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Professionalization in public child welfare: Historical context and workplace outcomes for social workers and non-social workers

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ABSTRACT

This article recaps the historic role of the U.S. Children's Bureau in the development and professionalization of public child welfare services. A review of the empirical literature explores relationships between professional preparation and outcomes in service delivery, job performance and preparedness, social work values, and retention of staff. This review informs the evaluation study, which draws from a longitudinal appraisal of almost 10,000 child welfare workers in Texas, about one third with degrees in social work. The study found significant differences between the experiences and perceptions of those with social work degrees and those with degrees in other fields.

1. Introduction

In the United States, schools of social work have a long history of partnerships with the U.S. Children's Bureau and state child welfare agencies to develop a workforce made up of professional, degreed social workers. During the past 15 years, partnerships have grown to include most state child welfare departments and many public and private universities. Schools of social work recruit students and child welfare employees to work in that field after they obtain Master of Social Work (MSW) or Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degrees with the support of educational stipends. Recently, workforce issues in child welfare have been brought once again to the forefront by the findings of the Children's Bureau's Child and Family Services Reviews and State Program Improvement Plans (PIPs), which reaffirm the need for a well-qualified staff with the knowledge, skills and commitment to provide competent services to vulnerable children and families who are involved in the public child welfare system (Perry & Ellett, 2008; Zlotnik et al., 2005a).

During this centennial year for the U.S. Children's Bureau, this article first recaps that organization's historic role in the development and professionalization of public child welfare services, including key policies and programs that have shaped the field. This historical discussion highlights collaborations among the Bureau, public child welfare departments, and schools of social work that are forerunners of the present IV-E stipend program.

A review of empirical literature then explores relationships between social work education and preparation and outcomes in service delivery, job performance and preparedness, social work values, and retention of staff. This targeted review of the literature informs the evaluation study presented in the balance of the article, which sought to answer the following question: At three intervals of employment tenure with the Texas public child welfare system, what are the differences and similarities between social workers and non-social workers concerning staff retention and personal perceptions of job readiness, ongoing use of training, and relationships with peers and supervisors?

The evaluation study presented in the third major section draws from an ongoing longitudinal appraisal of almost 10,000 individuals who entered employment in Texas as child welfare workers, about one third of whom have social work degrees. Texas child welfare workers are surveyed at three points in time: After about three months of employment at graduation from basic skills-development training (BSD), which includes three weeks of on-the-job training (OJT); eighteen months post-employment when staff can become certified CPS Specialists and three years' post-hire when they are eligible to become CPS Advanced Specialists. The goal of this study is to analyze the experiences of child welfare workers from the time they complete their initial training through their third year of employment. We track the staff members' experiences, perceived knowledge, perceived skills, views of organizational culture, supervisory experiences, overall satisfaction, and retention over time. This article reports significant differences between the experiences and perceptions of those with social work degrees and those with degrees in other fields.

2. The U.S. Children's Bureau and the public child welfare workforce

The history of the U.S. Children's Bureau, established a hundred years ago with a broad mandate to study and report on the health and social conditions of the country's children, has long been the subject of scholarship (e.g., Abbott, 1938; Chepaitis, 1972; Perry & Ellett, 2008; Rodems, Shaefer, & Ybarra, 2011; Zlotnik, 2003). After setting the context for the

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establishment of the Bureau in 1912, we explore its role in the creation, expansion, and professionalization of public child welfare services, particularly through support for staff and students to pursue social work education, programs that were precursors of current efforts to employ social workers in public child welfare agencies.

Prior to the establishment of the Children's Bureau, the U.S. had developed by the end of the 19th century an array of voluntary agencies devoted to child saving and child placement, including humane associations, anti-cruelty societies, orphanages, and children's aid societies. In addition, some child welfare institutions, such as state schools for special populations and general orphanages, had been founded under public auspices (Jones, 1993). Juvenile courts, which expanded through state legislation the judges' traditional powers under English common law to oversee wardship of minors, had begun by 1899 to promote a rehabilitative approach to delinquent and dependent children that increased the need for placement of children (Abbott, 1938).

The Children's Bureau, the culmination of advocacy by settlement house and public health workers, anti-child labor advocates, and other progressive reformers, represented the first foray by the U.S. federal government to address the general welfare of a broad group of Americans. Much of the Bureau's early emphasis was on the health status of children, and in 1921 it assumed administration of the first federal grant-in-aid to the states. Although the Bureau's health-related work provoked vitriolic opposition from the medical establishment that led to the grants' repeal in 1927, its Maternal and Infant Hygiene program logged many successes (Chepaitis, 1972; Combs-Orme, 1988; Rodems et al., 2011). In 1935 Children's Bureau was able to expand on its experience in working with states to administer new grants-in-aid under the Social Security Act, including landmark programs for child welfare services in rural areas.

