

# Child Welfare Education and Training: Future Trends and Influences

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Based on a review of current economic, political, social, and professional trends, the authors propose recommendations for child welfare education and training. Future partnerships between child welfare agencies and schools of social work will need to incorporate cross-system collaboration, multiculturalism, and family-centered approaches with a broader conceptualization of child well-being.

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Perhaps no other field of social work practice is more influenced by its context than child welfare. By *child welfare* we mean primarily the “constellation of public provisions and professional processes which are created to meet the needs of children who have not ‘fared well’” [Laird & Hartman 1985: 5].<sup>1</sup> Whether in policymaking, program development, or direct practice, those providing services to the most vulnerable families and children do so in an environment of constant change, limited resources, competing and sometimes conflicting expectations from a multitude of stakeholders, and new technologies, many of which are largely untested. Preparing professionals through professional education and training to work in this environment presents its own challenges. Schools of social work, as institutions, have their own obstacles to overcome as they try to both create and manage change in an academic environment that is not always conducive to rapid response.

This article briefly discusses preparation for professional practice in child welfare in the United States today, then delineates some of the current social and political trends and events that are shaping child welfare. Some of these are broad social trends; others are changes and new directions that are professional in nature and that have a direct impact on the provision of child welfare services. The implications of some of these trends for educating social work professionals for child welfare practice are highlighted, and a set of recommendations for curriculum content and approach are suggested.

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### Preparing for Professional Practice

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Professional practice in child welfare is primarily agency based, conducted in public agencies whose legislative mandate is to serve dependent and neglected children, and in private, nonprofit agencies providing contracted services to these children and their families. Social workers in these agencies are professionally trained

and provide services in programs that range from child protection to out-of-home care, from adoption to adolescent support. They may work at any level in the agency, from director to supervisor to direct service provider. Other staff in these agencies, even those whose title is also "social worker," may have no professional training in social work. It is generally agreed, however, that formal education in social work is the best preparation for child welfare practice, with the B.S.W. being the first level of professional education, followed by the M.S.W. for advanced practice levels [Liederman 1995]. Child welfare staff with social work training perceive themselves as better prepared than their colleagues who lack such training in a number of knowledge and skill areas in child welfare [Leiberman et al. 1989]; they also provide higher quality services [Olsen & Holmes 1982].

Schools of social work vary widely in their curriculum approaches to preparing professionals. Some offer specialties in fields of practice such as child welfare. Others specialize in preparing professionals with management, community, or clinical skills. The curriculum in most schools offering a master's of social work includes some content on child welfare, given its prominence as a field of practice, although the organization of this content is varied.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of an individual school's choice of curriculum approach, every accredited program must include curriculum content (in both the classroom and field education) in core areas such as human behavior and the social environment, research, diversity and work with special populations, and values and ethics. These content areas serve as an important foundation for professional practice in child welfare.

There are a number of issues related to education and training for child welfare practice.<sup>3</sup> One is the debate about the differences between the levels of professional education, i.e., the B.S.W./M.S.W. continuum. Another related issue is whether schools of social work should be preparing generalists—social workers able to practice competently in a range of settings with diverse cli-

ents—or practitioners with specialized knowledge and skills (see, for example, Abramczyk & Liberman [1994]). Still another debate centers on the differences between the goals and methods of education and training and the differing expectations of agencies and schools in preparation for professional practice [Maluccio 1985]. The recommendations section of this article addresses the issue of differences between education and training, and between schools and agencies in calling for an increased emphasis on a competency-based approach that will affect the content, structure, and approach of education for child welfare and will greatly increase opportunities for collaboration between schools and agencies to prepare competent professionals.

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### **Economic, Political, and Social Trends**

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As mentioned earlier, child welfare practice is highly influenced by economic, political, and social trends. Some of these are broad in their impact, while others directly influence the nature and environment of child welfare practice. For example, the increased attention to global issues is a trend with broad implications for American society. Although this trend has implications for child welfare (e.g., immigration of people from war-torn countries may increase the diversity of a child welfare agency's client base), not all practitioners are directly affected by it. Even so, there is—and should be—increasing attention to international social issues in social work [Healy 1988]. On the other hand, the trend toward conservatism in American politics produced dramatic changes in the country's welfare program, with the full impact yet to be felt [Dickinson 1995]. These changes will likely have serious consequences for the nation's poorest families, who also make up the bulk of the caseloads of child welfare agencies.

