



University/Child Welfare Agency Partnerships: Building a Bridge Between the Ivory Tower and the State Office Building

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>University/Child Welfare Agency Partnerships: Building a Bridge Between the Ivory Tower and the State Office Building</i>
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Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol. 9 No. 2</i>
Manuscript ID:	<i>92024</i>
Page Number:	<i>24</i>
Year:	<i>2006</i>

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

University/Child Welfare Agency Partnerships: Building a Bridge Between the Ivory Tower and the State Office Building

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Introduction

Like all professions, social work carries with it the obligation to consistently improve its practice in order to insure the best possible outcomes for the people it serves and for the society from which it gains its auspices. Thus, social work relies upon one of its core components, professional education, to reinvigorate its ranks through a constant flow of newly educated workers that complete rigorous and relevant courses of study; and through ongoing, meaningful exchanges between and among social workers who must remain current relative to knowledge transfer and faculty and students who must be grounded in the real world of applied work. All professions, including medicine, nursing, law and social work, maintain vitality because they are in a constant state of interaction between the university and the "real world" of practice.

The job becomes more difficult when schools of social work and large public systems such as child welfare determine to create this dynamic. Not only are the stakes high because the well being of vulnerable children and their families are in the balance, but also because there exist built in barriers that each system, whether education or public child welfare, must overcome in order to do their respective duties. The focus of this paper is to describe and explain how social work education i.e. the "Ivory Tower" and public child welfare, "the State Office Building" can thrive and, in fact, reach each of its complementary purposes through collaboration and partnerships. Child welfare's public mandate is to ensure the safety, well-being and permanency of all children (United States General Accounting Office, 2004). Indeed, social work's dual moral purpose to promote and enhance personhood, concurrent with creating and replenishing the just and good community (Albers, 2000) takes

into account how social work's history, its focus on those who are most vulnerable and its tradition of educating people to becoming child welfare social workers culminates in the public and social necessity that, at least one profession in this society, has at its core the intention to improve the lives of children and their families.

Social work, child welfare and society

The profession of social work is most identified with child welfare services. In fact, while social work is found in a host of institutional and community settings from hospitals to schools to prisons to community organizing settings, the one field that social work claims exclusively is child welfare (Popple and Vecchiolla, p. 47, 2007). The late nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries marked the beginning of professional social work with the founding of the New York School of Social Work, later Columbia University School of Social Work and the University of Chicago's School of Social Administration. Linked to these beginnings, The Child Welfare League of America was founded in 1921 after the Children's Bureau, the children's arm of the Department of Commerce and Labor, was instituted in 1912. For many years, at least until the eighties, social work professionals dominated the work of the Children's Bureau (Popple et. al., 2007). These beginnings all mark a continuous engagement between child welfare and the profession of social work.

While one could term the period between the twenties and sixties as somewhat dormant social work indeed did not sever its ties with child welfare, but it took the 1962 Children's Bureau conference to draft new child welfare legislation that affected every political jurisdiction and in fact emphasized underserved rural areas (Popple et. al.,

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2007). Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect by a host of professionals serving children became a reality in 1967 and with the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974) that mandated child protective services in all fifty states the workforce needs outstripped social work education's supply of trained workers. The presence of social work began diminished significantly in child welfare (Downs et. al., 2004).

Criticism has reigned on the profession for "abandoning" child welfare, but the extent to which the profession was simply overwhelmed rather than intentionally forsaking child welfare is an alternative view. What we do know is that recent trends in social work education point to a resurgence in interest in child welfare. Graduate programs in social work are required to offer advanced concentrations, and family and children's services, direct practice, family-centered practice are among the concentrations that aim to prepare graduates for work in child welfare. In addition, undergraduate programs in social work have also shown a growing interest in preparing its graduates for generalist practice in child welfare.

