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A Preliminary Evaluation of a Method for Teaching Documentation to Prospective Child Welfare Interns

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Abstract

Documentation of social work services is an important aspect of most field experiences. Specifically, in a child welfare setting, documentation forms the basis for life-changing court decisions. Both case-based learning and problem-based learning are well-established methods for teaching social work students about documentation. This article describes a method combining case-based learning and problem-based learning for teaching child welfare documentation to undergraduate social work students using movie characters as “clients.” A preliminary assessment of student perceptions and attitudes relative to their experience with that teaching method is presented, together with recommendations for future investigation into the extent and effectiveness of child welfare documentation training at the undergraduate and graduate level.

Keywords: documentation, case-based learning, problem-based learning, child welfare

The documentation of social work services should matter to every social work practitioner and to every student considering a social work career (Sidell, 2015). For many workers the practice paradigm is: “If it isn’t documented, it didn’t happen.” Thus, documentation is a “vital professional responsibility” for all social workers and an important part of the field education experience (Sidell, 2015, p. 6).

Historically, early social workers and reformers, such as Mary Richmond, utilized case records to both document problems and evaluate the effectiveness of solutions (Pittman-Munke, 1999). For these early social workers, their case records were a tool used in their reform efforts. The rich material in their documentation helped “the problem to wear flesh and bones and breathe,” which convinced policy makers of the need to reform (Pittman-Munke, 1999). Admittedly, the practice and thinking about documentation in social work has changed since the days of Mary Richmond (Sidell, 2015), however, the importance of documentation continues to be especially relevant in modern child welfare practice, where paperwork includes legal documents that are routinely used to make life-changing decisions for families and their children (Sidell, 2015).

The Issue: Shortcomings in Child Welfare Documentation Training

Training, including training on documentation, is common, if not mandatory, in modern public child welfare agencies and laudable and effective programs are in place to train child welfare workers across the country (Fox, Miller, & Barbee, 2003). There are, however, a number of unfortunate realities of current social work training on documentation. One is that these training programs are rarely evaluated to determine if learning transfers to the workplace (Antle, Barbee, & van Zyl, 2007). Another, is that such training is not likely to take place under the direction of a professional social work educator in a college or university setting. Instead, almost all training on documentation is left to social service agencies that might provide training after graduation or possibly during an internship (Ames, 1999; Ames, 2008). This stands in contrast to recommendations from the literature that appropriate documentation be taught in the classroom, the field education setting, and in the workplace (Ames, 1999; Kagle & Kopels, 2008; Sidell, 2015).

While students in Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree programs are generally viewed as better prepared for child welfare work (Yankeelov, Barbee, Sullivan, & Antle, 2009), the institutions that provide their education only occasionally provide documentation training in their direct practice courses (Ames, 2002). There is, unfortunately, a problematic and long-standing lack of consistent education standards for general social work practice documentation or specific child welfare practice documentation in BSW education (Ames, 1999; Ames, 2008; Kagle, 1993; Sidell, 2015). While there were a few texts written about case documentation early in the profession’s history and some more recently (Wilson, 1980), most social work students are briefly taught documentation skills and methods via a social work practice text and not a specific text focusing on practice recording (Sidell, 2015). Even the present Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] (CSWE, 2015) only vaguely hint that documentation is a part of a student’s social work education. While BSW programs, many of which depend on Title IV-E funding, may prepare graduates for child welfare practice in general, it is at best unclear whether those graduates are sufficiently prepared for the future burdens of child welfare documentation.

In her depiction of the stressors of child welfare practice, Crosson-Tower (2014) states that the “abundance of paperwork and frequent emergencies frustrate the organized worker who feels that it is impossible to ever finish a task” (p. 363). Excessive paperwork is also implicated as a cause of job dissatisfaction (Cherry, Ashcraft, & Owen, 2007), a reason for reduced opportunities to form meaningful relationships with clients (Abramovitz, 2005; Postle, 2002), and one author has even called documentation “the bane of many professional’s existence” (Sidell, 2015, p. 3). The simplification of documentation procedures has, not surprisingly, also been recommended as a tool for employee retention (Khowaja, Merchant, & Hirani, 2005).

Because stress is implicated as one of the strongest predictors of turnover and intention to leave in a child welfare setting (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001), it is important to reduce as many potential sources of stress as possible in a child welfare worker's environment. This would include the stress associated with providing quality documentation. Training in documentation skills should therefore be considered one of the many resources available to reduce worker stress. Workers who have been exposed to training on documenting child welfare practice during their BSW programs possess more resources for coping with this particular stressor. If child welfare documentation training in the BSW curriculum can indeed reduce worker stress and increase the likelihood of retention, then that should be sufficient justification to ensure that such training takes place.