To prepare practitioners for competent practice, agencies and schools must not only be current in their design of educational programs, but must look for future developments. Moreover,

schools must prepare practitioners to be able to undertake strategic planning initiatives that provide opportunities to examine a wide range of trends and then to consider how they are likely to directly impact their own agency. At the same time, schools must themselves model these "readiness efforts" by undertaking planning of their own, hopefully with the involvement of agency staff who clearly have a stake in the school's future. One of the authors' schools conducted a "future search" conference. The three-day conference involved 60 stakeholders, including staff from both public and private agencies, who looked at the past, considered current and future issues, and mapped out a way forward for the school [Weisbord 1992]. Not only has the school gained a blueprint for its future, it has used the opportunity to model a new approach to planning.

Other trends and developments include the devolution of responsibility from the federal to state governments, the growth of technology, increased violence in society, growing interest in the workplace environment, and increased attention to accountability, especially in the human services arena. If they are to respond to these developments, practitioners must be trained to work with their state legislators and to advocate in behalf of their clients [Schneider & Netting 1999]. With block grant funding, many policy decisions are now being made at local levels; new approaches to teaching the skills of policy practice (e.g., how to develop policy arguments and testify) to all child welfare practitioners are needed.

Another trend with relevance for child welfare education is the technology revolution. Both child welfare agencies and schools of social work have been slow to take advantage of new technology, yet computer applications can have wide-reaching implications both in the provision of services to clients [Gibelman 1999; Gingerich & Green 1996] and in teaching and training [Raymond & Pike 1997]. It will be critical for students (and faculty) to know how to use databases to locate information; for practitioners to

have access to library resources through their agencies; and for everyone to be able to use the Internet to obtain information on research studies and model programs as a basis for developing new programs. These advances promise a dramatic increase in the transfer of technologies and information from and to sites around the world. At the same time, some may present dilemmas around privacy, ownership of ideas, and other ethical issues [Reamer 1998; Raffoul 1996]. Thus, equally critical will be skills for ethical reasoning, so that practitioners can both recognize and deal with these challenges.

The increasing violence in society is on everyone's mind. Unfortunately, social workers are among those groups that are most at risk of violence at work [Lynch 1999]. Among social workers, child welfare practitioners, especially direct service workers who work in some of the most high-risk neighborhoods, are especially vulnerable. Practitioners need knowledge and skills to avoid unnecessary risks on the job, while administrators need to know how to establish and implement comprehensive plans for workplace safety [Nuehring & Houston 1992]. At the same time, these administrators must skillfully balance workplace safety goals with those of effective community outreach and client rapport. In other words, they must avoid making the agency appear to be an "armed camp." Moreover, supervisors must know how to assess and advocate for what their staffs need to feel and be safe at work.

In conjunction with a safe workplace, attention has also focused on other aspects of the work environment [Hasenfeld 1996]. Child welfare agencies are typically large public bureaucracies that are often seen as unattractive by professional social workers, who choose other settings that offer more professional autonomy and the ability to shape their practice [McGowan 1978]. As the trend toward fewer trained workers in all spheres continues, child welfare agencies will need to reestablish themselves as viable settings for professional practice [Liederman 1995]. Yet, as large bureaucracies, these agencies have been slow to implement needed changes [Cohen 1994; Pine et al. 1998]. Child welfare prac-

tioners in management roles need skills for involving staff in making some agency decisions and evaluating programs, and staff need skills in working effectively on cross-agency task forces and collaborative projects. Schools and agencies must work together to both prepare agency staff for professional practice and to recruit newly trained professionals into child welfare. Moreover, the federal government has an important role to play in expanding education and training in child welfare, a role that, unfortunately, has been diminishing compared to earlier times.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the 1999 federal request for proposals for child welfare training projects, the child welfare traineeships that traditionally had encouraged collaborative projects between schools and agencies to recruit and train specialists in child welfare were not included. At the same time, the federal government has funded 11 specialty resource centers around the country, all of which focus to some degree on training. (See Appendix.)

Another broad trend with implications for child welfare is the increased attention to accountability at all levels of government, especially in health and human services. Managed care as both a cost-cutting and a quality control measure has received much attention in the fields of health and mental health care [Corcoran 1997]. This controversial concept has now reached child welfare, with some agencies contracting some or all of their services to private, often for-profit, organizations [McCullough & Schmitt 1999]. Other expressions of the interest in accountability can be seen in the move to performance-based outcomes and measures that are now seen as key to effective programming [Kettner et al. 1999; Pecora et al. 1996]. Child welfare practitioners must be able to write measurable outcomes for their work with clients. For example, parents whose children are in placement must be made aware of what is expected of them and what needs to change for their children to be reunified with the family [Warsh et al. 1996]. Practitioners also need research skills for evaluating the effectiveness of their programs, as well as their interventions in specific cases.