The long history of voluntary societies dedicated to child welfare ensured that older urban areas of the U.S. were well supplied by 1935 with private protective and placement agencies. County child welfare boards and state child welfare departments also had been established during the preceding two decades in many states, including Minnesota in 1917 and Alabama in 1919 (Abbott, 1938). However, as the federal Social Security Act was debated, most rural areas remained badly underserved. In response, Social Security Act. 49 United States Statutes 633 (1935) charged the Children's Bureau to cooperate with state departments to provide protection and care, especially in rural areas, for children who were dependent, neglected, homeless, or at risk for delinquency. Congress initially made one and a half million dollars per year available for grants to states to establish or extend child welfare services (Abbott, 1938; Eliot, 1936).

By 1936, the rural child welfare plans of 41 states had been approved and funded by the Children's Bureau (Eliot, 1936). The wording of Title V was broad enough to allow considerable flexibility, and the Children's Bureau quickly supported states' use of the grants to enable present or prospective child welfare staff to attend graduate schools of social work (Child Welfare Division, 1938). Although Perry and Ellett (2008) observe that "little is known about the number of social workers or social work graduates (from professional schools) that assumed positions within child welfare settings" during this period (p. 147), anecdotal examples do exist. Washington State reported to the Bureau in 1938 that it was funding 16 employees to attend graduate school and that staff in Seattle were being allowed time to attend classes during work hours. Washington also had used Title V funds to establish a center to train new child welfare staff, most of whom had completed some graduate-level social work education, for four-month periods (Child Welfare Division, 1938). The same year, Kansas also listed among its funding objectives educational leaves for staff interested in preparing to work in public child welfare positions, and Tennessee noted "scholarships in recognized schools of social work for the special training of child welfare workers" and had five staff members pursuing degrees at the University of Chicago or Tulane University (Child Welfare Division, 1938, p. 660).

The Children's Bureau's longstanding ties with social work and social work education evolved from decades of stable professional leadership rooted in the settlement house movement and promoted from within its own ranks. Its initial Chief, Julia Lathrop (1912–1921) had been a Hull House resident and had spearheaded establishment of the first juvenile court and the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy before her appointment to the Bureau. Grace Abbott, the second Chief who led the Bureau for 15 years (1921–1934), shared the Hull House background and ultimately became a professor at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration. At the time the Social Security Act was passed, the Chief was Katherine Lenroot (1934–1951) who had been with the Bureau since 1914. She had attended the New York School of Social Work, and she served as President of the National Conference of Social Work in 1935. Physician Martha Eliot, a Bureau veteran who also had practiced as a medical social worker, chaired the National Conference of Social Work in 1949 and served as Bureau Chief from 1951 to 1956. She was followed by Katherine Oettinger (1957–1968), a social work graduate of Smith College and former Dean of the Boston University School of Social Work. Abbott and Oettinger are among those honored as National Association of Social Workers Foundation (2011), and the biographies of the first four Bureau Chiefs appear in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Mizrahi, 2008).

In the context of the Bureau's leadership, it is unsurprising that programs enacted as amendments to the Social Security Act and administered by the Bureau continued to support social work education and professionalization in public child welfare. These included Section 426 of Title IV-B, passed in 1962 (see Zlotnik, 2003) and Section 707 in the amendments enacted in 1967 (see Austin, Antonyappan, & Leighninger, 1996). Due in part to politically motivated weakening of the Children's Bureau during the Nixon administration, funding under Section 707 was phased out after 1974 (Austin et al., 1996; Ferguson, 1972).

During this challenging time at the Bureau and in the federal government, a combination of political and workforce issues resulted in removal of social work qualifications from many positions in public child welfare (see Perry & Ellett, 2008). However, even during this difficult period for the child welfare field, the Bureau funded and provided support for Regional Child Welfare Training Centers that offered educational stipends to prospective public agency staff (Vinokur-Kaplan, 1987), and some states used block grants under Title XX of the Social Security Act to offer similar opportunities.

The Children's Bureau has had a remarkable record of survival through periods of change, and passage of Title IV-E, enacted as part of the Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980, has assured the Bureau of an ongoing central role in funding education for social work practice in public child welfare. Schools of social work, in collaboration with state child welfare agencies, can be funded through Title IV-E for curriculum development, classroom instruction, and field instruction that are related to the mission of child welfare. Curriculum development around specific child welfare content has been stressed as a way to assure quality child welfare services (Pecora, 1989; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2003). Today, hundreds of IV-E partnerships throughout the country are spending millions of federal dollars to educate Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students for careers in the field (Cheung, Taylor, & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Faller, 2010; Smith, 2002).

The federal commitment to increase the number of social workers within public child welfare reflects a long-standing perception that employing qualified social workers improves child welfare service delivery (Smith, 2002). Unfortunately, there is insufficient evaluation research measuring the effectiveness of partnerships between schools of social work and state child welfare agencies in meeting goals related to services to clients. The need for program evaluation, including stronger methods and well-targeted questions, has been a theme in the literature for some time (Wells, 1994; Zlotnik, 1997) and has been re-emphasized recently (Faller, 2010; Rubin, 2011; Smith, 2002; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005b). In addition, the federal government is becoming increasingly interested in outcomes of educational programs, and some states are implementing reporting systems.