



The California Collaboration

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To cite this article: Sherrill Clark PhD, MSW (2003) The California Collaboration, Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 7:1-2, 135-157, DOI: [10.1300/J137v07n01_10](https://doi.org/10.1300/J137v07n01_10)

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J137v07n01_10



Published online: 12 Oct 2008.



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The California Collaboration: A Competency-Based Child Welfare Curriculum Project for Master's Social Workers

Sherrill Clark

SUMMARY. This article documents the Title IV-E child welfare social work project of the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC): The establishment and ongoing support of collaborative arrangements among 58 California counties, the California State Department of Social Services, and all of the California graduate social work schools. The primary goal of this collaboration is to produce MSWs who will commit to helping disadvantaged children and families in publicly supported child welfare services. The project model contains five interdependent components: a competency-based curriculum, financial support for students, development of instructional materials, active participation among public child welfare agencies and the universities, and evaluation.

This paper focuses on the collaborative curriculum development process. Evolving arrangements among stakeholders are described here in terms of the reciprocal adjustment of curriculum development and field

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[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "The California Collaboration: A Competency-Based Child Welfare Curriculum Project for Master's Social Workers." Clark, Sherrill. Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Behavior in the Social Environment* (The Haworth Social Work Practice Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 7, No. 1/2, 2003, pp. 135-157; and: *Charting the Impacts of University-Child Welfare Collaboration* (ed: Katharine Briar-Lawson, and Joan Levy Zlotnik) The Haworth Social Work Practice Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003, pp. 135-157. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-HAWORTH, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com].

and classroom instruction to prepare MSWs for public child welfare careers. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by *The Haworth Press, Inc.* All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. University-agency partnerships, curriculum development, Title IV-E funding, public child welfare education

INTRODUCTION

The following article describes a 10 year collaborative public agency-university child welfare social work project in process, one of the first of its kind to utilize Title IV-E funding for MSW education¹. The California Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools of Social Work and the California Welfare Directors Association created CalSWEC to encourage Master's level social work graduates in the state to prepare for careers in the publicly supported social services [Grossman et al. 1992]. Since 1992, the ongoing collaborative arrangements have produced more than 1100 MSWs who are committed to helping disadvantaged children and families in publicly supported child welfare services.

The goal of this collaboration's use of Title IV-E funding is to produce MSWs who will commit to helping disadvantaged children and their families in foster care or at risk of placement. It is thought that infusing social work values and methods will ultimately refocus the child welfare system on the development and maintenance of healthy families and safe children. The Center's initial objectives involved the creation of a program of financial aid for students linked to a competency-based curriculum developed jointly by educators and professionals in the public agencies and with employment requirements to be met upon graduation.

The project model contains five interdependent components: financial support for students, a competency-based curriculum, program and curriculum evaluation, resource support for the development of instructional materials, and active participation among public child welfare agencies and the universities. This paper focuses on the keystone quality assurance piece: the curriculum.

The first part of this article describes the need over a decade for child welfare workers in California. Next, the article describes the joint agency-univer-

sity curriculum development process from 1991 to 1996 and the ongoing modification process in terms of a tool for strengthening the collaboration. Collaborative arrangements among stakeholders are described here in terms of evolving reciprocal adjustments of classroom and field curriculum and field instruction. The definition of a competency-based curriculum, the process of selecting a diverse advisory group of child welfare experts, a description of the methodology, and the results of the curriculum development process are included here. Initial similarities and differences between practitioners' and faculties' views about what is essential for inclusion in a graduate child welfare social work program are noted. Then, how those views evolved as stakeholders gained more experience with the curriculum is discussed, emphasizing how this joint development process strengthens understanding and shared responsibility.

By using competencies, rather than mandating specific courses in child welfare, a step-wise approach was successfully used to strengthen the public child welfare social work curriculum. Next steps are suggested for modification of the curriculum as another opportunity.² Finally, the limitations of this model for social work education development and recommendations for improvement are discussed.

ESTABLISHING THE NEED FOR MSWs IN CHILD WELFARE

Deaths or injuries of children often focus intense scrutiny on public child welfare programs. These incidents reflect the pressure of caseloads that are rapidly increasing in numbers and acuity, while resources are diminished. Not infrequently, however, workers who have committed serious practice errors have been poorly educated for the complex skills associated with child welfare practice. In several cases in other states, departments of social services have been found deficient in observing legal and professional practice standards. States have been sued and resulting consent decrees have included requirements for upgrading child welfare staff, showing hiring preferences for persons with human services bachelors' degrees or Masters in Social Work [NASW 1989b]. However, the kinds of consent decrees that have the widest range, i.e., those which seek to reform large child welfare systems themselves, often have negative effects on resources. That is to say, states focus resources on compliance under consent decrees rather than on upgrading the professional skills of the workforce [Blome, 1998].