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## Policy and Practice Developments in Child Welfare

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The last several decades have witnessed a number of philosophical and practice-related shifts in such areas as family preservation, adoption, and permanency planning. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) was originally passed in the context of growing dissatisfaction with out-of-home placements, particularly the use of family foster care [Pine 1986]. At the time of its passage, children were often placed in unstable and unnecessarily restrictive placements, and little effort was made to keep birth parents involved or to facilitate reunification. In many cases, families had continuing needs for service even after their child's return. The provision of "reasonable efforts" to prevent family disruption, reunite families who have been separated, and enable children to be placed in alternative permanent settings should reunification fail or not be an option became the focus of child welfare practice.

Yet dissatisfaction with the growing numbers of children in out-of-home care and a concern that safety issues were being ignored in an effort to preserve families at any cost continued. In the late 1990s, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) established safety, permanence, and well-being as appropriate child welfare national goals.<sup>5</sup> This legislation refocused attention on child safety, and modified the reasonable effort requirement of P.L. 96-272 by providing specific situations in which states were not required to make efforts to keep children with parents. New timelines for filing for termination of parental rights and new timeframes for permanency hearings were established to reduce overly long stays in out-of-home care and to facilitate the adoption of waiting children. Reasonable efforts to place children were to be made concurrently with efforts to preserve or reunify families [Katz 1999]. Indicative of the change in public sentiment toward family preservation, the Family Preservation and Family Support Program, originally funded through the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993, was renamed the Promoting Safe



and Stable Families Program [Berry 1997]. Some program funds were also allocated to time-limited reunification and adoption promotion and support services, whereas they were previously directed to families whose children were still in the home.

In essence, the Adoption and Safe Families Act requires that permanency planning efforts begin much earlier in a child welfare case. Some of the practice skills and techniques that are required by this law include expedited termination of parental rights, development of concurrent case plans, prompt and accurate identification of situations in which reasonable efforts may be waived, and consideration of a broader base of permanent placement options, including kinship care, legal guardianships, and adoptive families [Zlotnik 1998]. Although in the past child welfare workers may have identified with one primary area of practice (e.g., family preservation, family reunification, or adoption), child welfare practitioners today and in the future will need to be competent in all aspects of permanency planning. Agencies must meet new timelines and conditions for filing termination of parental rights, while concurrently identifying, recruiting, processing, and approving qualified adoptive families. They will face and need to meet an increased demand for trained workers who have the skills to conduct home studies and adoption assessments.<sup>6</sup> Another critical skill area needed will be the ability to plan for permanency in kinship care [Bonecutter & Gleeson 1997].

Changes in the law also reinforce the need for comprehensive assessment and case planning skills, which are both child and family focused, coupled with the appropriate use of risk assessment and safety planning guidelines. Current risk assessment tools and computer technology must be applied appropriately to this new focus. Additionally, the need to work within a shortened time frame must be balanced with relationship building and engagement with the family.

Collaboration with the wide range of agencies and resources likely to be needed for concurrent case planning is also essential. Learning how to integrate various treatment approaches (includ-

ing those for treatment of substance abuse or domestic violence) into child welfare practice will also be a continuing need. Among the challenges will be balancing the new timelines for termination of parental rights with what is known about recovery from substance abuse, and knowing what types of intervention techniques hold the most promise and relevance for developing case plans to address substance abuse issues [Hohman 1998; Tracy 1994; Blythe et al. 1991].

A number of recent practice trends, in addition to those prompted by new legislation, have and will continue to shape the scope and context of child welfare practice. Among these are meeting the needs of special populations (e.g., medically fragile, HIV-affected, gay/lesbian youths), and serving the needs of children and families of color involved with the child welfare system [Barbell & Wright 1999].

In general, emphasis has increased on child welfare practice approaches that are reflective of and responsive to children and families from diverse backgrounds and life-styles [Liederman 1995; Cohen 1992]. Among one of the more controversial issues in this regard has been transracial adoption. Although P.L. 103-382, the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, signed into law in 1994, prohibits denying a placement based solely on race, the consideration of the cultural, ethnic, or racial background of the child and the capacity of the caregivers to relate to the child's background still remain important practice issues [Courtney 1997; U.S. General Accounting Office 1998]. Minority children have not fared well in the child welfare system; disproportionate numbers of minority children enter the child welfare system and remain in care for lengthy periods [Brown & Bailey-Etta 1997]. As we anticipate an increasingly diverse American society, one of the challenges will be to prepare practitioners to plan for permanent and culturally responsive home environments for children. Child welfare workers will likely benefit from training in how to assess and document special needs based on race or ethnicity and how

best to determine if a prospective foster or adoptive family can meet or be helped to meet those needs [Brooks et al. 1999].

