



Child welfare workers' perceptions of the value of social work education

Susan E. Mason ^{a,*}, Heidi Heft LaPorte ^{b,1}, Laura Bronstein ^{c,2}, Charles Auerbach ^{d,3}

^a Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, 2495 Amsterdam Ave., New York, NY 10033, United States

^b Department of Social Work, Lehman College, CUNY, 250 Bedford Park Boulevard West, Carman Hall B16-E, Bronx, NY 10468–1589, United States

^c Department of Social Work, UDC-315, Binghamton University, SUNY, PO BOX 6000, Binghamton, NY 13902–6000, United States

^d Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Visiting Professor of Emergency Medicine, Einstein College of Medicine, Yeshiva University, 2495 Amsterdam Ave, New York, NY 10033, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses public child welfare workers' perceived value of no-charge Masters level social work education courses as part of a project aiming at increasing professional identity and retention in public child welfare work. Over a 3.5 year time period, a total of 164 respondents completed 338 questionnaires that addressed their attitudes related to the value of their coursework. Descriptive statistics indicated that 90% were either pursuing or intended to pursue a degree in social work. Logistic regression showed that plans to remain in the child welfare field were most related to an understanding of workplace issues, and secondarily to the number of courses taken. Demographic factors were not statistically significant.

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1. Introduction and background

This study addresses the effects of providing opportunities to public child welfare workers in the form of Masters level social work education courses. Masters level social work education courses were funded through a grant from the New York State legislature to a consortium consisting of two stakeholders: the state's child protection agency whose official name is the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) and the Deans of the New York State schools of social work. Workers volunteered and were selected by local public agencies to take between one and three courses of their choice each semester at a number of social work programs throughout the state, excluding New York City which has a separate program. In most cases, workers sought to earn a Masters' degree in social work.

The connection between social work education and child welfare work has attracted increasing attention since the 1980 when Title IV-E first began funding social work education for child welfare workers. More recently, the Children's Bureau has funded a number

of projects with the goal of strengthening the child welfare workforce through partnership with the schools of social work. The thinking behind these commitments is that social work education is optimal for instilling knowledge and skills required for child welfare work (Zlotnick, 2003). Studies demonstrate that a social work education promotes professionalism which in turn is associated with improved practice with families (Curry & Cardina, 2003; Curry, Eckles, Stuart, & Qaqish, 2010; Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar, & Trinkle, 2010). At the same time, public child welfare agencies have experienced difficulties recruiting and retaining competent workers (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Drake & Yadama, 1996; US General Accounting Office, 2003). In response, social work educators have joined forces with public child welfare agencies to develop programs aimed at creating a social work educated workforce in child welfare work. Several states have instituted formal consortiums of schools of social work and public child welfare agencies whose missions are to work cooperatively to identify and train both new and veteran workers. Increasingly, social work educators have taken on a commitment to work with both public and private agencies to provide social work education to child welfare workers. Although child welfare is one area of practice among many, its association with social work is firmly rooted in the shared mission of making a better life for children and families in need of services.

This article addresses the connection between social work education and the child welfare workforce by describing the New York education opportunity project with its two primary goals: an improvement in worker professional competency through social work education and an increase in rates of workforce retention. These goals were driven

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 212 960 0806.

E-mail addresses: masonse@yu.edu (S.E. Mason), doctorheidi@aol.com (H.H. LaPorte), lbronst@binghamton.edu (L. Bronstein), Auerbach@yu.edu (C. Auerbach).

¹ Tel.: +1 718 960 1892.

² Tel.: +1 607 777 9162(office); fax: +1 607 777 5683.

³ Tel.: +1 212 960 0816(office); fax: +1 212 960 0821.

by OCFs' plan to improve services to children and families and to address the yearly state agency turnover rate that averaged up to 25% in some counties (Lawson et al., 2006). Although workers taking courses were under no obligation to remain at the agency, administrators thought they would stay for at least the time it took to get the MSW degree. Agency policy makers predicted that once the MSW degrees were earned, many workers would move into supervisory and other leadership positions. This study examines the project's outcome in three key areas linked to professionalism and retention: better understanding of clients' social and environmental context, greater appreciation of workplace issues, and opportunities for professional networking. The study includes the connection between demographics and retention and the number of courses taken and the intent to remain in the field of child welfare. The linkage of social work education with professionalism in child welfare work and its implication for policy and research are subjects of the discussion.