Historically, social work has been the leading deliverer of services in child welfare practice, but professionally trained graduate social workers have not predominated. A national study done in the 1970s indicated in a sample of 38 states and the District of Columbia that only 9 percent of child welfare workers had an MSW [Shyne & Schroeder, 1978]. A decade later, a study of 16 states showed the percentage had risen to 13 percent [Lieberman et al., 1988].

The need for MSWs is particularly profound with respect to professionals who are members of ethnic and racial groups, particularly in a state that contains one-third of the immigrants in the United States [Wong, 2001]. These changes in California's population require more staff from the underrepresented ethnic groups and more bilingual workers. Child welfare staffs do not represent the same ethnic mix as the poor, recent immigrant, and refugee populations [Tatara, 1991; Harris et al., 1993]. Bilingual and bicultural social workers are in short supply and many of them must finish baccalaureate degrees before they can take advantage of the Title IV-E MSW program.

Child welfare jobs are very difficult and emotionally taxing. The relationship between educational opportunities for workers and the ability to handle the distress of these difficult jobs is just now beginning to be examined [Dickinson & Perry, 1998]. Contrary to popular opinion, child welfare jobs are among the most complicated and call for a wide range of knowledge and skill. It is for this reason that professional social work is particularly suited for this type of practice.

At least one study has demonstrated some relevance of professional social work education to child welfare practice [Booz-Allen 1987]. Another study has found that MSWs were most successful in the delivery of substitute services, including "more successful in finding adoptive homes for the children assigned to them than were other groups of workers" [Olsen & Holmes, 1982: 99]. A more recent analysis has found that for children placed in foster care, caseworkers with a social work degree (BSW or MSW) were significantly more likely to carry out "a permanent plan within three years than those without a social work degree" [Albers, Reilly et al., 1993: 337].

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCIES FOR MSW CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE: BACKGROUND

Prior to the collaboration in 1990, each institution stayed in its own camp. Agency staff were skeptical of the capabilities of new MSW graduates to perform the necessary tasks for public social work practice. By the same token,

faculty were not convinced that social workers in public agencies would be able to practice according to professional standards.

Consequently, it was important for the schools of social work to show good faith. The deans did this by passing in each school, a common mission statement emphasizing preparation for practice in publicly-supported social services serving poor and disadvantaged clients. The county welfare directors as a group demonstrated their effort by participating in and approving the competencies for practice in public child welfare and are active members of the board and its committees.

The design and structure of graduate curricula are the province of each faculty and a variety of curriculum models may be effective. By delineating a basic set of educational knowledge and skill competencies and basic values that the schools could adopt as curriculum objectives in child welfare, CalSWEC hoped to assure an appropriate level of consistency in MSW training for child welfare throughout the state of California with the minimum amount of interference.

From 1991 to 1996, CalSWEC worked with the schools of social work to integrate the child welfare knowledge and value competencies with existing MSW practice, policy, research methods, and human development courses wherever possible. For the more specific skill-based competencies, CalSWEC offered instructional support to assist schools in developing field placements and delivering integrative field seminars mostly in the second year to cover the more specific core child welfare skills and methods. Assistance to the schools and the county social services departments in the collaborative implementation of curriculum for the education and training of MSW child welfare workers remains a key function of CalSWEC.³

Key to the care and tending of an active collaboration is having persons who are well versed in more than one institutional language and able to translate one for the other. For the CalSWEC project, each school is allotted one project coordinator whose job it is to act as a boundary spanner between the practice field and the university. These project coordinators, some of whom have been with the project for eight years, are a unique form of academic and practice expert.

THE REASONS FOR USING COMPETENCIES TO INFLUENCE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Competent means being “properly or well qualified; capable; adequate for the purposes defined” [Berube, 1985]. Competency further implies expertise, proficiency, and mastery of a particular skill or body of knowledge. The idea

of competency-based social work education is not new [Gambrill, 1983; Freisen, 1986; Hughes & Rycus, 1989; Institute for Human Services, 1987; Tabbert & Sullivan, 1988; Wolfe, 1989; Pecora et al., 1990; LeCroy, 1990; Cheung et al., 1991; Maine Child Welfare Training Institute, 1991]. Without specification, the ability to know or do child welfare social work is an ambiguous, overwhelming goal for education.

