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Shaping Attitudes in Public Child Welfare: An Innovative MSW Training Program

Susan M. Love and Venetta Campbell

Children investigated by child welfare are at significant risk for poor cognitive, emotional, social, behavioral and economic outcomes. In 2000, California formed the Child Welfare Services Group to propose changes in how child welfare services are delivered, the CWS Redesign. California State University, Long Beach's child welfare training program developed its complement. Fundamentally, Redesign calls for partnering with families and communities to strengthen families, prevent unnecessary placements or re-unite families successfully. These changes are a paradigm shift in attitudes toward birth families and communities. In a qualitative study, interns logged their observations and subsequent impressions of CWS-Client encounters to explore how attitudes are learned. Majority of interns observed positive, collaborative encounters and perceived birth parents as motivated. Their impressions support introducing interns to birth families on the front-end of CWS training.

Key words: child welfare, social work training, family preservation

As of July 1, 2005, there were over half a million children in foster care in the United States (C-CFSR, 2006). Most came from families that were unable to provide them with essential nurturing in a sober and safe environment. Of these children, 46% had experienced neglect, 27% were exposed to physical abuse, 11% to sexual abuse, and 7% to emotional abuse (NSCAW, 2005). Despite the fact that the majority of children in foster care have a court order for family re-unification services, statistics show that only about half of all children entering out-of-home care will successfully reunite with a parent (AFCARS, 2001).

The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being is the first national representative study on the wellbeing of children who have been brought to the attention of child welfare services. The survey showed that of those families investigated for child maltreatment, only 11% had children placed in out-of-home care, with the remaining 89% left at home (NSCAW, 2005). Of the families whose children remained at home, less than one out of four received services from child welfare services (CWS) after the initial investigation. In the Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS), "each year up to 33% of all referrals represent repeat referrals of the same family from the previous year" (*Redesign*, p. 13).

The NSCAW study (2005) also determined that all of the children, regardless of whether they were placed out-of-home or offered CWS services, were at high-risk for compromised development. On the Bayley Infant Neurological Screen (BINS), 53% of those tested were measured to be at high-risk for developmental delay. These results were consistent with the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI) mean scores at a full standard deviation below normal with 31% scoring two standard deviations below. The

Vineland Adaptive Behavior Skills test (VABS) was used to measure the children's social functioning and 38% were found to have "fewer" social skills, a level twice lower than what would be expected in a normal sample. These children were five times more likely to have behavior problems than their peers, and one quarter of them were reported by caregivers as having delinquency problems (again five times the rate of their peers in the general population.) Of the children between 11 and 15, about 25% reported having had sexual intercourse.

To summarize, most children investigated by CWS for possible maltreatment remain in the home, and few receive any further services beyond the initial investigation, regardless of the likelihood that this child and family will be reinvestigated at a future date. This lack of follow-up is a huge missed opportunity given that the children of investigated families are on a negative developmental trajectory toward cognitive, emotional, social and behavioral problems.

In California, the situation has become even more serious. California contains only 13% of the nation's total child population, yet it is home to 20% of the nation's foster children (CA Stakeholders Group, 2003). In 2000, California responded to these challenges by forming the Child Welfare Services Group, comprised of 60 locally and nationally known experts in the public and private child welfare community. The stakeholders group reclaimed the original vision of seeing: "Every child living in a safe, stable and permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities". *The CWS Redesign: The Future of California Child Welfare Services (CWS Redesign, final report 2003)* has been adopted as the blueprint to provide competent CWS to California's most vulnerable children and families. The CWS, *Redesign* was one of two major initiatives of the state legislature that have converged to produce a new climate. The second is the passing of AB636: *Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act*, which established a statewide outcome-based accountability system. If universities are going to meet the *Redesign's* mandate to "develop and sustain a high-capacity, competent and satisfied child welfare workforce who is prepared to fulfill the essential functions of the *Redesigned* child welfare system" (*Redesign*, p. 31), then universities that train MSWs in public child welfare must make a comparable paradigm shift in its internship program. "Transformative change involves three ingredients: (1) clear vision of a new reality; (2) specific tactics to get there, and (3) a means of checking progress along the way" (*Redesign*, p. 22). The California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) MSW internship program is meeting this challenge with its innovative training program, the *CWS Learning Plan*; the first cohort (class of 2006/2007) has completed its initial phase of training.