Statewide initiatives defined through collaborations and partnerships between schools of social work and public child welfare include the California Social Work Education Consortium, the Utah Partnership and the University Consortium in Kentucky, all examples of social work education's resurging interest and commitment to child welfare and public child welfare's openness to work with higher education. In addition, the extensive use of Title IV-E and Title IV-B federal funding that began in 1990 (Zlotnik, 2003) to support the professional education of employees in public child welfare demonstrates social work education's renewed commitment to child welfare. Individuals from public agencies and universities working in partnership have developed a network for information-sharing, which meets annually at the Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting and operates a listserv and website regarding child welfare/university partnerships (see www.uky.edu/SocialWork/cswe).

Over time and with the increasing presence of not only students but faculty from schools of social work who conduct collaborative research in public child welfare such as those studies discussed throughout this Special Issue, social work has the opportunity to again become the central profession in the creation, implementation and evaluation of child welfare services in America.

All this said, social work has found itself a profession under siege, fighting for its place in higher education, losing ground in attracting students and competing with other professions that have already adopted a scientific nose for doing their business and have garnished considerable federal funding for research. Contrast medicine and nursing to social work in terms of its research and scientific agenda and social work finds itself wanting (Hoffman, 2004; 2006).

Thus, social work's interest in applying science and evidence to child welfare practice is not only requisite for the future of the profession, but child welfare, a field that has been guided more by legislation than by science, needs to find its way forward and include evidence in every aspect of child welfare practice. This can happen only through the continued collaboration between social work education and public child welfare practice — the Ivory Tower to the State Office Building.

Child welfare and science

Specifically, social work education is assessing its place in the academy including the expectation that the research that is required of social work faculty will improve the lives of people and will build a better, more just society (Allen-Meares, 2006) Thus, the improvement of child welfare services and policy through the use of science, technology and technology transfer becomes an additional and incontrovertibly important aspect social work education's interaction with public child welfare.

With the implementation of the Adoption and Child Welfare Assistance Act of 1980 and the passage of the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997, legislation that takes into account scientific

findings about brain functioning and the irreversible effect that harsh circumstances including violence, substance abuse, inadequate diets and exposure to a host of toxic elements in the social environment of young children can have on cognitive, physical and emotional development, the world of child welfare practice forever changed (Poppo et al., 2007). That is, other than the findings first by a social worker and later verified by radiologists, that the patterned, repeated physical injury to children in hospital settings was not the result of repeated "accidents," but represented what was then referred to as the "Battered Child Syndrome," (Kempe et al, 1962) has science so deeply impacted the public child welfare system in this country and around the world.

What is most rigorous about this recent legislation is the time an abused or neglected child may remain in a "stopgap" state, that is in out-of-home or kinship care, while a permanent plan for the child is developed, is limited to 15 of the last 22 months the child is in out of home care (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2004). That is an exceedingly long period in the life of a child, particularly young children because brain functioning, affected by separation and loss, is deeply and some argue intractably set. However, it is a short time when basic changes in family functioning are expected, that is, when life long conditions must be altered or when treatment and intervention options for parents and families where abuse has taken place are costly and sometimes unavailable and nearly always untested for their efficacy. Couple issues of treatment efficacy with the slow pace of court proceedings along with the public's demand to demonstrate accountability in its use of resources, the need to invoke science (i.e. evidence) into its work becomes even more significant (McGowan and Walsh, 2000; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2004). Thus, the moral and professional responsibility upon the profession of social work requires that the best treatment protocols be found and that the best administrative, legal and practical outcomes for children be assured. Further, that all be applied

sooner, rather than later, gives immediacy to restore social work's great calling: public child welfare and underscores the important role higher education in social work must play.

