



Social work education and Title IV-E program participation as predictors of entry-level knowledge among public child welfare workers

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ABSTRACT

Given the resources expended in promoting social work education and specialized training in child welfare as a means to increase the knowledge and competency of public child welfare (PCW) workers, research in this area is important to evaluate the outcomes of such efforts. The current study adds to the literature in this area by examining the performance of newly-hired PCW workers on objective tests of child welfare-related knowledge. Workers with Master of Social Work (MSW) degrees were compared to those with other degrees to examine whether there were differences in performance by social work education on an overall test of knowledge and two tests assessing for specific knowledge areas. The study also examined whether participation in Title IV-E stipend-based programs was a factor in test performance among only those workers who had MSW degrees. The findings supported the hypothesis that workers with MSW degrees would score higher on all measures when compared to those with other degrees. The results also supported the hypothesis that workers with MSW degrees who participated in Title IV-E programs would score higher than those with MSW degrees who did not participate in such programs. Implications for the PCW field and future research in this area are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The field of child welfare is always evolving in response to changes in both policy mandates and the presenting problems of families referred to public child welfare (PCW) agencies, yet one constant is that a qualified and well-trained workforce is necessary in order to successfully navigate the ever-changing system and provide effective services to vulnerable clients (Gleeson, Smith, & Dubois, 1993). Social work education and training specifically in the area of child welfare have historically been relied upon to ensure that PCW workers are indeed qualified and well-trained. For example, federal funding through Title IV-B, Section 426 and Title IV-E provides states with resources for training programs for prospective and current child welfare workers in order to ensure a qualified and competent PCW workforce. One way that Title IV-E funds are used is to provide stipends to students in social work degree programs along with specialized PCW experience and training (e.g., internships at PCW agencies and child welfare-related courses) in exchange for a commitment to working at a PCW agency upon graduation.

Although there is literature suggesting the effectiveness of social work education in increasing the knowledge and skills of child welfare workers (Albers, Reilly, & Rittner, 1993; Booz-Allen and Hamilton, Inc., 1987; Dhooper, Roysse, & Wolfe, 1990; Franke, Bagdasaryan, & Furman,

2009; Gleeson & Dubois, 1990; Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988; Olsen & Holmes, 1982), there are also conflicting findings (Dhooper et al., 1990; Gleeson & Dubois, 1990; Perry, 2006). There is less literature regarding the impact of specialized training, especially through stipend-based programs, on such knowledge and skills, but the findings are clearer and suggest a positive relationship (Franke, Bagdasaryan, et al., 2009; Gansle & Ellett, 2002; Huebner, 2003; Jones & Okumura, 2000). Given that funds and other resources have been expended in promoting social work education and specialized training in child welfare in order to increase the knowledge and competency of PCW workers, further empirical work is needed to evaluate the outcomes of such efforts. The current study adds to the growing knowledge base in this area by examining the performance of a large sample of newly-hired PCW workers on three separate objective measures of knowledge prior to the start of pre-service training. One of the tests assessed for overall child welfare-related knowledge, while the remaining two involved more specific areas: permanency planning and case planning/case management. The first set of multivariate analyses examined whether there were differences in performance on these tests by education, when controlling for other factors such as length of time working in the field of child welfare and demographics. The hypothesis was that workers with Master of Social Work (MSW) degrees would score higher on all three of the measures, on average, compared to those with other degrees. The second set of multivariate analyses focused only on workers with MSW degrees to determine whether or not participation in Title IV-E stipend-based programs was a determinant of performance on the three tests, when controlling for other factors.

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The hypothesis was that the workers who participated in Title IV-E programs would score higher, on average, on all three tests when compared to those without such participation.

2. Background and prior research

One reason for the conflicting results in the literature described above regarding the impact of social work education could be due to differences across studies in how outcomes were measured. For example, two studies in this area measured outcomes in terms of service planning/delivery, and both found differences between workers with social work degrees and those without such degrees in expected directions. *Albers et al. (1993)* examined the records of 404 children in foster care in Clark County, Nevada to test predictors of length of stay in care; the researchers found that although only about 40% of the child welfare workers involved in the cases had training as social workers, with either Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or MSW degrees, those who did were significantly more likely to develop a permanent plan within three years compared to those without such degrees. Similarly, *Olsen and Holmes (1982)* reported that child welfare workers with social work education were more effective when it came to service delivery as compared to those without such education.

Another direct outcome measure is performance on tests of knowledge. *Dhooper et al. (1990)* utilized several measures of performance in a study of child welfare workers in Kentucky; in one part of their study, they examined performance on a state merit examination, and found that workers with MSW degrees ranked first, followed by those with BSW degrees, MA/MS degrees, and lastly BA/BS degrees. It is important to note, however, that the sample size was small in this part of their analysis as it involved only 50 employees hired as social workers by the state government in 1987. Still, *Franke, Bagdasaryan, et al., (2009)* found similar results with a larger sample of 469 newly-hired PCW workers. The researchers examined differences in performance on a test of knowledge by social work education and Title IV-E participation. The workers in the study were required to undergo a pre-service training and were given a pre- and post-test assessing for various areas of child welfare-related knowledge (e.g., child welfare policy, child development, and court report writing). The results of the repeated measures multivariate analysis supported the pattern found by *Dhooper et al.* in that workers with MSW degrees scored highest on the pre-test, on average, followed by those with BSW degrees. Workers with other degrees were able to gain ground after the pre-service training but those with MSW degrees still scored the highest, on average, at the post-test.