Training Interns in Public Child Welfare

There has been "marked growth in the quality and quantity of training in child welfare; however, there is still unmet need for rigorous evaluation of these newly developed components of training" (Doris, Mazur & Thomas, 1995, p. 479). In 1974, Congress passed landmark legislation in the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA; Public Law 93-273; 42 U.S.C. 5101). The act provided states

with funding for the investigation and prevention of child maltreatment, conditioned on states' adoption of mandatory reporting law. The impact of mandatory reporting was a surge in reports overwhelming the states' supply of competent professionals to investigate, intervene and care for abused children. By the 1980s, the care of abused children and their families had reached a crisis (Doris et al., 1995) and the unstructured, in-house and on the job experience supplemented with workshops and seminars could not meet the demands for a competent work force. In response to the crisis, federal Title IV-E funds were created in the 1980s to form university-child welfare agency training programs. "The US General Accounting Office (GAO) found the university-agency training partnerships to be promising practices for addressing the staffing crisis in child welfare, in part by improving both recruitment and retention (GAO, March 2003).

Training in child welfare has three critical components: (1) attitudes; (2) knowledge; and (3) skill-building (Leung & Cheung, 1998, p. 670). Clapton and Cree (2004), in an exhaustive review of the literature, found that transferring classroom knowledge into applied practice is difficult. "The nature and future of the relationship between 'field' and 'classroom' is crucial if learning for practice is to be integrated yet it appears that the extensive literature on these two pillars of social work education has yet to produce a working synthesis to integrate learning for practice" (Clapton & Cree, 2004, p. 12). This is no more critical than in public child welfare. How we think about vulnerable children and families, how we intervene and how we measure success are dependent upon our ability as professional educators to effectively integrate classroom and field. Partnership between university faculty and in-the-field practitioners is a golden opportunity to get it right. Universities by the mid-1990s developed explicit, written competencies in child welfare. "Descriptions of these competencies are plentiful, but evaluations are limited—evaluations are primarily focused on contents and immediate outcomes of training. Rarely do researchers report empirical evidence to identify the long-term effect of CPS training" (Leung et al., p. 670).

Research on the effectiveness of training is sorely limited. "Although training in child welfare as an intervention to promote effective performance on the job (transfer of learning—TOL) as well as staff retention, there is not a preponderance of empirical evidence to support this practice" (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005, p. 931). Vinkur-Kaplan (1986) in a national sample, surveyed child welfare workers and supervisors to evaluate the workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of received trainings. The factors that students rated most highly were: relevance, qualified training staff, adequate agency support, and sufficient time off. Jones, Stevenson, Leung and Cheung (1995) in another national survey, found that states' training programs emphasized 7 CPS priorities: case planning, cultural issues, family preservation, interventions, investigation and assessment, legal issues, and substance abuse. Although "some states report that their training efforts have been evaluated, minimum research has focused on the long-term effectiveness of CPS training" (Jones et al., p. 669). Leung and Cheung (1998) in a quasi experiment compared improvements in knowledge and performance of child welfare trainees to current workers. They followed 152 trainees and 52 controls (present CPS workers) over two years. The research team found that although trainees had significantly better scores in knowledge and skills from pre to post training, that over time, they were not more knowledgeable than those caseworkers who learned exclusively on the job. As importantly, some attitudes

changed as a function of training, but most did not. Trainees in child welfare entered with attitudes that they retained regardless of the trainers' efforts to shape them. Although knowledge deficits can be compensated by supplying more information, and skills can be learned through guided practice, "attitudes are clearly not so easily influenced or changed" (Stevenson, Cheung & Leung, 1992, p. 2).

Shaping attitudes in public child welfare: an exploratory study, presents an innovative training program to improve attitudes, knowledge, and skills of graduate-student interns. It also explores how this unique integration of theory and field in a university training program influences the intern's attitudes toward vulnerable families. Given the lack of published studies on the impact of child welfare training, starting with an exploratory study provides the best opportunity to yield new insights and set the ground work for further research. "Exploratory studies are very valuable in social work research" (Rubin & Babbie, 2005, p. 124), when breaking ground into an area that has limited research.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the *CWS Learning Plan's* impact on emerging perceptions and attitudes of MSW interns toward birth families and communities as they began their hands-on work with public child welfare in Los Angeles County. This qualitative study explored the initial three months of the MSW intern's public child welfare field experience.

