsite to Pennsylvania's public child welfare workers.

Methodology

Sample recruitment

This study examined the potential for utilizing multimedia to deliver distance learning to Pennsylvania's 67 public child welfare agencies by assessing the technological capacity of each site (i.e., the presence and forms of available technology), as well as administrative attitudes toward distance learning. The directors of the 67 county children, youth, and family-serving agencies in Pennsylvania were contacted by mail to participate in the study. Follow-up telephone calls were made to those directors who failed to respond (via return mail) to the initial request.

Data collection & analysis

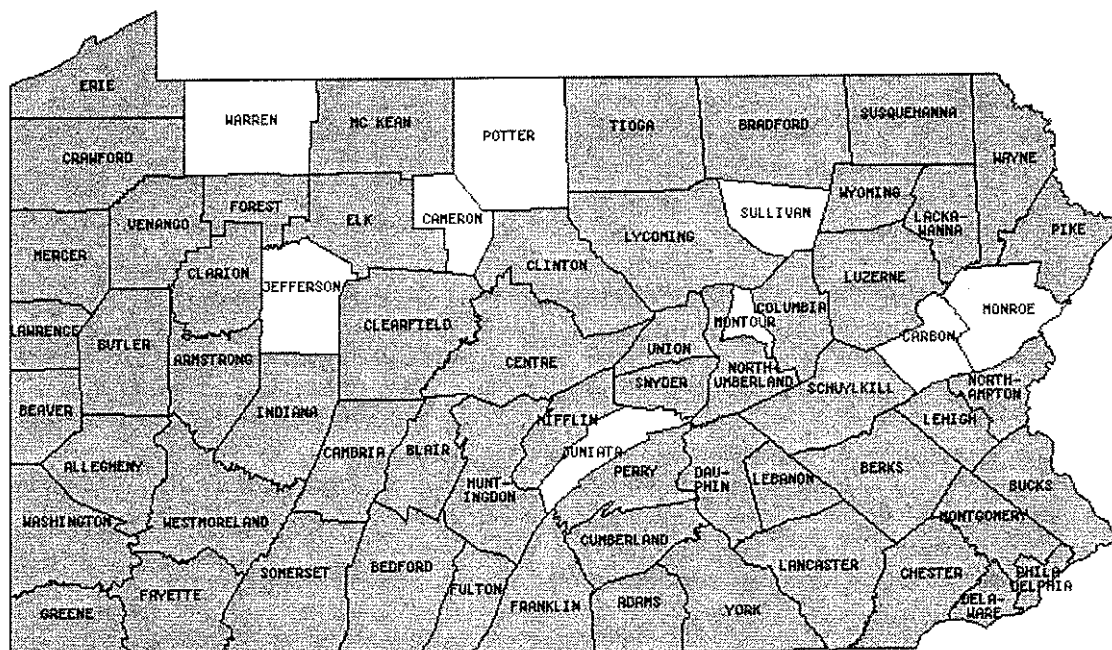
A telephone survey was administered to participating agency directors by an experienced, graduate student interviewer. The survey was intended to elicit attitudes toward distance learning and included a technology inventory. Completed surveys were coded and analyzed using standard descriptive statistics. Univariate and bivariate statistical analyses were also used. Variables were primarily dichotomous, although a variety of six point Likert-type scales were utilized to achieve a greater variance. T-tests, chi-square, correlations, and one-way analyses of variance, where appropriate, were used in the analysis of findings. Open-ended items were subject to content analysis.

Results

As indicated in Figure 1, 87 percent (N=58) of the county public child welfare agencies in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania participated in the

Figure 1. Pennsylvania County Outline Map

Respondent Counties (N=58)



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study. Of the counties not currently participating in Title IV-E training, 66 percent (N=12) participated in the survey. Over half of all respondents were female (52 percent, N=30), and two-thirds of those interviewed were agency directors (66 percent, N=38). Sixteen percent (N=9) of respondents identified themselves as assistant/deputy directors or administrators, asked to participate in the survey by their directors. The remaining 14 percent of respondents (N=8) were supervisors, who were also asked by their respective director to complete the survey. Thirty respondents (52 percent) had a graduate degree, and 47 percent (N=27) completed an undergraduate degree. One respondent was a community college graduate.

Respondents were asked a question about their knowledge of distance learning. Using a nine point, Likert-type scale, respondents were asked to rate their knowledge. Responses ranged from (1), "Before I participated in this survey, I hadn't heard of distance learning" to (9), "I know a lot about distance learning." Over two-thirds of the respondents' (73 percent, N=39) indicated they would describe themselves as being familiar with distance learning (mean score 4.83). There were no statistically significant differences in responses to this question with regard to gender or educational background.