The history of using science to inform practice is well-grounded in medicine and nursing as well as other health profession, including public health. One cannot make the same claim about social work. In fact, social work's birth outside the academy, its emphasis in its early training on practical skills and a reliance on practice wisdom coupled with its adherence to narrow theoretical constructs that include not only a limited view of what it means to be human, but a very complicated, untested and expensive way to induce change in people has resulted in science and evidence being rather peripheral and, if present, certainly not applied to the dynamic and thorny field of child welfare. To put it another way, social work's intellectual history, particularly in "casework" was dominated by psychodynamic treatment and its applicability to child welfare has always been problematic. In addition, social work's history using, in Gambrill's term, "authority based knowledge" has had the unsettling effect of discouraging inquiry, hypothesis testing and questioning (2001). In its place, social work has too often relied on ideology above science and policy mandates or administrative rules rather than moral reasoning. Such misplaced dependence is no longer possible because without social work's wholehearted use of evidence based practice based on the best science available, too many bad decisions that affect the valuable lives of children will be made.

Defining and carrying out evidence based practice

In uncomplicated terms, evidence based practice is simply the use of the best assessment and intervention protocols available, those that have been tested empirically and can be effectively used with the population, the family or the individual person with whom the social worker is engaged (O'Hare, 2005). Whether the assessment and intervention must be shown to be "effective" or "efficacious" or

both is certainly under discussion by scholars in the field (Gambrill, 2001), however, that the use of knowledge and research findings to guide practice is generally agreed upon (O'Hare, 2005).

Given the limited evidence base, and tremendous need in child welfare (Dawson & Berry, 2002; MacDonald, 1998) it should be noted that there is a wide range of types of evidence needed which provide opportunities for faculty with varying research interest. In addition to enhancing practice techniques with families, there is a need for enhancing frontline supervision to promote evidence based practice (Randall, Cowley & Tomlinson, 2000). The supervision projects described in this Issue and elsewhere (see Collins-Camargo & Groeber, 2003; and Collins-Camargo, in press) provide good examples of university/agency partnerships of this sort. There is an need for research in building of learning organizational cultures (Crisp, Swisson & Duckett, 2000), and management techniques (Preston, 2004). Finally, there are opportunities for developing knowledge regarding policy development (Cannon & Kilburn, 2003).

In order to carry out evidence based practice whether through the application of previous outcome research that has produced validated intervention protocols or by the ongoing process of systematically evaluating the process of practice through monitoring and feedback, practitioners must have acquired a mindset that is open to new ideas, one that values questioning and is critical of incomplete or inapplicable findings, and one that is guided by ethics and ethical conduct (O'Hare 2005). In turn, organizations where evidence based practice is carried out must also demonstrate that mindset. Thus, in order to carry out evidence based practice, social work education must demonstrate an emphasis in its programs on research, research integrity and ethics and public child welfare must assure that the practice environment is open and receptive to questioning. That is, the child welfare agencies and the system in which they are embedded must become learning organizations and social work education programs must adhere to the high-

est standards of inquiry and ethical conduct. All these attributes must be part and parcel of professional education in social work and public child welfare and are the defining elements of their meaningful collaboration.

Growing opportunities for collaborative research in child welfare

Creating the environment in which research can take place and supporting faculty and students working in tandem with practitioners in the field is only the first step in assuring that evidence based practice can be adopted in child welfare. The next step is ensure that the funding necessary to support solid research is available.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that child welfare research is not nearly as developed as research in health related areas such as mental health and substance abuse. In fact, a perusal of the Administration for Children and Families website (see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/>), found only eight sponsored research projects listed that have to do with "abuse, neglect, adoption and foster care." (Administration for Children and Families, 2006). Nonetheless, there does appear to be a growing interest in research on the part of the Children's Bureau and such projects as Quality Improvement Centers, aimed at improving the practice of child welfare and outcomes for children and families, and the interest of foundations such as Annie E. Casey Foundation. Federally funded and large foundation initiatives provide the opportunity for a national audience for research. This is, in fact, the third professional journal issue dedicated to the work of the Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center's supervision research, which is notable.

In addition, schools of social work throughout the country are collaborating with their state and local agencies to address questions that research poses about child welfare practice and outcomes. The "return" to child welfare of academic social work with its mandate to carry out research that will improve the lives of the people it serves offers real

hope, but there is no doubt that the research that does take place and must continue to grow and flourish is deeply tied to collaborations and partnerships.