Programs and Strategies

California CWS "Redesign"

The Child Welfare Services *Redesign* is a long-term strategic plan to help California realize a new vision for child welfare. The *Redesign* emphasizes five goals, to: PREVENT child maltreatment; PRESERVE and strengthen families while the child continues to live at home; RESTORE family capacity for placed children to safely return home; REBUILD lives for placed children who will not be able to return home; and PREPARE youth to enter adulthood as members of a family/community. The *Redesign* shifts the focus from "rescuing" children to building stronger families, partnering with communities and providing planned, evidence-based interventions for children and families that yield explicit, measurable outcomes.

The Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) has adopted specific evidence-based practices to achieve the *Redesign's* goals including Points of Engagement (POE), Structured Decision Making (SDM), Team Decision Making (TDM), Community Partners (CP) and Permanency Partners Program (P3). Public child welfare is not only composed of structures, policies and practices, but also perceptions, attitudes and shared meaning. Historically, the public child welfare system has operated from the belief that individual families are the root causes of maltreatment, and as a result, the structural or institutional problems inherent in our society have been largely ignored. This attitude of "parental blame and punishment does not necessarily make children safer and holds unintended consequences for child and family wellbeing" (*Redesign*, p. 24). These consequences include failing to achieve permanent families

prior to emancipation for many youth, as well as failing to provide at-risk families with the services required to modify their child's negative developmental trajectory. To be effective, Children Social Workers (CSW) need to shift their attention from "substantiating" abuse to creating collaborative, respectful and empowering relationships with the birth families. CSWs need to value the birth family as the client (and/or resource) and not the "problem". In order for the *Redesign* to be implemented effectively, we need to understand the initial experiences that shape a social worker's personal attitudes, as it is these attitudes that will ultimately shape the culture of public child welfare.

The CWS Learning Plan

Overview of the CWS LP

Ideally, interns will have the opportunity to follow a specific case from a Hotline call, dependency investigation, disposition hearing, and team planning to resolution. The intern would be instrumental in helping to link troubled families with relevant and timely community services. All of the experiences of the MSW interns are carefully nurtured and guided by one of two field instructors, both DCFS supervising county social workers assigned exclusively to the CWS internship project. The field instructors' experience in DCFS gives the interns invaluable wisdom and expertise, while their exclusive connection with the CWS gives focus and attention to the student's learning needs.

Objectives

The CWS LP was developed to prepare students to be leaders in the DCFS' work force who could meet the current challenges and implement the *Redesign*. The three principal objectives of the CWS LP are to:

1. Move students systematically through child welfare PROCESS from Hotline calls to Permanency Planning programs— thus exposing MSW interns to the experiences, challenges and opportunities for change at each important juncture
2. Work on the FRONT END to teach students how to maintain and strengthen family relationships—preventing unnecessary out of home placements and/ or returning children to safe, nurturing families
3. Partner with COMMUNITIES to establish collaborative relationships and to successfully link high-risk families with community agencies and resources that not only can help strengthen families but help to sustain them

The CWS LP initiates students to both the processes and the strategies of the *Redesign* by starting MSW interns in the Emergency Services Department (ER). In this two-week assignment, interns shadow Hotline calls and "ride along" on maltreatment investigations. The ER assignment is followed by a week in Dependency Investigation Services (DI) where the student shadows assessments of family and community collaterals. This introduction to the ER and DI is intended to give students an experience-based context to appreciate the complexities of *the work* while exposing students to Points of Engagement (POE) strategies including Structured Decision Making (SDM). The interns are each assigned to a preceptor at the beginning of their fieldwork. The preceptor, a case-carrying CSW, selects a specific case or cases for the

intern to follow starting with a family supervised by DCFS where the child remains in the home receiving Family Maintenance (FM) services. The intern co-facilitates interventions with their preceptor, who also includes the student in other activities surrounding that child and family, such as court hearings and Team Decision Making (TDM). As the student becomes more skilled and confident the CSW will select a second case, in which the intern will assume a more primary role. The CWS LP is structured to expose MSW interns to POE strategies from Hotline to case disposition, so that students will experience the logic and continuity of front-end decisions.