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## **Recommendations for Education and Training**

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Based on the above discussion of societal and professional trends that are likely to influence child welfare practice, the following recommendations are offered for the preparation of competent professionals. Five interrelated themes are dominant in these recommendations: (1) collaboration, (2) family involvement and a family-focused approach, (3) multiculturalism, (4) child well-being, and (5) competency based education and training approaches.

### *Collaboration*

The mandate for concurrent case planning, coupled with the fact that the target population for child welfare services is likely to be a diverse one with multiple needs, will demand more comprehensive assessments and service planning on the part of child welfare practitioners than ever before. Effective collaboration between child welfare agencies and the courts, mental health care, health care, education, substance abuse, and income support systems will be needed simply to meet the basic requirements of the law [Zlotnick 1998]. In the wake of recent incidents of youth violence, many communities are even now looking for methods to increase communication and coordination among courts, child welfare agencies, and schools [Wingo & Denihan 1999].

As the social service system works to develop family-centered, community-based, integrated service systems, child welfare services will need to collaborate closely with the continuum of services available in a community [Corrigan & Bishop 1997]. Practice innovations designed to foster collaboration, such as the use of pooled funding, standardized intake procedures, co-location of staff from different systems, and intersystem or interdisciplinary teams, will be increasingly common in the future.<sup>7</sup> In addi-

tion, practice methods that involve the practitioner with multiple levels of the client's environment will receive more emphasis in professional education as well [Kemp et al. 1997; Henggler et al. 1993].

Increasingly, education and training will need to emphasize collaboration skills; collaborative relationships between agencies and universities will need to be strengthened; and joint cross system training sessions (e.g., police, teachers, and social workers) will become more commonplace. Goals for increased collaboration will more likely be achieved when agencies and schools work together to developing funding for education and training initiatives that they jointly sponsor [Zlotnick 1998]; when they use methods such as training councils, where representatives from other systems such as the courts and law enforcement work jointly to develop cross-system training activities; and when there are increased exchanges between social work faculty and agency personnel for purposes of teaching, training, program planning, and research.

### *Family Involvement and Family-Centered Services*

Current social work practice philosophies, as well as the child welfare legislation of the past decade, support intervention techniques that respect and strengthen family ties and reflect the role and importance of extended families, neighborhoods, and communities [Saleebey 1997]. Trends have favored—and will likely continue to favor—the development of family-friendly approaches to practice, that is, the use of methods that involve all family members in service planning and decisionmaking and that make use of and mobilize community and family strengths and resources [Adams & Nelson 1995].

Family-centered child welfare practice recognizes that the welfare of the child is intricately intertwined with the welfare of the family. The recent development of family group decisionmaking or family group conferencing within child welfare is one such example of involving family members and extended family net-

works in creative solutions to family problems [Connolly & McKenzie 1999]. Some of the knowledge and skills needed to implement such an approach include assessing and engaging social network resources, working with formal and informal support networks, providing concrete as well as clinical services, and implementing micro as well as macro social work approaches with at-risk populations.

### *Multiculturalism*

If by the year 2020 in the United States, immigration will be the largest source of population growth, and if predictions about population growth are true, use of the term *minority group* to describe people of color will become obsolete sometime in the next century when their numbers are expected to constitute half of our nation's population [Reeser 1996]. These trends—and the fact that child welfare clients are so disproportionately families of color—make multiculturalism an imperative for the agencies who serve them [Gutiérrez & Nagda 1996].<sup>8</sup>

Multiculturalism goes beyond cultural competence, which stresses shaping program and practice around an understanding of the influences of culture and ethnicity [Liederman 1995; Hasenfeld 1996]. A multicultural agency, according to Gutiérrez and Nagda, works for social change and social justice for clients, staff, and the community. Such an agency, in addition to “appreciating, celebrating and valuing client strengths... strives for the workplace to be an endeavor in multicultural learning, supporting, challenging, and growing for its members” [Gutiérrez & Nagda 1996: 206]. The goals of multiculturalism are more likely to be achieved when professionals have skills for building coalitions and networks among ethnically and racially diverse groups and organizations in the community; when training and organization development activities focus on new skills and knowledge about culture and ethnicity; and when professionals have research and planning skills that enable them to forecast changes (especially demographic changes) and develop new program initia-

tives accordingly. Moreover, as Hasenfeld [1996] has noted, to reach its diverse client population, an agency may need to link with local organizations, to use them as sites in which to offer services, and to develop local residents as service liaisons. These changes in service delivery will demand new planning and negotiating skills. Finally, within the next several decades, all child welfare personnel will need to become bilingual or even multilingual.