**Child welfare agencies as learning laboratories
—beyond Title IV-E Training**

Clearly, the availability of Title IV-E funding for training and education of public child welfare staff — and the benefits of involving universities in delivery — has done much to promote the engagement of public agencies and university social work programs (Zlotnick, 2003). This has led to a majority of states providing child welfare education through this sort of partnership (Zlotnick & Cornelius, 2000). The field has moved from conceptualizing the impact of these programs to evaluating their effectiveness in promoting knowledge enhancement, worker satisfaction and retention (Schoen, Goodson, King & Phillips, 2001; Jones & Okamura, 2000; Scannapieco, Faulkner & Connell, 1999). This development holds a double benefit to both agencies and universities — improved practitioner competency, and research into the effectiveness of educational and knowledge transfer programs of import.

Child welfare agencies, however, offer much greater promise for universities than simply the opportunity to provide university training programs. The key to a true partnership that benefits both at a maximum level is through the transformation of child welfare agencies into learning organizations. A learning organization, as described by management theorist Peter Senge (1990), involves five disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. Beyond these characteristics which speak to the attributes of people in an organization, Cowley (1995) emphasized the importance of a learning organization approach in agencies that are experiencing rapid and multidimensional change, arguably a characteristic of public child welfare systems. Without this approach, the rapid change in child welfare is often misdirected and short-lived. This may be part of the reason that the term “initia-

tive fatigue” is more frequently being used in child welfare — agencies are quick to jump to roll out multiple initiatives without examining their potential for addressing identified needs, their conceptual grounding or evaluating their effectiveness.

Unfortunately, social work research has not explored the concept of the learning organization to the extent one would expect (Gould 2000). Gould went on to identify the importance of several factors including “the primacy of teamwork in the process of learning, the need to reduce implicit epistemological hierarchies which downgrade practitioner knowledge; “and the incorporation of evaluative inquiry within organizational processes.” (2000; p. 585). Universities are natural partners for child welfare agencies as they emphasize, by definition, these factors and can contribute, through the development of a true partnership, advances that can assist the child welfare agency adopt a learning environment. As noted by DeVilbis and Leonard (2000), such a partnership is inherent in the development of a learning organization.

This process involves the organization looking inward and challenging its own thinking in striving toward better practice (Senge, 1999). This can be competently facilitated through engagement of the university, which brings with it a command of the professional literature and expertise in facilitating an atmosphere of inquiry. Schein (1985) reminds us that organizational culture can only be changed when the implicit values and assumptions are discussed openly and confronted. If a child welfare organization is to promote outcomes-based practice, it must first confront the fact that traditional practice has not been outcome focused, and engage in a cultural and philosophical shift.

Most public child welfare bureaucracies do not currently have the internal structures and processes to easily engage in organizational learning (Cohen & Austin, 1994), which these authors define as

... the process through which an organization continuously improves its performance over time, and through experience. The learning process is interactive and purposeful, not

simply the receiving of information or ideals from a central source. Learning takes place as the parts of an organization struggle to make sense of current practices or conditions that are considered problematic, and to invent more effective practices (Cohen and Austin, 1994, p. 13).

It is notable that these authors made their compelling argument twelve years ago, yet the child welfare environment they described as needing transformation is largely unchanged.

Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect this level of change of the public agency, without the support and assistance of others such as universities. As bureaucracies, child welfare agencies are structured in such a way to resist change and promote uniformity. The projects testing clinical supervision in the frontline child welfare agencies described in the in this Special Issue were implemented collaboratively through university/child welfare partnerships, and involved the development of learning laboratories where innovative strategies of supervisory practice were collaboratively tested, with the goal of working to develop an organizational environment where learning can and does occur. Their struggles in promoting these innovations (see Collis-Camargo & Groeber, 2003; and, Collins-Camargo, in press) illustrate some of the barriers universities and agencies may face in working toward implementing this sort of partnership, but their successes as described throughout this Issue are a testament to the possibility that such efforts offer.