Strategies

1. Shadowing Emergency Services and Dependency Investigations

Typically a child and family are brought to the attention of DCFS via a call to the Hotline. This is true whether the reporter is mandated, such as a teacher, physician or social worker, or a member of the community such as a concerned neighbor or relative. DCFS recently embraced POE as a set of strategies for making the transfer of responsibility from front-end investigation to actual service delivery both seamless and timely. POE, as all programs in the Department, utilizes the research based, objective assessment tools of SDM. These tools are completed at each critical decision point in the life of the case to guide workers in their decision making, including response time, whether to open a case, family strengths and needs, child safety and possible need for out of home placement, and when it is appropriate to return a child home or close a case. SDM discriminates low, moderate, high and very high-risk cases to assure a more appropriate response. SDM combined with safety assessment is used determine placement decisions and to PREVENT low risk cases from entering unnecessary placements. POE also uses TDM strategies to expand the decision making body to include multiple stakeholders such as extended-family members and community partners. In the CWS Learning Plan, MSW interns are assigned to a specific CSW in Emergency Services and Dependency Investigation Services, so that they can shadow POE activities, and learn POE strategies through actual case experience.

2. Co-leading family maintenance cases with an assigned CSW

The second principle of the *Redesign* is to PRESERVE families in their communities. Specifically in Los Angeles County, one of the three key goals in implementing the *Redesign* is to reduce reliance on detentions. Once a family has been investigated and accusations of maltreatment have been substantiated, the child may remain in the home if safety can be reasonably assured. A family in this situation may elect to be supervised voluntarily, or the CSW may decide that the case would be better managed through involuntary court supervision. In either case, the family receives family maintenance services from a CSW. Consistent with the *Redesign*, family maintenance services help families build successful and long-term partnerships with community agencies and resources. MSW interns learn directly through co-leading with the preceptor (case carrying CSW) how to PRESERVE and strengthen families while the child continues to live at home.

3. Community networking activities and exploration of community context (systematic planned activities lead by the CWS Field Education Consultant)

One of the most significant changes proposed in the *Redesign* is the idea of partnering with communities to support and strengthen families. It is critical that students at their orientation to public child welfare learn how to work within a community. To help students become effective in community work, the CWS LP asks students to participate in regular meetings that focus solely on applying a Social Ecology Model in public child welfare. These discussions, *Community Consultation Meetings*, help students to think from a *person-in-environment* perspective, and allows for problem solving with colleagues on how to identify helpful community services and agencies and how to link families to relevant community partners. *Community Consultation Meetings*, lead by the CWS Field Education Consultant (University faculty), are a focused effort to introduce students to established community partners in their Service Planning Areas (SPA) in Los Angeles County, and to participate in a dialogue about what services are lacking in the community. Students are also encouraged to attend community-planning meetings and to visit specific agencies for added exposure. Once a student takes a case, he/she is asked to connect the children and their families to community partners; this helps teach the intern the skills and strategies of effective linking. If a family is successfully linked to an effective community partner, that link not only contributes to a host of positive changes right away, but will also help sustain that family's progress after exiting DCFS supervision—and PREVENTING future maltreatment.

4. Assignment of a placed child (or siblings) that are either in a kinship or non-relative foster placement with a court order for family re-unification services

The MSW intern is assigned to a preceptor (case carrying CSW) who supervises and supports the intern's learning opportunities to RESTORE family capacity for placed children to safely return home. Student interns have an opportunity to support Family Visitation Plans and to link to Community Partners their assigned families. The plan is to have each student facilitate both a kinship and non-relative foster placement to help the student understand their unique opportunities and challenges.

Methods

Design

According to Rubin and Babbie (2007) "One of the key strengths of qualitative research is the comprehensiveness of perspective it gives the researcher. By going directly to the social phenomenon under study and observing it as completely as possible, you can develop a deeper understanding of it" (p. 237).

This is an exploratory study of interns' individual field research within the CWS training program. The study employed qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured observations of intern training encounters. Interns were asked to log their qualitative observations of CSW-Client or Intern-Client interactions and their subsequent impressions on semi-structured client-logs. The client-log is consistent with the typology: *environment* (department, activity and client), *role* of the observer, and *impressions*. Interns during initial encounters move between continuums from complete

observer, observer-as-participant, to complete participant. The observation questions were formulated to help interns in the process of observation and researchers during content analysis to differentiate between the *emic* perspective – trying to adopt the beliefs, attitudes and other points of view shared by the members of the culture being studied, and the *etic* perspective – allowing researchers to maintain their objectivity as an outsider and to raise questions about the culture they are observing that wouldn't occur to members of that culture (Rubin & Babbie, 2007, p. 247).