### *Child Well-Being*

Children are the poorest Americans. Over 20% of all children (14.3 million) in the United States are poor [Gustavsson & Segal 1994]. Poor children are much more likely to live in a one-parent family, reside in an impoverished neighborhood, be at risk of developmental delays and disabilities, experience problems in learning and at school, be exposed to family and community violence, and, in general, have access to fewer family and community supports than their better-off counterparts. These are the children and families who are most likely to be served by child welfare agencies.

Training and education for child welfare practice can no longer focus solely on child welfare as the formal system of services for families in need, but must adopt a broader scope. The child welfare practitioner of the future will need to attend to the well-being of all children in the community and should possess some understanding of child growth and development in the broadest sense [Andrews & BenArieh 1999]. Advocacy for and with children and families, and for a continuum of services and community factors that promote healthy development should be part of the child welfare practice repertoire. Along these lines, informative and appropriate outcome measures that tap child well-being will be needed. In addition, collaborative research projects that make the best use of agency and academic resources and that seek answers to practice questions derived from the field will be increasingly relevant. Moreover, as mentioned above, skills for

collaboration, network building, and cross-system work will be the key to effective programming and practice. Effective advocacy skills will be needed in the call for universal health care, adequate early intervention programs, quality child care (especially for families leaving welfare), and other efforts that take a developmental approach to children's well being [Sarri 1996].

### *Competency-Based Training*

Among the more promising approaches to content and structure in training is the competency-based approach. In its broadest sense, *competency-based training* is "designing, delivering, and evaluating training that ties worker performance to the goals of an organization and its deployment of resources" [Warsh et al. 1994: 6]. This approach delineates the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes for a particular area of practice around which curriculum content and approaches are then developed [Hughes & Rycus 1989]. Schools and agencies can work together both to design and deliver competency-based training. Friction caused by differing expectations and needs is minimized when there is agreement about training outcomes and these are jointly evaluated. Moreover, the learning needs of individual staff members can be better planned for using a competency-based approach to design both social work curricula and child welfare agency inservice training. Competency-based training and education can be delivered through new and old methods: through interactive distance learning, through computer-assisted training, in the classroom, and even by reestablishing field units in child welfare agencies (an early approach to practicum learning in social work education) [Lloyd 1987].

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### **Conclusion**

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Education and training can prepare child welfare professionals to face the future and to do what is best for society's most vulner-

able families and their children. Child welfare agencies and schools of social work must take up the challenge to form or expand partnerships aimed at cross-system collaboration, multiculturalism at all levels, and family-centered and involved approaches with a broader view of child well-being. In addition, a competency-based approach to assessing and meeting the learning needs of professionals involved in designing and delivering services, can help to ensure that educational efforts attain their desired ends. ♦

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## Notes

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1. The authors agree with others (e.g., Downs et al. [1996]) that it would be preferable to define *child welfare* as a concept that focuses on the broader needs and efforts for assuring children's well-being rather than limiting child welfare to a set of policy and program responses to children and their families already in trouble. This limitation is addressed in one of a set of recommendations in the last section of this article.
2. See Maluccio [1985] and Zlotnick et al. [1998] for a discussion of curriculum models in child welfare.
3. References to *practice* and *practitioner* encompass direct practice as well as community and management practice in child welfare.
4. See Maluccio [1985] for a discussion of the federal initiatives in child welfare education during the late 1970s and early 1980s.
5. See McGowan and Walsh (this issue) for further discussion of federal legislation affecting child welfare.
6. One school of social work has received a foundation grant to train selected second-year M.S.W. students in adoption assessment. With training and supervision from the school, the students will conduct adoptive home studies for the local public child welfare agency on a fee-for-service basis.
7. See, for example, Tracy et al. [1999] for a description of a statewide collaborative effort, and Warsh et al. [1996], for a comprehensive agency assessment process that, among other aspects of the child welfare agency's functioning, examines its effectiveness in working with nine other systems in behalf of children and families.



8. *The Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Instrument* published by the Child Welfare League of America (1993) provides a framework for determining an agency's cultural sensitivity in program, management, governance, and practice

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