Respondents were then read the following statement:

"Distance education refers to instruction that occurs when students are located some geographic distance from the instructor/trainer (as opposed to traditional methods of in-person instruction which occur when the instructor is physically present at the teaching site). Distance learning is the delivery of educational material utilizing electronic media. The technological advances of the last decade have made distance learning more versatile and cost-effective, so that it can be used for a wide range of educational applications. So much so, we currently have the potential to utilize telephone lines, the

fax, mail, INTERNET, World Wide Web, satellite networks, videocassette recorders (VCRs) as well computers and both one- and two-way broadcasts via cable to deliver courses to distant students."

Following this statement, respondents were queried with a series of eight, six point, Likert-scaled questions. For these eight questions, a response of (1) indicated, "I definitely disagree with this statement," while (6) indicated, "I definitely agree with this statement." Seventy-nine percent (N=46, mean score 4.2) of survey respondents agreed they had no difficulty understanding how distance learning works. Only five percent (N=3, mean score 1.88) felt they had difficulty understanding how distance learning works (no statistically significant differences by gender or education were found in response to this question). Thirty-five percent (N=20, mean score 3.05) did not expect distance learning to become a necessity in their daily lives, though 72 percent of the respondents (N=42, mean score 4.12) felt distance learning could be infused within their professional lives (i.e., was a good fit).

More than 80 percent of the survey respondents (N=50, mean score 4.88) felt distance learning would save their agency money. Seventy-eight percent (N=45, mean score 4.17) felt their agency could afford to implement distance learning even if it did not work out. The same percentage also believed that distance learning would be cost-efficient, "worth every cent it would cost to implement," though 17 percent (N=10, mean score 2.81) felt the cost to implement distance learning would be prohibitive for their agency. When these variables were re-coded and cross tabulated, results indicated that 91 percent of the respondents (N=54) who felt distance learning was cost-efficient also felt that their agency could afford to absorb the cost of implementation if distance learning did not work out.

Respondents were also asked to identify their greatest fear in introducing a new technology for

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distance learning into their agency. A number of themes emerged in response to this question. Almost a third (29 percent, N=17) of those surveyed reported no fears or concerns about introducing technology into their agency. Thirty-one percent (N=18) of survey respondents feared staff resistance to new technology. More specifically, 9 percent (N=5) thought staff resistance would stem from difficulties learning to utilize the new technology, while 12 percent (N=7) were concerned with their staff's reluctance to change. Five percent (N=3) were particularly concerned about their "older" employees resisting the utilization of new technology for distance learning.

Nearly 20 percent (N=12) of the survey respondents questioned their agency's ability to fully and effectively implement new technology. Common themes centered around: a lack of expertise and knowledge to utilize technology (N=5), concerns about receiving proper training in the appropriate ways to utilize technology (N=4), and concerns about a lack of ongoing technical assistance (3 percent, N=2) once a new technology was introduced. Approximately 5 percent (N=3) of survey respondents were also concerned that the introduction of new technology would threaten confidentiality, be time consuming, and substitute an impersonal interaction for the personal approach found in traditional educational settings.

Table I delineates the types of information technologies (multimedia and other) that survey respondents indicated were available in their agencies:

Interestingly, though only eight agencies have the ability to receive satellite feeds and six have video conferencing capabilities, 53 percent (N=31) of survey respondents indicated their agencies could receive satellite feeds from one of Pennsylvania State University Extension Offices. Fifty-two percent (N=30) of survey respondents indicated they could receive satellite feeds from other agencies nearby, and 21 percent (N=12) could receive them through their local community college.

Survey respondents were then asked, "Instead of

sending your workers to a university or college to learn about child welfare, what would you think of broadcasting training directly to your workers in the agency?" Two-thirds (65.5 percent, N=38) indicated they approved of broadcasting training directly to the agency instead of sending their workers to a university or college to learn about child welfare. These respondents felt that eliminating the need for travel to a university or college would save time (43 percent, N=25) and money (41 percent, N=24).