A competency-based curriculum, (1) provides clear descriptions of what skills or knowledge are measured and how (including the selection of distinct outcomes chosen before the interventions begin), (2) follows progress during the intervention process, (3) employs empirical literature, and (4) applies critical thinking skills [Gambrill 1983]. A competency-based curriculum must select elements that have clear, measurable descriptions and distinct outcomes are chosen before the interventions begin. The elements must allow for the ability to follow progress during the intervention process. Empirical literature and the application of critical thinking skills are used in the development of the elements [Gambrill, 1983]. Therefore, one of the first tasks of the curriculum committee was to carefully specify the skills, knowledge and values desired by an advanced practitioner in child welfare, while using the context of the professional social work foundation.

The professional foundation, as formulated by the major accrediting body for social work education, the Council on Social Work Education, bases social work curricula on five professional foundation content areas [CSWE, 1994]. The foundation includes Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Social Welfare Policy and Services, Social Work Practice, Research, and the Field Practicum. CSWE further states: "Both levels [the baccalaureate and the master's] of social work must provide the professional foundation curriculum that contains the common body of knowledge, values, and skills of the profession. . . . The master's level of social work education must include the professional foundation content and concentration content for advanced practice in an identifiable area. [CSWE, 1994: 136]. This statement does not suggest that the development of discrete courses is the only way to address specialty programs. In fact as noted above, when CalSWEC created the competencies, the goal was to infuse the curriculum with the knowledge, skills and values needed to work with disadvantaged families and children.

The California public child welfare service delivery model includes discrete service categories based on policy specifications for the delivery of child welfare services (see, for example, the Adoptions and Safe Families Act). For several years, the distinct program areas have been: Adoptions, Emergency Response, Family Reunification, Family Maintenance, and Permanency Planning. Rather than organize social work courses around these service categories, CalSWEC developed a set of competencies that would prepare social workers

for specialized practice in child welfare, yet be woven into the professional foundation content areas as described by CSWE. This competency-based curriculum does not require that specific child welfare courses be developed, but it does require problem solving among the schools and agencies to determine how to provide students experiences to enable learning in specific child welfare areas.

In fact, there has been concern for some time among professionals that what social workers are learning does not “fit the problems the problems of families most frequently encountered in child welfare” [Wiltse, 1981]. A national survey done by Lauderdale (1980) indicated that classroom instructors felt most confident about their students’ knowledge regarding child welfare policy, supportive services, and legislation. The development of treatment skills in the special problems of children, while the most desired graduate course was the least frequently taught. Classroom instructors relied on the field placement experience to teach these skills to their students. The reader is left with the impression that the classroom and the field operated on two different curricula.

As it happens, very few classroom courses correspond directly to the program areas, e.g., have titles such as, *Child Abuse and Neglect* or *Child Protective Services* [Kravitz, 1991], nor should they, necessarily. To the extent that there is child welfare content in the curriculum, it is found in case examples in foundation courses or in specialized electives about the child and family. However, even specialized electives do not represent a systematic treatment of the subject of child welfare because mental health content has predominated in specialized electives about the child and family [LeCroy, 1990]. When the presence of child welfare content is not assured or treated in a comprehensive way, all students do not have equal opportunity to learn using child welfare examples. Finally, there has been little documentation of the transfer of learning process: applying classroom knowledge and skills in the field or using the field experience to enhance classroom learning.

The National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators’ survey of the collaborative efforts of public child welfare agencies and schools of social work encourages the development of competency-based assessment of practice [NAPCWA 1991]. For this curriculum effort, collaboration and specificity of curriculum elements were regarded as primary goals. CalSWEC felt that starting with the elements themselves, rather than challenging existing structures in either the university or the agency domain, a curriculum could be developed that met the needs of both professional graduate social work education and professional child welfare services. The expectation was (and is) that capable graduate social work specialists in child welfare should be skilled and knowledgeable in these competencies.

Curricula must be sensitive to changes in public policy, the distribution of client populations, available resources, and existing knowledge about what works to alleviate social problems. At the same time curricula must adhere to and promote professional values and ethics. Hence the education for professional social work practice by necessity involves collaboration between field practitioners and social work faculty. The methods chosen for the development of the child welfare curriculum allow for the fact that people already have ways of doing things that work for them, but that new ways of educating child welfare workers must also be developed. The first steps were to select a panel of experts conversant in various aspects of child welfare as well as with the process of social work field education and to mail them a questionnaire containing a list of competencies.