Interns

All 16 interns from the fall 2006 CWS program were invited to participate in the study, and all had been selected from the California State University Long Beach MSW graduate program. Selection was based primarily on having good academic standing and a sincere motivation to work with this population. The CWS internship is a specialized stipend fieldwork program (under the Title IV-E funds) to prepare MSW students in public child welfare for Department of Child and Family Services. Students in the program have a one-year commitment to work for DCFS immediately following graduation.

Procedures

The 16 CWS interns were introduced to the research and invited to participate on August 30, 2006. Fifteen of the 16 CWS interns volunteered and signed Consents. Although the CWS fieldwork placement began the first week of September, students did not shadow in Emergency Service until late September and Dependency Investigations until mid-October. Most students however, were assigned a preceptor by mid-September and began facilitating or co-facilitating family maintenance services that allowed them to log encounters as observers or observer-participants of CSW-Client interactions. All data was collected by November 22, 2006, the end of Fall academic semester. Client-log forms were available to the interns at their fieldwork site, along with a locked “mailbox” in which to deposit the anonymous logs.

Instrument

The researchers for the purpose of this study created the semi-structured client-logs to capture the environment, role of the observer, and impression of the intern as she observed interactions between CSW (or, self in the role of CSW) and a client. Encounters included listening to Hotline calls, determining differential response categories, Team Decision Making planning, interviewing clients at home or in the community, interviewing collaterals, and contacts with community partners. Interns were asked to make systematic observations describing their environment (department, activity, and client), their role in the observation (observer, observer-participant or participant) and their impressions.

To explore the question of what shapes child welfare workers' attitudes and culture, interns were asked on the client-log to respond to three open ended questions: (1) Impressions of birth parent, kinship or foster caregiver? (2) Best way to approach a similar situation in the future? (3) Your future role in public child welfare? Additionally, to assess interns' use of evidence-based practice in making clinical

decisions, interns were asked on the client-log to rank 'learning opportunities' that helped them understand the encounter (i.e. classes, field seminar, intuition).

Analysis

Semi-structured observation logs were used to assess interns' developing attitudes regarding child welfare populations and practice decisions. Borrowing a conceptual framework from the goals for public child welfare employees under the Child Welfare Services *Redesign* the variables of attitudes and practice decisions were assessed according to their degree of a *collaborative, respectful and empowering relationship* with the birth family and use of *evidence based practice*.

Both manifest and latent content of client-logs were coded under the typology of environment, role and impression. For example within environment, department, activities and client were coded; within role, the role of the observer was coded; and, within impressions, attitudes and perspectives were coded. Interns' perceptions of the quality of the CSW-Client encounter were analyzed from strengths perspective: (1) Was the client respected as an expert on their own life (CI Expert)? (2) Was the client allowed to be an active participant (CI Active)? (3) Was the encounter collaborative (Collaborative)? (4) Was the CSW engaging of the client (Engaging)? (5) Was the client empowered (Empowered)? (6) Was the encounter solution focused (Solution focus)? And, (7) Was the focus on the future (Future focus)? Client-logs were also analyzed by coding the entire log for comprehensive meaning.

Results and Discussion

Fifteen (15) of the 16 student-interns volunteered to participate in the study. The fifteen interns completed client-logs for a total of thirty-eight (38) encounters. The environments that the interns logged were evenly divided between ER (n = 15) and FM (n = 15) with a few from DI (n = 3), Permanency Planning (n = 3), and Adoptions (n=1) departments within DCFS. All of the logged encounters were face to face. Twenty-five (25) of the encounters were in the client's home, eight (8) were in the community, and two (2) were at TDM meetings. The interns logged CSW-birth parent encounters twenty (20) times, CSW-child encounters fifteen (15) times, CSW-non-relative foster caregiver once (1) and CSW-Kinship foster caregiver once (1). One (1) intern did not identify the client in the encounter.

The interns, as expected, had different roles in the encounters. The intern was a complete observer in nineteen (19), observer-participant in nine (9), and complete participant in ten (10) logged encounters. Interns were very likely to be complete observers in Emergency (ER) encounters (n= 13/15) and not likely in Family Maintenance (FM) encounters (n = 3/15). Similar to ER, interns in Dependency Investigation (DI) encounters were complete observers (n= 3/3). Whereas, interns in Permanency Planning (PP) (n= 3/3), Family Reunification (FR) (n = 1/1) and adoptions (n = 1/1) were either observer-participants or complete participants.