This article presents an engaging, multi-media method for teaching BSW students child welfare documentation. A preliminary assessment of student impressions, perceptions, and attitudes about the teaching method is also reported. The hope is that child welfare educators might adopt these new and creative ways to teach the important skills of recording and documentation. Students who acquire these skills should be more prepared to provide timely, consistent, and professional child welfare documentation and thereby avoid some of the stress associated with the field's infamous paperwork burden.

Literature Review: Teaching Documentation to Future Child Welfare Workers

Documentation and paperwork management have a major impact on current practice in child welfare services from intake to adoption or reunification. There is some limited mention in the research about documentation and its impact on child welfare practice. An admirable review of the history and current trends in child welfare case recording was published by McDevitt in 1994. Among McDevitt's (1994) observations was the fact that "case recording is a constant preoccupation of child welfare caseworkers under pressure from difficult cases and expanding caseloads" (p. 41). More recently, Juby and Scannapieco (2007) used structural equation modeling to find that effective paperwork management is a strong contributor to successful workload management in child welfare workers. Unfortunately, while these are admirable findings about case recording in the child welfare field, there does not appear to be any review or evaluation of child welfare specific documentation training for pre-practicum undergraduate students in the social work literature. It is unclear to what extent future child welfare workers are being exposed to documentation training in an academic setting prior to their field education and employment.

Relevant Teaching Models

Some child welfare workers view documentation as tedious busywork necessary to meet agency and legal mandates. In fact, some fail to see the connection between such work and the provision of quality services to children and families (Sidell, 2015). It is therefore important to develop pedagogical tools to link child welfare documentation and quality child welfare services. The model described in this article has features of both case-based learning and problem-based learning. Both methods were utilized to teach child welfare documentation primarily because they fit nicely with the hands-on nature of social work education and help to make the all-important link between documentation and practice.

Case-based Learning. In social work education, teaching using cases from the field occurs quite naturally in practice courses. For example, in a social work practice course the instructor might choose a case to use as an example of a theoretical concept or practice skill that is being presented in class. In case-based learning this common teaching practice becomes a more extensive structure upon which a student-centered and discussion-based collaborative process is built (Jones, 2003). Some of the specific goals of case-based learning are "to elicit discussion and analysis of situations and to build upon the student's capacity to clearly define issues, problem-solve, make appropriate clinical decisions, implement, and evaluate selected solutions" (Jones, 2003, p. 184). Case-based learning has been determined to be an effective teaching method

for teaching in many professional education programs (Austin & Packard, 2009) as well as in both graduate (Jones, 2003) and undergraduate (Cossom, 1991) social work programs. The case-based teaching method is especially effective in encouraging and reinforcing critical thinking, problem solving, and professional decision making (Austin & Packard, 2009; Jones, 2003). Case-based teaching also promotes skills such as making fact-based judgements, making decisions in the context of competing alternatives, and applying conceptual knowledge to real-life situations (Austin & Packard, 2009).

Problem-based Learning. The method of teaching presented in this article fits most cleanly within the case-based method described above, however, it also shares some of the characteristics of problem-based learning methods that have become more popular in the social work curriculum (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003; Coleman, Collins, & Baylis, 2007; Hartsell & Parker, 2008; Lam, 2004; Pearson, Wong, Ho, & Wong, 2007). Problem-based learning originated in medical education in the 1960s and has since been applied to other disciplines, including social work (Coleman et al., 2007). Although, some have argued that problem-based learning is a natural outgrowth of the historical practice methods of Mary Richmond and Jane Addams (Hartsell & Parker, 2008).

As with case-based learning, in problem-based learning students are presented with a problem or issue as the starting point for the learning process. However, in problem-based learning the problem has been described as “ill-structured,” i.e. it lacks an absolute correct answer and allows for multiple perspectives for solving/interpreting the situation (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003). Obviously, most social work practice scenarios fit the characteristics of an “ill-structured” problem. Some instructors who use problem-based learning (Hartsell & Parker, 2008) place students in agency settings so that the “ill-structured” scenarios arise from their real-life social work practice with their assigned clients.

In the case-based method described previously, “the case material is already organized and synthesized for students,” whereas, with problem-based learning, the problems are intentionally “ill-structured” (Barrows, 1986, p. 483) and the problem is the vehicle whereby students learn the concepts being covered in the particular course. The students are not taught by the instructor how to solve the problem; instead, with the instructor acting as facilitator, the problem provides the opportunity for students to discover a solution through the self-directed use of problem solving and critical thinking (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003; Lam, 2004). It is because of this difference in problem structure between case-based learning and problem-based learning that some have characterized the latter as superior because it increases motivation for learning, helps students learn to structure knowledge, and develops student-centered and self-directed learning skills (Barrows, 1986; Hartsell & Parker, 2008).