When outcomes are measured indirectly, however, using self-reports regarding competencies and knowledge, supervisory ratings, or quality assurance ratings, the results are somewhat mixed. For example, *Lieberman et al. (1988)* surveyed 5360 child welfare personnel across 16 states who rated how well they felt their educational experiences had prepared them with regard to 32 areas (e.g., assessing problems, assessing risk, case planning, etc.). When controlling for years of experience, 31 areas were significant and workers with MSW degrees scored higher, on average, than workers with no degrees and those with other degrees (BS or BA, BSW, or other advanced degrees) on 21 out of those 31 areas. Similarly, *Gleeson and Dubois (1990)* examined self-reported competencies provided by 115 child welfare workers and their supervisors in six areas (assessment and planning, intervention methods, relationship building, working with the court system, substitute care, and working within an organization). The analysis indicated that having a social work degree significantly predicted self-rated competence in assessment and planning and in intervention methods; however, education was not a significant predictor for supervisor assessments of competencies on the six scales.

Booz-Allen and Hamilton, Inc. (1987) examined the performance of child welfare workers in Maryland utilizing workers' self-reported competencies and ratings by supervisors. The researchers found that ratings for workers with MSWs were higher than for those without

MSWs. On the other hand, *Dhooper et al. (1990)* examined Quality Assurance Ratings of 437 cases randomly selected for review by the Department of Social Services and found that although workers with social work degrees had the highest ratings, the difference was not significant. *Perry (2006)* also examined performance evaluations made by supervisors. The analysis tested whether the educational background (defined as undergraduate major) of child welfare investigators and workers in Florida had an effect on their performance evaluations but there were no differences observed by having a social work education.

Considering the research in this area as a whole, it appears that studies utilizing direct measures of performance/knowledge report findings in favor of social work education, while studies with indirect measures have more mixed results. The conflicting findings could be a result of the varying methodologies or it could be that knowledge is not being translated in the field settings in such a way that is measurable by supervisor ratings and other such performance reviews.

The findings are clearer, however, when reviewing the few studies that have examined differences in knowledge by Title IV-E program participation. For example, *Gansle and Ellett (2002)* conducted a quasi-experimental study with two analyses: one with BSW students and another with MSW students, comparing those with Title IV-E stipends and those without. Paper/pencil tests measuring child welfare knowledge were administered to all students in the study, one prior to the beginning of the last year of the program and one just prior to graduation. The results indicated that for the MSW group, all students did significantly better after the program compared to before, but there was no difference by stipend receipt. BSW students as a group also did significantly better at the end of the academic year than at the start, but those with stipends scored higher than those without stipends. Across degree groups, students with stipends had significantly higher change scores than those without stipends.

Jones and Okumura (2000) examined 266 newly-hired workers in San Diego, CA, comparing those who were Title IV-E trained and those who were not. The researchers administered a test of basic child welfare knowledge and also assessed confidence in that knowledge. The Title IV-E graduates scored higher on the knowledge test and they expressed more confidence in their ability to perform basic child welfare tasks than did the other workers. Similarly, as part of the *Franke, Bagdasaryan, et al., (2009)* study described earlier, the researchers examined differences in performance on a knowledge test by Title IV-E participation. The study found that both participants and non-participants had an increase in scores from the pre-test to the post-test, but those who participated in Title IV-E programs scored significantly higher, on average, at both time points.

All three studies described above utilized knowledge tests as the outcome measure and found significant differences by Title IV-E participation in expected differences. Using other measures of performance, *Huebner (2003)* evaluated a similar program in Kentucky, entitled the Public Child Welfare Certification Program (PCWCP), and found significant differences as well. Although the samples compared were small, *Huebner* found that PCWCP graduates scored significantly higher on a number of measures when compared with the non-PCWCP group such that the PCWCP workers: intervened more aggressively, provided services more often, used practices more consistent with the risk rating of cases, placed more children with relatives, placed more children in adoptive homes, visited children in out-of-home care more regularly, were rated by foster parents as providing more satisfactory visits, and established a permanency goal more often. Contrary to these findings, however, *Rosenthal and Waters (2006)* examined differences in supervisory ratings by Title IV-E participation for a large sample of PCW workers and did not find significant differences.

Although the literature as a whole indicates that social work education and Title IV-E training increase the knowledge and competency of PCW workers, many studies did not involve multivariate analysis. In addition, there have only been a few studies regarding the influence of Title IV-E participation. The current study extends this line

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