Another aspect of the learning organization is the examination, interpretation and application of empirically supported knowledge in the field. Learning to use both theoretical and empirical knowledge appears to enhance effective decision making in child welfare (Drury-Hudson, 1999). In addition, preparing students for child welfare who are grounded in research can only serve to enhance the learning organization.

The evidence base is beginning to build in child welfare. For example, Rossi, Schuerman and Budde (1999) found that inconsistencies in casework decisions were not predicted by case characteristics,

and that there was a wide variation in decision-making by CPS workers and experts, although they agreed conceptually on what characteristics are important in decision-making. DePanfilis and Zuravin (2001) examined service-related variables to the recurrence of maltreatment, finding that only attendance at services was a predictor. Dawson and Berry (2002) reviewed existing research identifying effective approaches to engaging families in child welfare, which has been shown to contribute to positive case outcomes. In research they reviewed, it was revealed that worker behaviors have a greater impact on outcomes than caseworker characteristics and qualities. Studies such as these have the potential to drive practice decisions, but only if practitioners are aware of them, and agencies adjust policy based on the evidence available.

However, Bednar (2003) reminds us that even in areas where there is a great deal known, such as necessary factors for creating satisfying organizational climates in child welfare, this knowledge has largely not been applied. Frontline child welfare staff is unlikely to regularly read scholarly journals — not because of a lack of interest, but due to the pace of the workload, and the inaccessibility of useful literature to the public employees. The university's role in reversing these trends is two fold: first in packaging research findings in a format that is easily accessible to and useable by practitioners, and in collaborating with agency administrators in strategically examining how to revise policy and practice in light of knowledge gained.

Field education

Though Valentine (2004) reports a widening gap between academia and the practice community social work literature recognizes that developing competent practitioners through improved field education would benefit from a more collaborative approach between university and placement agencies; creation of alternative models of supervision; and the need for greater integration of class and field (Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Jarman-Rohde & McFall, 1997). Succinctly stated,

The practicum is the linchpin of social work education, where theory and practice might be linked, where some measure of integration can take place. The classroom offers instruction in the theoretical knowledge, the ideology, and the various intellectual systems that shape the firm foundations of practice. The field represents the verifiable and dynamic world of practice (Goldstein, 2001, p. 6).

Social work education depends upon the field, and the public child welfare agency is obviously an important placement resource. It is a major employer of social work practitioners who can act as field instructors. In turn the child welfare agency from benefits the supply of new workers who have already had some orientation to this specialized field of practice. Further, most social work practitioners must interact with the public child welfare system in some way. Social work programs would do well to examine how even students with no plan to practice in child welfare can have learning experiences with this system so that the entire field of human services may benefit.

Professional education of practitioners

Field education of students without prior child welfare experience is certainly not the only area in which planful educational programming takes place. Child welfare agencies are faced with a need for professional development of their staff and may do so through specialized professional development programs that provide MSW education for child welfare practitioners (Zlotnick, 2001). In fact, field education can be particularly challenging when the student is an experienced practitioner. How can graduate programs make field a meaningful learning experience for students who are accomplished practitioners? These students already have a foundation of knowledge and skills that sometimes need to be built upon, and in other cases may need to be unlearned. The literature includes examples of creative programs designed to provide relevant new learning for experienced child welfare workers involved in

graduate education while filling an identified need for the public agency (e.g. Young, 1994; Walters & Young, 1999).

Agency in-service training systems, many of which are administrated in collaboration with universities, are similarly challenged. The failure of traditional professional development and training models to meet the needs of organizations has been documented (Hartley, 2000). Holton and Baldwin (2000) estimated that only 10% of what is learned in training is actually used in the field. Studies have found trainees' transfer of learning was significantly impacted by their perception of the work unit's organizational culture and the relevance of the information to their reality (Austin, et. al., 2006; Awoniyi, Griego & Morgan, 2002; Seyler et. al., 1998; Tracey, Tannenbaum & Kavanagh, 1995). Training programs must move from traditional "stand and deliver" methods, and find ways to promote learning reinforcement in the field, such as those described elsewhere in this Issue. The university/agency partnership holds great promise in finding creative ways to promote learning transfer into the field such as mentoring and supervisory reinforcement, feedback loops, and post-training follow up and reporting on application of knowledge and skills. The agency's buy-in is critical, so that what is being taught is reinforced in agency policy, data collection systems, and performance evaluation.