THE MAILED SURVEY: METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The main source for our original competency list was a document entitled, *Individual Training Needs Assessment for Child Welfare Caseworkers*, developed by Ronald C. Hughes and Judith Rycus of the Institute for Human Services [IHS], Columbus, Ohio [IHS, 1987]. There were two additional primary sources.⁴ In 1991, using the Delphi method, a mailed survey consisting of 126 suggested competencies was sent to the panel of 30 experts [Delbeq, 1975; Lauffer, 1984]. This panel consisted of child welfare practitioners and faculty who were nominated by members of the Curriculum Committee which consisted of 3 welfare directors/practitioners and 3 deans/directors. From the mailed survey, respondents indicated which competencies were *necessary*, *desirable*, or *unnecessary* for public child welfare practice. The competencies on which the practitioners and the faculty agreed could be taught in the MSW curriculum and which were necessary for child welfare practice are listed in Table 1.

An interesting dichotomy developed from the mailed survey results. Faculty felt they could teach the competency areas in Table 2, but practitioners thought this was too much to expect of the schools and opted for saving these competencies for on-the-job training. Consequently these competencies, although everyone agreed they were important, were identified as "advanced" competencies that beginning social workers would have to learn on the job.

In 1991, after much review of the list of competencies by the Curriculum Committee, CalSWEC held a statewide conference to encourage regional school-agency collaborations. Over 100 child welfare practitioners and teachers attended, among them the 30 members of the panel and the members of the curriculum committee.

TABLE 1. Competencies Indicating Faculty/Practitioner Agreement

- Ethnic sensitive practice
- Understanding of basic child welfare practice
- Basic social work skills and methods
- Human development and the effect of child abuse and neglect
- Understanding interdisciplinary teamwork
- Understanding the role of the child welfare manager as team developer.

TABLE 2. Competencies Indicating Faculty/Practitioner Differences

- The legal basis for child welfare practice
- Child welfare assessment and specialized child welfare practice
- Advanced skills relating to interdisciplinary work
- Skills working with the client's community on behalf of the client and the client/family group.

One of the original conference activities consisted of a general discussion of the competencies that were important learning priorities but that were not adequately represented in the field or classroom. Following that, participants met in groups by California state region to identify regional gaps in the curriculum. Agencies and schools that shared students and field placements were asked to then make specific, local plans for curriculum development addressing these gaps. Table 3 shows the priority areas identified by these regional groups as lacking in child welfare education by California state region.

These competencies noted as gaps in the curricula of the schools of social work were discussed by the Curriculum Committee who, after a request for proposal process, then allotted funding resources for developing new curricula in those areas which could be disseminated among all the schools. These regional gaps, then, formed the basis of our first curriculum development projects (explained below) which were funded over the course of the next four years.

THE RESULTING COMPETENCY-BASED CHILD WELFARE CURRICULUM

Staff organized the final 1991 version of the competencies into six categories according to the task required and the topic under consideration.⁵ The categories comprising the CalSWEC competencies for public child welfare MSW practice are: *Multicultural and Ethnic Sensitive Practice, Core Child Welfare Skills, Social Work Skills and Methods, Human Development and Behavior, Workplace Management, and Child Welfare Administration, Planning, and Evaluation.* The competency based approach was used to demonstrate that it

TABLE 3. The 1991 Top Three Competencies Lacking in Child Welfare Social Work Education by California Region*

Northern/Bay Region
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural understanding and use of supports. 2. Being able to deal with nonvoluntary and hostile clients. 3. Understanding the policy and legal basis for child welfare services and the goals of public social services.
Mountain Valley Region
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understanding cultural differences needed for assessment and practice. 2. Understanding policy and legal requirements for implementation. 3. Evaluation of abuse and neglect while understanding the trauma of separation.
Southern Region
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being able to deal with nonvoluntary and hostile clients. 2. Adapting the casework plan to a cultural perspective. 3. Interviewing in the home and in chaos and empowering families.
<p>*Represents the consensus of the attendees at the first curriculum implementation conference, including faculty and practitioners.</p>

was truly possible for schools of social work to integrate very specific field related knowledge and skills and yet provide a broad-based educational experience for students. It was expected that the competencies would change over time as at-risk groups comprising the service population change, as more knowledge is developed about what works, and as policy changes.