The client-logs captured a range of positive impressions by the interns regarding the quality of observed CSW-Client interactions. Primarily the interns perceived the encounters as collaborative, respectful and empowering family relationships. Interns observed CSW's respect their client as the expert on their own life; allow their clients to

be active participants; build a collaborative relationship with their client; engage and empower their client; and stay solution focused and future focused. The positive attributes assigned to their observations, though, were not evenly distributed across environments. FM observations were universally positive; whereas ER, although mostly positive, were not as strongly positive. There was a distinct relationship between whether the encounter was in Emergency Services (ER) or Family Maintenance (FM) and the intern's positive impression of the encounter.

Interns' Observation Environments

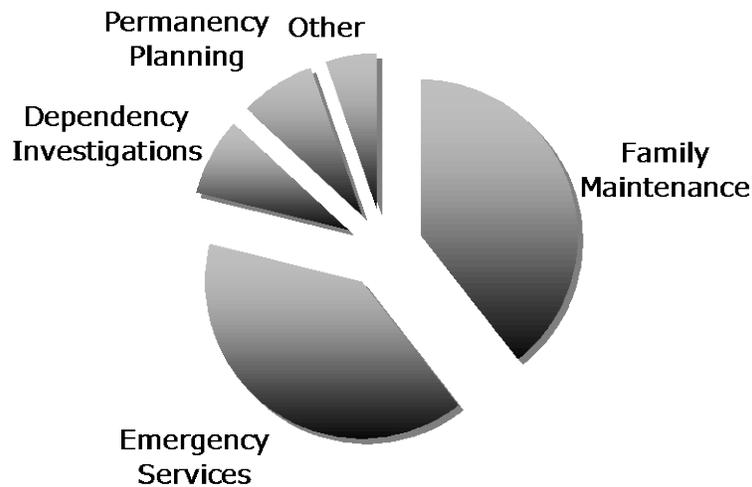


Figure 1: Child welfare department in which the intern observed CSW-Client encounters

Interns were asked to rank what they perceived to be most influential in understanding what they were observing: "Reflecting on the following 'opportunities for learning', what helped you understand this client-CSW or client-Intern interaction?" Interns ranked their *intuition* as most influential ($x=5.63$), *DCFS trainings* as second ($x=5.34$), *supervision* as third ($x=4.67$), *classes* including written materials as fourth ($x=4.16$) and *field seminar* as last ($x=3.45$), on a seven point Likert scale, from least to most helpful. The students' beliefs about what influences their learning is concerning. The students think that their own intuition (what they brought to graduate school) has more influence on their understanding of a professional intervention than what they are learning either in the classroom or in weekly field seminar at the University. These

heuristic beliefs are counter to evidence based practice that requires social workers to research best practices when making clinical decisions—drawing upon explicit learning and current journal articles to inform decisions.