One study determined that it takes approximately two years for new child welfare workers to obtain the necessary knowledge, skills and values to work independently (Ellett & Millar, 2001). Pre- and in-service training in this field is typically provided during the first six months of employment (Midgley, et. al., 1994) but of equal importance is that professionals must obtain "tacit knowledge," or that which is "difficult to see and express, personal, and involves perception, intuition, and foresight" (Collis & Winnips, 2002, p. 134) to practice effectively. Schon (1990) promoted practitioners using reflection-in-action: "thinking what they are doing while they are doing it" (Schön, 1990, p. xi). This process requires facilitation by a mentor, supervisor or coach.

Understanding the tremendous need for organizational learning in their staff, child welfare agencies must strengthen four capabilities: diagnosis/problem definition and questioning practice realities; invention or challenging the status quo; the ability to test ideas in practice; and generalization (Cohen & Austin, 1994). The work unit can function as a learning laboratory in which this can occur. Professional trainers have the opportunity to move from classroom instruction into a more strategic role of transforming the organizational culture, and integrating both incidental and intentional learning when acting within the context of a learning organization (Bartell, 2001). With the support and resources of the university, this process can be grounded in theory and an empirical base.

Transforming the organizational culture sounds promising, but how can child welfare agencies achieve this considering the workload frontline staff and supervisors manage? Working with a university partner shifts some of the burden of this process and engages the university in what they do best: translating science to the practical world of child welfare practice. Webster, Needell and Wildfire (2002) describe the typical levels of skepticism experienced by many child welfare workers that would need to be overcome in order to make significant changes. Thus, the enduring uncertainty that the organization cannot change requires that the initiatives be realistic and practical, as well as the skills of educators with expertise in challenging the thinking of experienced practitioners be highly developed. Universities have the capacity to guide the public agencies in implementing programs that focus on non-traditional training models, and in making the argument that the evidence supports such approaches as agencies strive to improve practice.

A ripe setting for informing and conducting applied research

Gray (2001) noted that an important lesson social work can learn from medicine is the importance of bridging the chasm between research and

practice. Social work needs to first be explicit about its practice knowledge (Bloom, 1975), and then test the effectiveness of these practice techniques in achieving outcomes (Cheetham, 1994). Once this occurs, empirically supported interventions can be included into practice protocols (Howard & Jenson, 1999). Zeira and Rosen (2000) provide an example of applied research to study the relationship between worker's tacit knowledge, interventions selected and outcomes in family service agencies. They found a very high degree of differentiation among interventions used based on outcomes sought, which is very encouraging regarding social work practice as a rational process. There is a tremendous need for similar studies in child welfare.

Research into the ability of the public child protection system to achieve its outcomes has been limited (Waldfogel, 2000a & 2000b; McGowen & Walsh, 2000). In no other field is the need for development of the evidence base greater, as the well-being of children hangs in the balance. Many have called for studying efforts to promote attitudinal change toward incorporating evidence-based practice, and an organizational culture that focuses on outcomes and evaluation in child welfare agencies (Webster, Needell and Wildfire, 2002; Carrilio, Packard & Clapp, 2003). In addition, there is a need for additional research regarding the relationship between organizational variables themselves and client outcomes (Bednar, 2003). Through collaborative identification of research topics with the potential to positively inform the field, and participatory research approaches that involve practitioners, studies taking place in the field will not only build the evidence base regarding child welfare practice, but promote a culture in which evaluation and applied research is an integral part of the learning organization. The opportunity for faculty to benefit through conducting such applied research brings with it potential funding and publications, as well as enhancing their classroom teaching.