1.1. Professionalism in public child welfare

We are defining professionalism in child welfare as a commitment to education and training (North American Resource Center, 2008). The need for an educated, committed, and competent workforce in public child welfare has been a concern for the past several years (Curry et al., 2010; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Landsman, 2001; McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin, 2009; Rycraft, 1994; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). Researchers suggest that quality practice with clients is strongly influenced by the degree of professional behavior that workers demonstrate (Curry & Cardina, 2003; Curry et al., 2010; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). Professional practice is shown to be strongly influenced by workers' perceptions of their work environment (Brown & Leigh, 1996; Ellett & Leighninger, 2007; Glisson & Green, 2006; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Parkin & Green, 1997). There has been much written on the difficulties facing child welfare workers including large and complex caseloads (Alwon & Reitz, 2000; Cyphers, 2001; Ellett et al., 2007), inadequate resources (Juby & Scannapieco, 2007; Tracy & Pine, 2000), increased demands for documentation (McGowan et al., 2009; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006) and frequently changing policy mandates that complicate the work (Lawson, Anderson-Butcher, Petersen, & Barkdull, 2003; Westbrook et al., 2006). While we know the importance of having a positive view of the work environment, there is more to be learned about the value of social work education for increasing workers' understanding of the challenges that public child welfare agencies face.

1.2. The move for greater professionalization through social work education

The relationship between the field of child welfare and social work has undergone a notable history of vacillation. In the time period between the 1960 and the 1980 the status of child welfare work diminished among professional social workers. This was followed by a movement to re-establish the connection between the two and to declare social work as the primary discipline for child welfare work (Zlotnick, 2003). In response to what was viewed as a deprofessionalization of child welfare workers, a special meeting of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was called in the mid-80s to encourage the social work presence in child welfare services (Kadushin & Martin, 1988).

Since the mid-1980 there has been a significant move towards collaborations between schools of social work and public child welfare agencies to help professionalize the workforce (Mason & Heft LaPorte, 2008; Scannapieco, Bolen, & Connell, 2000). This effort was aimed at giving child welfare workers increased skills and confidence in working with their clients and agency administrators, as well as to curb turnover. Having a strong professional identity, commitment to the work, and

belief in social work values were factors found to be associated with remaining in child welfare work (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Ellis, Ellett, & DeWeaver, 2007; Landsman, 2001; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001).

During the 1980 a number of states began to access federal funds through the Social Security Act, Title IV-E in order to support the educational training of child welfare workers (Rose, 1999). Most states accessed these federal funds after 1991 when state funds for this effort also became available. States created educational programs that supported the belief in the advantages of professional social work education in providing the necessary knowledge and skills for practice in the child welfare arena (Jones & Okamura, 2000). Social work educators and researchers began to connect social work to child welfare work calling for collaborations between schools and agencies. Steib and Blome (2004) went as far as to state that social work education should be a prerequisite for child welfare work. Others asserted that child welfare workers with a social work education were best suited to the job (Auerbach, McGowan, & Heft LaPorte, 2008; Hopkins, Mudrick, & Rudolph, 1999; Jones & Okamura, 2000; Landsman, 2001; Mor Barak et al., 2001; Westbrook et al., 2006).

Today, most states have active social work education consortiums that link schools of social work and public child welfare agencies. These consortiums advocate for social work education for staff already working in child welfare agencies and for the recruitment of new workers. California's CALSWEC was among the first of these groups. Established in 1990, it remains the largest with its headquarters at the University of California, Berkeley. The data from the study in this article comes from the New York State Consortium, established in 2000 and known as SWEC.

1.3. Retention in child welfare agencies

Retention is defined here as the intent of workers to remain in the field of child welfare. Others have included in the definition the intent to remain in the current agency (Wermeling, 2009; Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). In either case, the high turnover in child welfare work has caused many to view the situation as a workforce crisis (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Drake & Yadama, 1996; US General Accounting Office, 2003). While turnover rates are likely to be affected by the state of the economy, the United States General Accounting Office in 2003 reported that, nationwide, the average length of employment in child welfare was less than two years (US General Accounting Office, 2003). This coincides exactly with the number of years suggested as necessary to develop the skills and knowledge to work independently and effectively in the field (Louisiana Job Force Task, 2000). The significant investments in training and organizational induction given to workers who leave at the time when they can be expected to achieve proficiency results in both economic and social costs. The economic costs are those associated with training and orientation programs. Perhaps more importantly, the social costs, or costs to human capital, are associated with the destabilization of the workforce and, in turn, the destabilization of worker–client relationships (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2008, 2010).

Social work educators have called for a number of changes to help reverse this trend. They include improving workforce selection (Landsman, 2001; McGowan et al., 2009) and supervision (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, & Dickinson, 2008; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett et al., 2007), reducing caseloads and paperwork (Drake & Yadama, 1996; Lawson et al., 2006; McGowan et al., 2009; Rycraft, 1994), and optimizing opportunities available for professional growth (Curry et al., 2010). Career satisfaction, training and professional development opportunities have been linked with the intent to stay in child welfare (Auerbach et al., 2008; Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005; McGowan et al., 2009). Feelings of self-efficacy have been linked with retention. Workers who feel that their job allows them to set and achieve goals were less likely to consider leaving child welfare work (Ellett, 2007).

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