Table I. Technology Presence in Pennsylvania Public Child Welfare Agencies

<i>N=58 Respondents</i>	
Technology	Percent Frequency
Call Waiting Service	83% (N=48)
Cordless Telephone	81% (N=47)
Camcorder/video Camera	84% (N=49)
Telephone Answering Machine	45% (N=26)
Fax Machine	98% (N=57)
Voice Mail	59% (N=34)
Personal Computers for Word Processing	100% (N=58)
Personal Computers for Electronic Mail & Talking with Others Not at the Agency (e.g., Internet)	79% (N=46)
Internet Port	91% (N=53)
TV Sets to Show Broadcast Programs	97% (N=56)
Video Cassette Recorders (Videotape Recorders/ VCRs)	98% (N=57)
Overhead Projectors	66% (N=38)
On-line Information Services	31% (N=18)
Slide Projectors	50% (N=29)
Filmstrip Projectors	22% (N=13)
Opaque Projectors	9% (N=5)
Calculators	98% (N=57)
CD ROM Players	90% (N=52)
Audio Cassette Players	91% (N=53)
Satellite Feed Capabilities	14% (N= 8)
Video Conferencing Capabilities	10% (N= 6)
Computer Printers	100% (N=58)

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Respondents also felt this onsite training through broadcasting would eliminate worker absenteeism and related agency disruptions that tend to result from off-site training (31 percent, N=18). Moreover, 22 percent of survey respondents (N=13) felt that broadcasting would enable agencies to train more workers and would enhance the quality of education public welfare workers receive (17 percent, N=10). Finally, 17 percent (N=10) of the respondents felt onsite training would be beneficial to agencies that are a considerable distance from a university or college setting, and to those staff with families (N=2).

Despite these positive responses, 28 percent (N=16) of the survey respondents were ambivalent about onsite distance learning. Twelve percent (N=7) would approve of broadcasting training into agencies only under certain conditions, or as long as the broadcasts were not the sole method of instruction. Only seven percent of respondents preferred the university or college setting to broadcasted training onsite. These respondents felt that onsite training would not be as productive as face-to-face instruction, would lack a personal touch, and would prevent workers from a needed opportunity to remove themselves, physically, from their agency for new learning experiences. These respondents felt agency environments are not conducive to learning experiences.

Discussion

Overall, the survey respondents were very positive about the potential for utilization of multimedia technology to deliver distance learning training to child welfare workers in their agencies. Respondents were enthusiastic about the time and money that distance learning could save their agencies. As a result of the massive proliferation of information technology, agencies can now offer their staff distance education onsite. The emergence of new distance learning technologies is especially promising for agencies that found off-site continuing education and training to be prohibitive.

With respect to the ambivalence toward distance learning noted by some respondents, it is recommended that an incremental approach be pursued. Distance education should first be explored within agencies that expressed enthusiasm for the onsite training. After documenting the experiences and outcomes of public child welfare workers in these settings, the findings could be shared with the other agencies. This can help reduce feelings of ambivalence by identifying them as such ("naming it and claiming it" as social work clinicians' say) and providing meaningful feedback.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, ITV (also known as compressed video, interactive video, or video conferencing) is currently the most widely used technology for the delivery of distance education courses (American Council on Education, 1997). Results from the technology inventory in this survey indicate that at least half of the respondent counties had either video conferencing capabilities or a satellite feed available onsite or at a nearby university or college. Because of the administrative enthusiasm for utilizing broadcast technology coupled with the empirical evidence of Rooney and Bibus (1995), Petracchi and Morgenbesser (1995), and Hollister and McGee (2000), ITV emerges as a viable means for transferring valuable knowledge and skills to public child welfare workers. Schools of social work offering child welfare training should explore opportunities to work with these county agencies.

Moreover, the technology inventory suggests that two additional modes of instructional delivery should be pursued. First, 53 (91 percent) of the survey respondents indicated their agencies were equipped with Internet ports. Given this resource, web-based course delivery is clearly an option for the onsite delivery of distance education to these public child welfare workers. Further, 100 percent of the survey respondents indicated they had personal computers available in their agencies, and 90 percent (N=52) are equipped with CD ROM players. Courses contained on CD ROM may also prove

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to be a fruitful option for the distance education of these public child welfare workers.

The results of this study suggest that, within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the field of public child welfare is receptive to the use of multimedia technology to deliver distance education courses onsite, directly into the human service agencies where public child welfare workers are in need of training. The agencies represented in this study support this method of instruction and have multimedia technologies available that would facilitate the onsite delivery of child welfare training.

Across the nation, the training requirements for child welfare workers are increasing. Survey respondents also indicate increasing acceptance of utilizing information technologies to deliver training curriculum. Other states can learn a great deal from the impressions and experiences of child welfare workers in the Commonwealth of

Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania is a state which contains urban centers as well as extensive geographic areas with no accessible social work programs. Distance learning provides an effective and efficient alternative to traditional child welfare training in these locales.

Future studies should examine the perceptions of frontline staff (those who will receive the distance learning training) to see if they are consistent with those opinions expressed by their administrative officers. Historically, the introduction of technology into our public child welfare agencies has been viewed as a means to monitor workers and enhance case management practice. However, existing information technology may provide an opportunity to better train our county public child welfare workers, ultimately enhancing the quality of services delivered to our children.

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