Development and testing of theory-grounded practice techniques and practice protocols

Closely linked to the discussion of evidence-based practice is the need for faculty to assist agencies with developing practice protocols and policies that are conceptually sound and inclusive of research findings. Preston (2005) found, for example, that very few child welfare management training is based on pedagogical models. Further, a significant proportion of these curricula was designed for use outside of human service agencies and may in fact conflict with social work's core values and ethical practice (Healy, 2002). By planfully incorporating articulated theory and empirical findings into practice protocols and techniques, agencies are less susceptible to criticism, and worker decisions are more defensible (Serman, 2002). This may be particularly important in fields like child welfare that are frequently scrutinized. Johnson & Austin (2005) provide an example of how this process can work effectively through a university/child welfare agency partnership between the Children and Family Research Center and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. The public agency selects and prioritizes research projects with the potential to impact practice, which are then designed and implemented by the Center. They work together to identify the practice implications from findings and policy and procedures are subsequently revised.

The child welfare supervision research and demonstration projects described throughout this Issue, present another example of a university-public child welfare agency partnership on all of these levels. The design of the program was focused on the development of learning laboratories in which the agencies would move forward toward resembling learning organizations (Collins-Camargo & Groeber, 2003). The needs assessment and knowledge gaps analysis focused on collecting data from the child welfare agencies, and a literature review on what is known about social work supervision, which led to the selection of the impact of clinical supervision on a variety of outcomes. These

applied research projects were required to involve a university/agency partnership, which drove their planning, implementation and evaluation. Central to the clinical supervision process was an emphasis on learning, and the creation of an environment of evidence-based practice was promoted (Collins-Camargo, in press). In each, a mixture of faculty and agency practitioners were involved in professional development of supervisors and middle managers in the agency, and in one of four states, participants received graduate credit for their work in the project. Each research and demonstration project yielded findings that have been referred back to the public agency for interpretation, identification of implications for practice, and development of curriculums, and supervisory practice guidelines that are driven by the evidence generated.

The role of the child welfare agency in keeping social work education relevant

A significant challenge in professional education is keeping the curriculum relevant and appropriate to the practice community while still grounding it conceptually. In order to do this effectively, academia needs the active involvement of the practice community. The realities of practice evolve, and social work education must adjust. Child welfare is an especially important collaborator in social work education, due to the involuntary nature of the work, the very active public policy arena, and the rapidly evolving knowledge base. While community advisory boards are important, a truly relevant and integrated curriculum will require much more active engagement, so that student learning both in the classroom and the field is optimized.

Integration of practice innovations into the curriculum

Barriers to the transfer of learning noted in the literature include lack of reinforcement on the job, perceived impracticality or irrelevance of the knowledge or skills being taught (Broad & Newstrom, 1992). This underscores the need for

universities to stay in very close touch with the realities of practice in the field. For example, family group conferencing and similar approaches have become common practice in child welfare and have transformed the way the field thinks about engaging families and community members in case planning and intervention. It is not uncommon that practice innovations and trends are occurring but the curriculum and research testing their efficacy may not be up to date on them.

The art of engagement in non-voluntary practice

Child welfare is a field in which a majority of clients are — at least early on in the intervention — involuntary. Working with involuntary clients requires a specialized set of skills that may not be incorporated into many practice classes (Ivanoff, Blythe & Tripodi, 1994). Even for students who are not planning to work in child welfare, social workers would do well to have experience in using confrontation effectively without damaging the worker-client relationship, and the effective use of self in the context of highly emotionally-charged circumstances. Skilled child welfare practitioners make excellent speakers for classes on these topics, and students placed in child welfare placements bring to practicum classes an exceptional opportunity for exploration of these approaches. On the other side, public agencies would be very welcoming of newly graduated students having some exposure to the intricacies of working with involuntary clients, so that the education received is relevant and appropriate to the new employee.