To further emphasize the importance of a guiding philosophical statement, the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators survey found that "The greatest barrier to collaboration between child welfare agencies and schools of social work is the absence of a common philosophy and a shared agenda between these two institutions" [NAPCWA, 1991: 3]. In response, staff included a statement of guiding principles in the list of competencies. Some important factors in the guiding statement for the competency-based curriculum should be stressed: This statement philosophically supports a wide diversity of life styles, including many definitions of family. It recognizes the state's right to intervene to protect children, while encouraging workers to make reasonable efforts to keep families together. It also supports the importance of delivering effective service based on empirically based procedures and literature. Critical thinking is encouraged. Finally, it acknowledges, above and beyond the professional definition of each individual competency section, the family's contribution to the definition of the child welfare situation.

Multicultural and Ethnic Sensitive Practice items received the most agreement from all concerned who felt that ethnically sensitive practice skills

should be applied throughout the competency document and also be described in a special section so that these issues would be neither isolated nor underemphasized. This section presumes that the practitioner will go beyond the simple understanding of cultural differences: to apply social work techniques and knowledge to learn the values of the client family, contrast them with dominant values, and to effectively use that knowledge to foster culturally sensitive treatment plans. This knowledge must then be transferred to the student's field experience in order to build skills in cultural competency. Specifically this section includes essential knowledge, values, and skills for culturally competent child welfare practice with particular attention to the context of oppression and racism, the role of culture in an individual's well being, and an understanding of the diversity represented by the people of California.

Core Child Welfare Skills contains the assessment categories and specialized topics included in the field's categorization of child welfare services. Highlighted in this section are the various kinds of conflict that child welfare workers must be knowledgeable about to do their jobs: Spousal, substance, and institutional abuse in addition to the different kinds of child abuse. Here are competencies emphasizing the child welfare worker's role with the court system. This section also identifies the important target populations which seem to constitute most of the child welfare cases in California now: persons of color who are overrepresented in the child welfare system, low income families, single parent families, medically fragile children in foster care, and non-traditional families, including kinship foster care. It is in this section that specific competencies for knowledge about the legal basis for intervention and working with the legal dependency system are found. Finally, the child welfare worker's dual responsibility to the family as well as the child and the collaboration required to provide effective services are incorporated.

The third section, *Social Work Skills and Methods*, features skills that are core to direct practice social work education, combining these skills with specialized knowledge about families, adolescents and very young children. Interviewing hostile and nonvoluntary clients is acknowledged as a special skill. It highlights the differences from the usual casework methods of interviewing voluntary clients. There are competencies which address the student's ability to interview and adapt treatment plans to adverse conditions, such as home visiting and interviewing in chaotic environments, for example, interviewing family members outside courtrooms or teenagers at bus stops.

The core technique used in this section is case management. The conception of case management encompasses assessment and interviewing skills, self awareness, and critical thinking skills, so important in this field. Case management skills such as, making initial and ongoing risk assessments regarding child safety and family functioning, appropriate referrals for community resources, recommendations to the court about placement, working with community groups to support a family in reunification are emphasized in this field

of practice. They also require the ability to work in interdisciplinary teams or at least work side by side with others concerned for child protection and permanency.

The child welfare worker must be well versed in the assessment, treatment, and support of caregivers who face mental health and/or substance abuse problems, especially since adult mental health and substance abuse problems, which often accompany severe cases of abuse and neglect, recur with varying levels of severity.

The section on *Human Development and Behavior* takes into account the effect of societal, structural, and environmental factors on the phenomenon of child abuse and neglect, adoptions, and placement. However, normal human development must be studied also to discern what differential effects child abuse, neglect, and family problems have on various members of the family at different times of their lives. This is important to treatment planning to design age level appropriate individual treatment plans for child welfare clients. Learning about the effects of developmental disabilities and special medical needs of children from substance abusing environments and those who have HIV is included here.

It is important to note that the focus is on child development and the effects of loss and separation on children and families. This is different from the required generalist MSW human behavior and social environment courses that teach human development across the life span. There has been much discussion about the development of the brains of young children, when most enter foster care, beyond the separation and attachment theory literature, and the need for quick intervention to protect brain development [Wolfe, 1991; Dawson et al., 1994; Silverman, 1996; Illig, 1998].

This knowledge has been pivotal in the development of social policy, namely the Adoption and Safe Families Act (P.L. 105-89), which emphasizes early permanency for children and deplors the effects of foster care drift on children. To the extent that the policy has created new opportunities for adoption of children who formerly would have languished too long in foster care, this policy has the effect of placing time lines on the services support system for any family referred for a child welfare issue. To the extent that the legal permanency fosters emotional permanency, this is good. For a worker to make the correct placement at the right time requires an extensive knowledge of child and family development. The social workers in this field have to know the difference because this is central to defining a successful outcome for a child and a family.