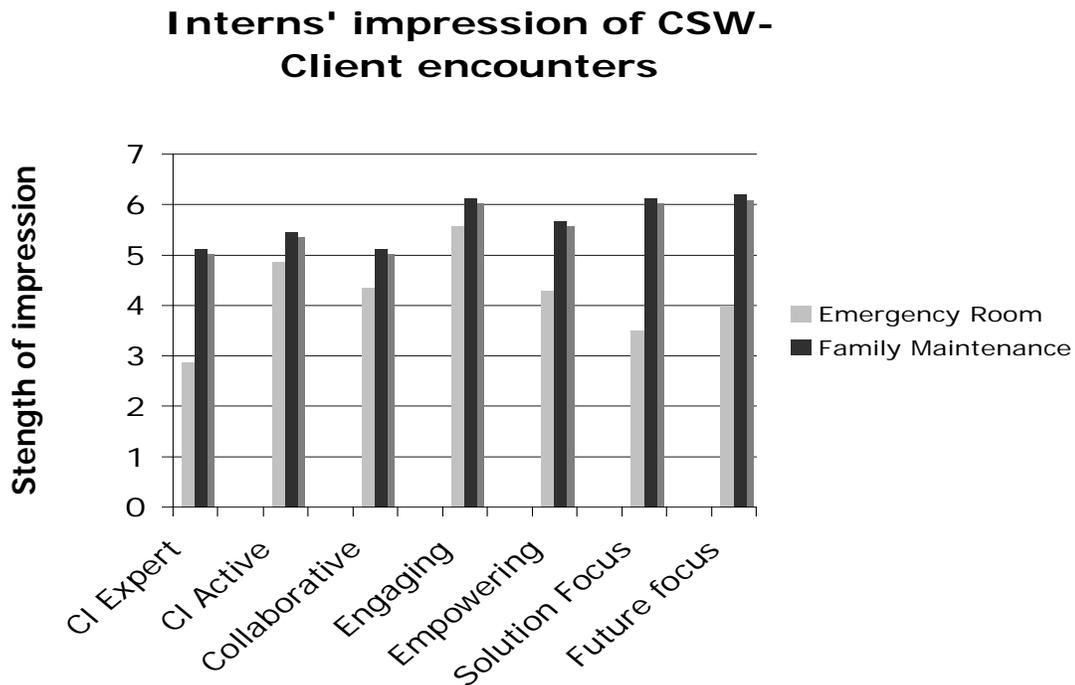


Figure 2: Interns' impression of CSW-Client encounters

The question that this study hoped to illuminate is how the environment, role and impressions shape emerging attitudes and culture of new workers in public child welfare. The observations of birth families appeared to make strong impressions on the students. Students perceived birth parents, primarily, as cooperative, motivated and wanting services to help them and their children. Those students who observed positive collaborative CSW-parent encounters often wrote that the experience motivated them to do child welfare. Not all students observed cooperative birth families; a birth mother was observed to be demanding and controlling not only to the CSW, but to the children and other family members. Some of the interns expressed empathy for the parent. A few students talked about the parent being overwhelmed either with their parenting or the case plan. One student wrote that the mother appeared depressed and sad.

In these encounters the interns frequently logged that they would like to be advocates. One student put it succinctly, “to advocate for the needs and well being of the children and to assist their families in being able to do so”. A student logged that meeting with a parent was an enlightening experience after reading the case report and

that she will in the future meet with the parent sooner and more often. Two interns logged that they had the opportunity to talk with the father of the children. One intern noted that the father could be a resource when the mother was unavailable or incapable of parenting and the other intern noted that she was surprised at how talkative and candid the father was, noting “he gave more information than needed”. In summary the experiences for the interns of observing birth families was rich and meaningful. As one intern wrote, “this just gets me excited to start working the case. I am happy to be part of child welfare.”

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Given the small sample size ($n = 15$) and that it was a sample of convenience, the results of this study cannot be generalized beyond the fifteen interns that participated in the study. Also, the IUC program is only offered to a select number of graduate social work programs in Southern California. Thus, the results may only apply to interns completing specialized training in public child welfare in Los Angeles County.

This study can help inform educators of MSW graduates entering public child welfare. This qualitative study indicates that students benefit from shadowing on the front-end in child welfare. Future research could explore the feasibility of applying the IUC Learning Plan within other university-based Title IV-E child welfare training programs. The long term impact of this training on CPS workers’ effectiveness and retention would best be addressed in a longitudinal study.

Suggestions for Future Training

Clearly, the CWS LP structure has successfully given student-interns a comprehensive and systematic exposure to DCFS operations, organization culture, and diverse career opportunities for CSW’s. The varied shadowing experiences have gently guided students through the challenges of child welfare practice. This phased approach fosters appreciation for the actual work. Similarly, expanding the student-interns role to observant-participant and complete participant has an empowering effect on students, building confidence in their work capacity, thus mediating future burnout. Through these environmental exposures, students can make informed decisions about the workforce. This structure should be maintained through the academic year.

From a practical standpoint, the systematic exposure should be modified to include a designated number of core environment-activities rather than solely based upon academic calendar or preceptor assignments. For example, many student-intern shadowing experiences were delayed due to unit staffing changes (promotions, reassignments, etc). If core activities are assigned, then student-interns will be assured purposeful unit exposure with minimal interruptions.

The student-intern early interactions with birth mothers, critical community resources, and collaborative interactions between DCFS and community partners creates an “other-centered” perspective which supports a strengths-based approach to child welfare practice. At the outset, student-interns are exposure to an integrated approach to child welfare practice as opposed to compartmentalization. This community partner exposure and the invaluable experience of Family Maintenance (vs. Permanency

Planning cases) enable interns to appreciate and collaborate and with birth families. This vital model of client advocacy should be continued as well.

The interns' primary reliance upon intuition in decision-making clearly warrants early academic exposure to evidence-based practices (EBP). Within the CWS LP, students have been introduced to EBP in Community Partners Orientation. However, given the volume of trainings offered to date, linking the information may prove challenging. This information will be infused throughout the academic year to insure better integration.

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