Examining the reality and implications of public policy decisions

Teaching macro practice and policy in social work education programs presents a particular challenge, as many students are focused on direct services. There is a real need to make these courses relevant and real for students to learn the implications of public policy decisions on practice, and on our clients. Child welfare policy is in a state of rapid change, in part driven by the federally mandated

Child and Family Services Reviews and the subsequent Program Improvement Plans states develop to improve their outcomes that do not meet the national standard. They provide a real time opportunity for students to observe the policy-making process and the practice changes that follow. Child welfare agencies can be a learning laboratory for macro practice and policy. Commissioner John Johnson (2004) described significant public policy and organizational structure and culture change implemented in New York based on their review of research related to the relationship between child welfare and juvenile justice. While work with stakeholders is described, the involvement of university partners in the process is not mentioned. This may have been a missed opportunity to involve faculty and students in the interpretation of research findings and analysis of potential impact on the system, as well as evaluation of the success of the changes made in relationship to established outcomes.

From practitioner to social work educator — source of skilled instructors

Title IV-E partnerships for training and professional education have demonstrated the value of bringing practicing child welfare workers, and administrators into the classroom. The large number of practicum placements within child welfare requires the engagement of skillful field instructors who have the time, commitment and skill to be exemplary field-based teachers. One such example involved a special project at the University of Kentucky in which an experienced child welfare professional turned academic led a group of students who were also child welfare employees in an intensive field experience. The use of evidence, thoughtful clinical decision-making and applications to policy and larger social issues were central to this unique experience. Repetition would depend upon a long process of encouraging particularly gifted employees to obtain advanced degrees in social work and then moving back to apply knowledge to field-based teaching. Such models are difficult to create.

Summary—mutually beneficial relationship or symbiosis

Partnerships between public child welfare programs and university social work programs are touted in the literature as an excellent vehicle for sustained improvement in child welfare practice (Breitenstein, Rycus, Sites & Kelley, 1997; Briar-Lawson, Schmid & Harris, 1997; Hopkins & Mudrick, 1999; Tracy & Pine, 2000). Merriam-Webster's on-line dictionary defines partnership as the state of being a partner "one who shares," "a legal relationship existing between two or more persons contractually associated as joint principals in a business," or "a relationship resembling a legal partnership and usually involving close cooperation between parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities." There is insight here in the reference to sharing — university social work programs and child welfare agencies have unique knowledge, expertise and opportunities that if shared would be of great import and benefit to both. In some cases university/child welfare agency partnerships are contractual and in others they are not. There is much room, however, to move beyond the contract, the cooperation and into collaboration and true partnership in ways that are mutually beneficial.

While it is understood that the term partnership may be overused, we have outlined a number of ways that such a collaborative relationship could be operationalized. Interestingly these activities closely parallel what Rousseau describes as the features characterizing evidence-based practice:

- Learning about cause-effect connections in professional practices;

- Isolating the variations that measurable affect desired outcomes;
- Creating a culture of evidence-based decision making and research participation;
- Using information-sharing communities to reduce overuse, underuse, and specific practices;
- Building decision supports to promote practices the evidence validates, along with techniques and artifacts that make the decision easier to execute or perform (e.g., checklists, protocols, or standing orders); and,
- Having individual, organizational, and institutional factors promote access to knowledge and its use. (2006, p. 259-260).

The actualization of mutually beneficial partnerships between the child welfare agency and the university builds on the ground laid in Title IV-E training programs but must go much further if we want to fulfill the purpose of the profession. Social work practice and social work education have different purposes, methods and structures, but should be indelibly intertwined in their common moral base if either is to be effectively realized. In this way, their relationship could best be seen as symbiotic — each are independent and different, but flourish in the close integration of the functioning of each. Interestingly, Sarri's keynote speech at a CSWE conference in the early Seventies is a harbinger of what still remains an issue today, when she said that "unless the [social work] profession demonstrates that it can provide leadership in the design and delivery of social services, it will be relegated to [the role of] handmaidens to other professionals." (1973, p. 31).

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