Workplace Management recognizes that the agency organizational culture and agency policy interpretation influences practice. In most social work programs, students either focus on direct or indirect skills. One consequence of

this dichotomy is that direct service social workers may not comprehend the full range of influence an organization can have on the individual practitioner and his or her client and do not understand what options they have for dealing with organizations to get things done for their clients. In the field of child welfare, workers as team members, regularly encounter problems in interorganizational relationships with court systems, schools, hospitals, and other large traditional bureaucracies. They must be able to show their expertise to enhance their credibility and to accomplish their goals.

Workplace management emphasizes worker competence in dealing with distress. Workplace management includes the achievement of competence in recognizing the contribution of and involving the community in child welfare concerns. The experience of the CalSWEC collaborators is that providing opportunities for ongoing adult learning contributes to retention and protects against burnout for child welfare workers. It follows that this section includes concepts of self care, peer support, conflict resolution, use of supervision, safety, and other aspects of the organizational climate. With the focus on retention of professional social workers and recruitment, the field is recognizing that better-prepared workers in supportive organizations can provide services with better outcomes for families and children [Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998].

The last category, *Child Welfare Administration Planning and Evaluation*, was included as part of the graduate social work curriculum for all students, though it is recognized that not all direct practice students can have a management experience in the field. However, this section addresses the importance policy on practice, as well as the issue of including organizational behavior and the effects of organizational structure on direct practice. Some schools include their research sequence in this section as a demonstration that MSWs provide a unique expertise in the area of practice and program evaluation.

CURRICULUM MODIFICATION

The project coordinators led the effort to modify the curriculum competencies in 1996. By the time the curriculum was modified for the first time, the practitioners, who in 1991 had recommended that the schools not teach these advanced competencies, were ready to take responsibility for teaching them to students in the field and wanted classroom content about social work in the legal dependency system to complement those experiences. In that five years, due to resources focused on curriculum development and field placement enhancement, there were regular opportunities for students to participate in legal proceedings and write court reports. Agencies began to gain confidence that

the students were focusing on their need for specialized training in child welfare.

In 2001, the second major modification of the curriculum will occur after a series of community focus groups conducted by the project coordinators at each school and a series of CalSWEC meetings with the project coordinators and the board. So far, the competency list has held up: Participants are updating, grouping and combining the competencies in ways that could not have happened in 1991 because they did not have experience with each others' institutional language. Participants in these focus groups include field instructors, child welfare workers and supervisors, former IV-E students, attorneys, administrators, foster parents, and former foster youth.

Preliminary analysis indicates that there will be fewer competencies and they will be organized according to first and second year MSW program. Through the years, as goals, services and populations shift, the understanding of what MSWs should know and be able to do will need to be revisited, revised, and upgraded. A postgraduate list that may give us a more thorough picture of our extended goals for the MSW child welfare practitioner in California through the two year postgraduate level would be important to start developing now.

Now that an extensive partnership of schools and agencies has agreed upon a competency-based child welfare curriculum, how well the curriculum will continue to be woven into the existing curricula at the (now)14 graduate schools of social work in California remains the work of the collaboration. In discussing implementation, it is important to remember that this list of competencies represents the minimum skill and knowledge expectations for the newly graduated MSW specializing in child welfare.

Title IV-E funding has been used here to develop new curricula in fields germane to child welfare, such as interprofessional collaboration, ethnic sensitive practice, and working with kinship foster families. Schools have held faculty development seminars for field instructors to learn how to apply the competencies in their settings. Some specialized child welfare courses have been developed, such as Working with Vulnerable Children (CSWE, 1999). Most of the integrative field seminars are focused on the transfer of learning between the classroom and the field.

EVALUATION AND INCENTIVES FOR CHANGE

It is important to see the competency-based curriculum as a work in progress, not as a rigid and eternal set of standards. The Center conducts an assessment, monitoring, and evaluation process to learn the effects of the

competency-based curriculum in California. One of the criticisms of a competency-based approach to knowledge and skill building is that it is normatively generated. This is akin to the criticism of social work practice that it is “authority-based” or not easily amenable to change or open to the consideration of values that go beyond the limitations of existing policies and procedures [Gambrill, 2001]. Consequently social work practice does not reflect what is truly helpful for clients because it has not been empirically evaluated. That having been said, this particular model of collaboration, although it resulted in a consensus-based curriculum, set the conditions for creating empirically-based practice and curricula.

