

We Really Should Get on With It: An Argument for Not Assuming Social Workers Make Better Child Welfare Workers Than Non-Social Workers

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Being in full support of asking the question, “Do social workers make better child welfare workers?” we must be open to what we might find. It may bring us closer to what practices work and what practices do not work for children and families. By framing the issue in this way, we remove the debate about social worker usefulness in child welfare and move toward advancing the field of child welfare. Perhaps child welfare is child welfare and not social work; perhaps social workers do child welfare better than those with different educational backgrounds. We do not know. Grappling with this question should push all social workers (administrators, researchers, clinicians, practitioners, community organizers, and case managers) to advocate for necessary system change so that more focused studies can be done to improve practice to better help the children and families.

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In reading Dr. Robin Perry’s article on whether social workers make better child welfare workers than non-social workers, I found myself intentionally looking to find fault with the study in whatever way I could. This indicates a bias toward assuming or intuitively feeling that social workers do make better child welfare workers. After all, I am a social worker, and I have worked in the child welfare field since 1986. So, it seems I have good reasons to try to find fault with the findings of the study. After further thought, however, it is apparent to me that what this study does is shed light on the many ways in which we judge child welfare workers, what they do, what they don’t do, how they do it, and, finally, how well they do it. Dr. Perry studied the performance evaluation method that Florida State has implemented. Performance evaluations are flawed at best for many reasons, not the least of which is the bias and incompetence (by no fault of his or her own) of the evaluator. There are rarely any tutorials that train supervisors to evaluate their workers properly, how to use the instruments, and so on. In addition, in this case peers were also doing the evaluating, thus adding to the reliability questions. Conversely, when research is

done, it is virtually unheard of to not train a researcher in how to use a particular instrument, and yet in the child welfare system, it appears to be okay to allow shoddy research methods when evaluating the high-stakes work of child welfare workers.

Another reason that performance evaluations can be flawed when assessing whether social workers make better child welfare workers is that evaluating a worker’s performance within the context of the organization is, in reality, different than assessing competent practice. When looking at the performance expectations identified in this study, it is evident they are driven by agency expectations of compliance, administration, funding, and the law. Within those performance expectations, I found very little that reflected the expectation that social workers should practice their craft (not to mention there really is little agreement on what competent practice is). Furthermore, there is little evidence that these performance expectations have any positive correlation to positive outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system. In other words, the practice of social workers is dictated by the agency that often does not have much room to reinforce social work practice because it is driven by accessing and maintaining funding.

With all of these faults (I really don’t have any idea if they are really faults because I am not a researcher), I found myself questioning the basic premise that social workers are better child welfare workers. I found myself wanting more, wanting the next question to be asked, the

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next study to be done, which is why I think we really should get on with it. By this I mean that the only real measure of whether social workers make better child welfare workers is to study the outcomes that are achieved (or not) by the children and families in the child welfare system and linking those back to the educational background of the worker. Of course, the work does not end there. As is clear, there are many moderating and control variables that need to be resolved, but the focus of any study from here on should be on the linkage between educational background and the outcomes of the children and families. Anything short of this, in my opinion, is a waste of time.

We now have enough data as a result of more than a decade of Title IV-E educational programs (both master's of social work and bachelor of social work) and in-service training. We are closer to developing a consensus on competent child welfare practices. Furthermore, because of the federal child and family services reviews, we also have child and family outcome data. If we were really serious about finding out what kind of practice has the most beneficial effect on children and families in the child welfare system, it would be the norm to have human resources data linked to case management and outcomes data so that staff performance indicators became linked to the outcomes of the children and families, thus putting the whole issue of staff performance into a different context.

I am in full support of Dr. Perry's willingness to actually ask the question, "Do social workers make better child welfare workers than non-social workers?" By asking this question and being open to what we might find, it may bring us closer to what practices work and what practices do not work. By framing the issue in this way, we remove the debate about social worker usefulness in child welfare and move toward advancing the field of child welfare. Perhaps child welfare is child welfare and not social work; perhaps social workers do child welfare

better than do those with different educational backgrounds. We do not know. It seems to me that those of us who are grappling with this question must free ourselves from wanting social workers to do child welfare best so that we can best use our skills as administrators, researchers, clinicians, practitioners, community organizers, and case managers to move the necessary systems in such a way that the most useful studies can be done to better help the children and families.

When I began working in child welfare, I was not a social worker. However, I got into it because I loved children and I wanted to help make their lives better in some way. As such, I think our efforts should be focused on identifying what practices work best in child welfare. If we believe that social work is the best home in which these practices should live, then it may mean adjusting social work curriculum to ensure that students develop these practices if they want to work in child welfare. I continue to struggle with the differences in perception between the practice community and the social work education community. Members of each think they know the best way to practice. In reality, we have no real evidence that a degree in social work makes a better child welfare worker. For all the potential limitations of Dr. Perry's study, I concur with his findings and feel that being closer to saying that this is a fact troubles me greatly and makes me want to say again, "We really should get on with it!"

In advancing this opinion, I must reiterate that I am not a researcher; I am a social worker who is an administrator. In this context, I use social work skills and practices to administer my program. I also use other skills and practices to administer my program. Perhaps we can view the social work-child welfare debate in the same context. As a child welfare worker, I use social work skills and practices, but that is not the whole of my practice. If viewed in this way, perhaps we can advance child welfare and social work at the same time.