The next steps in the monitoring process consisted of evaluation of the curriculum: Is it being taught by the schools? After the stipend program had been in effect for one semester in May 1993, project coordinators at each of the 10 schools involved in the coalition took “snapshots” of the existing curricula. The first snapshots were baseline measures of the curricula before the development of specialized field seminars and the application of other curriculum development resources.

Currently, schools present a progress curriculum snapshot report each June. These snapshots indicate where the schools have refined and updated information regarding where the competencies are found (in the field or in the classroom) and when (in the first or second year of the graduate program). They also identify where resources are needed for curriculum development and instructional support. A second source of data, along with the snapshots, is focus group information from graduating students at each school, gathered to identify gaps and strengths in the curriculum. When students complete their work payback requirements, they are sent a survey designed to assess their intent to remain or leave child welfare and to investigate the organizational and educational implications of their experiences [Dickinson & Perry, 1998].

Several CalSWEC schools have developed their own evaluation instruments for measuring individual student competence using the competency-based curriculum, but the general feeling has been that the MSW program itself has sufficient measures (exams, field instructor evaluations, for example) that new ones are not necessary. This may or may not be the case: The purpose of measuring skill and knowledge in this particular field is to connect the learning with better outcomes for child welfare practice. The Center applies the knowledge gained from the snapshots, the student focus groups and the ongoing retention study to redirect resources for change. For example, to begin to make changes in the curricula, in 1993-4 members of the coalition proposed curriculum development awards that would enhance teaching of the competencies initially identified in the snapshot as absent or weak in the curricula or ranked in the 1991 regional groups as important but not adequately

acquired. The awards produced several best practices curriculum workbooks and videotapes.⁶

The research and development committee of the board, consisting of county welfare directors and university deans and directors, garnered research questions from the practitioner community. Then, using these practitioner-based questions, requests for the schools of social work for applied research projects that would result in curricula that would be made available to all the schools. These projects resulted in a variety of empirically based curricula.⁷ Although starting from a consensus model of curriculum competencies, the resources have been directed at creating more opportunities among the schools and agencies to develop empirically based curriculum for practice.

In addition, regional groups of schools and county agencies held faculty development institutes that included field supervisors and classroom faculty. In some instances, it was the first time a group of schools had collaborated on a presentation to the practitioner community. In others, although the group had collaborated before, the opportunity to provide specialized focus on child welfare issues had not previously occurred.

By comparing the state of the agency-university collaboration from the beginning of academic year 1992-1993 to the end of academic year 1994-1995, there have been positive changes. After only 3 years the curriculum snapshots from the schools showed an increase in the number and the kinds of opportunities for collaboration among the schools and the agencies for applied research and development of services.

Table 4 shows that there have been increases since 1992 in all categories of faculty agency collaboration, except one. There have not been any faculty who have taken leave to work at a public child welfare agency. However, more faculty are collaborating on applied research projects at the local county agencies and perhaps that is the structure that fits the skill of the faculty as well as the incentive system of the university, rather than taking a leave for practice experience alone.

CHALLENGES

Critics say that by preparing social workers for a specific field of practice, the foundation of social work education is compromised. Challenges for this and other projects like it include first demonstrating which skills and knowledge social workers bring to the child welfare arena and to show that with this better preparation, workers will produce better outcomes for disadvantaged children and families. Logical next steps would be to collaboratively develop recommendations for research on the relationship between professional educa-

TABLE 4. Numbers of Faculty Involved in Public Child Welfare In California

	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95
Serving on public child welfare committees	24	21	24
Serving on public child welfare agency commissions	15	15	7
On academic leave for work in public child welfare	0	0	0
Involved in the development of service pilots	19	23	26
Providing consultation for public child welfare agencies	28	26	54
Providing inservice training for public child welfare employees	37	23	58
Conducting collaborative research with public child welfare agencies	28	25	48

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tion and worker retention as well as on outcomes for families and children who are served by professional social workers.

The use of competencies holds promise in several areas. First, if applied systematically and examined in terms of what is required on the job, competencies could be used to help agencies differentially assign cases to differently educated levels of social workers. With a competency-based curriculum specially designed for this work, the connection between agency-based on the job training and professional social work education can be strengthened. By encouraging on the job training, support is given to the public child welfare agency as a learning organization. The agencies will be able to "grow their own" MSWs by recruiting them early in their careers and connecting training and educational opportunities to incentives for promotion and recognition

The buy-in process needs to be refreshed periodically. When new members of the collaboration join the board, a complete orientation is crucial, so that they can understand and support the program. New partners from other disciplines, such as school social work and mental health should be encouraged to partici-

pate and to develop shared field experiences for students rather than competing for them. The point, after all, is to start where the families' needs are.

**CONCLUSION:
INTERDEPENDENT COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL
REINFORCE EACH OTHER**

Although this project and the means for evaluating it have limitations, it has been successful in creating opportunities for agency-university partnerships and for increasing professional development opportunities for child welfare workers. Among its limitations are first, that it has not systematically established that better outcomes for children and families result from specially trained MSWs. Secondly, although CalSWEC has an eight year track record and a fair amount of success with agency-university collaborations, we still do not know how well these connections will be sustained during a period in which there are shortages of many different kinds of social workers or changes in public policy about IV-E funding. Third, our means for evaluating graduate outcomes need to be strengthened; that is we need to better operationalize the competencies and be able to say clearly what a specially trained IV-E MSW knows and is able to do upon graduation.

Public policy has established a focus on permanency and safety for children, to break the cycle of multiple foster homes for dependent children. These objectives require child welfare departments to radically alter the scope and focus of services. In addition, as noted above, members of ethnic, racial, and cultural minority groups constitute an increasing portion of the clientele of the child welfare system. This condition requires increased recruitment of minority workers and the mastery by all workers of culturally competent practice. Besides mastering new intervention modes, students who enter public social welfare practice in the next few years must have the leadership and organizational skills to play significant roles in improving the structure and design of agencies and service programs.

To enhance collaboration the opportunity for exchange must be present: Use of the competency-based curriculum, in this case, was and is the key. For a collaborative partnership to be mutually beneficial to families, schools, and agencies, common definitions of the problems families and children face must be agreed upon, social workers must have adequate opportunities to learn about them, and research must be directed toward the alleviation of the negative human conditions that cause them.

NOTES

1. Center operations are funded by a combination of Title IV-E federal funding through the Department of Health and Human Services and private foundation funds. A three year grant from the Ford Foundation was extended to five years and supplemented by the Haas, Walter S. Johnson, Lurie, San Francisco, Santa Clara, Stuart, van Loben Sels, and Zellerbach funds. The authors would like to thank the Federal Regional Office of the Administration for Children, Youth and Family, and the Department of Social Services, State of California for their support of graduate child welfare social work education through Title IV-E funds. Ms. Lisa C. Tracy contributed to the development of this report.

2. The actual California Competency-Based Child Welfare Curriculum for graduate social work education is not included here but is available to interested readers on the CalSWEC Web page: (<http://calswec.berkeley.edu>).

3. As of fall, 2001, there were 14 California graduate schools of social work involved with the CalSWEC program.

4. The first additional source was a list of in-service training competencies developed for the State of California Emergency Response Training Project at California State University at Fresno by Wynn Tabbert, Peggy Sullivan and Robert Whittaker (1988), entitled, *An empirical validation of competencies required for child protective services practice*. The second was a list of fieldwork competencies developed at Cal State Long Beach under the direction of Janet Black, Teri Hughes, and Jeanne Crose, entitled, *Fundamental and Specialized Child Welfare Competencies*, plus handouts, from a workshop entitled, *Building Child Welfare Practitioners*, Anaheim, CA, October 5, 1990.

5. *The Statement of Principles and the Curriculum Competencies for Public Child Welfare Practice* in California can be obtained from the CalSWEC web site, address previously noted.

6. For example: two involved ethnic sensitive practice, one developed a workbook for specialized child welfare skills, one integrated management skills and knowledge into direct practice, one involved the effect of substance abuse on child welfare, and one navigated through the hazardous (for social workers) child welfare legal system. These can be obtained through the CalSWEC library accessed through the CalSWEC website.

7. For example, in 1997-1998 Academic Year, the following projects were funded: *The Effects of Computerization on Public Child Welfare Practice* Dale Weaver, CSU, Long Beach; David Cherin, USC. Duncan Lindsey, UCLA.

Choices: The Effectiveness of Court Mandated Intervention versus Voluntary Services in Child Protective Services. Loring Jones, San Diego State University.

Children's Experiences of Out-of-Home Care: Elements of a Successful Foster Care System. Jill Duerr Berrick and Barbara Needell, UC Berkeley.

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