The Teaching Tool

Both case-based learning and problem-based learning lend themselves nicely to the teaching of documentation in a child welfare setting. Documentation cannot be effectively practiced in a classroom setting without some sort of “case” upon which to base the teaching. The “ill-structured” nature of most child welfare cases makes problem-based learning a natural fit to teaching child welfare documentation, because, as noted previously, problem-based learning relies on a problem that lacks an absolute correct answer and allows for multiple perspectives for solving/interpreting the situation (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003). The teaching tool being assessed in this article is a hybrid of case-based learning, problem-based learning, and the idiosyncratic pedagogy of the authors. This method, with slight variations, has been used for close to fifteen years to teach child welfare students the art of documentation. In this method, the source of the “ill-structured” case is a movie depicting a father and daughter who navigate their way through the child welfare system.

The “Case”: *I am Sam*

The Academy Award® nominated film, *I am Sam* (Nelson, 2001), tells the story of Sam Dawson as depicted by Sean Penn. Sam suffers from various developmental and mental disabilities and finds himself in a situation where he is the sole caretaker of his young daughter, Lucy. The case of Sam Dawson and his daughter, Lucy Diamond Dawson, is presented in the movie in an ambiguous enough manner that students must use critical thinking skills to make decisions about what services should be provided. As the movie ends, it is not clear what permanent decisions were made in Lucy’s case. Thus, students’ assignments and arguments are based on their own developing clinical skills and critical thinking abilities rather than “the right answer,” because no such answer is provided in the movie.

Contemporary films in general have proven effective in social work education (Downey, Jackson, Puig & Furman, 2003). This film provides opportunities for students to observe many facets of a child welfare case and complete the typical documentation of an actual child welfare case, including: case notes, risk/safety assessments, service plans, and court reports. In the movie, *I am Sam* (Nelson, 2001), the main character, Sam Dawson, becomes involved with the child welfare system when his daughter, Lucy, is removed from his care. One of the reasons that *I am Sam* works well as an instructional tool is that the characters in the film are followed from Lucy’s birth to her removal and then through the family’s participation in court proceedings, foster care, and other events that a child welfare client might experience. For example, Sam Dawson is shown participating in a shelter care hearing, an adjudication hearing, and in a supervised visit with his daughter. These events might not normally make the director’s cut in a Hollywood production featuring a child welfare case, and yet they are useful tools for exposing students to at least the Hollywood version of the child welfare system. The authors are not aware of another movie that provides this level of detail about the child welfare system in an engaging feature-length film.

I am Sam (Nelson, 2001) is not an exclusive fit for this type of an exercise, although it is one of the best. There are certainly other films that may also be effective as a tool to conduct a similar documentation training exercise especially in an introductory micro or mezzo social work practice course. Though not familiar to the authors, a colleague has recommended another Academy Award® nominated film, *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* (Blomquist & Hallström, 1993), as a possible vehicle for presenting this curriculum in a similar fashion.

In order to facilitate a systematic and organized presentation of the Sam Dawson case, the authors reviewed the film and divided it into sections for use during the various weeks of class. The film is presented in class on separate weeks in a semester-long class in a series of nine clips of approximately 15 minutes each. In each clip, the material for completing various types of child welfare documentation is depicted in the film as the characters proceed through the child welfare system.

Child Welfare Documentation Tools

The actual documentation forms completed by the students are all a close approximation of the forms that are currently in use at a county child welfare agency in the eastern United States. The specific forms that are completed during this *I am Sam* exercise are those generally used in child welfare practice and many are used in other fields of social work practice. Thus, students who take the child welfare course and never practice as a child welfare worker still benefit from the exercise. The specific forms used are: 1) an intake screening form; 2) a risk/safety assessment form used to determine the relative safety of the child as the case opens and progresses; 3) a shelter care petition presented to court making the case for or against initial removal; 4) a simple dictation or case note following a supervised visit; 5) an adjudication petition to legally continue the ongoing placement of the child; 6) an information release form; 7) a family service or treatment plan; and 8) a permanency court report to determine the permanent placement/arrangement for the child. Where the film does not provide adequate information to complete some of these forms, students are

encouraged to make up the information (e.g., telephone numbers, social security numbers, birthdates, and addresses).

A manager from a local child welfare agency helped to develop this teaching method. She also provided the sample documentation forms, and originally co-taught the course. Eventually, other local professionals were invited to help with the course. In every case, those new co-teachers were alumni of the program who had experienced the “*I am Sam*” exercises first hand in their BSW education. This collaboration between field staff, program alumni, and university faculty brings an extra level of practice reality to the “*I am Sam*” exercises and gives the experience the feel of a supervisor training a new employee.

Child Welfare Documentation Instruction

The “*I am Sam*” documentation training takes place during the last hour or second/third session of a three hour, weekly, undergraduate, child welfare practice course. Prior to each film clip from *I am Sam*, students are provided with basic instructions for completing the documentation by the professor and co-instructor. While the film clip is showing, students write down the necessary information they need to complete the relevant forms or reports. Students then complete the forms electronically at home at their convenience. Supplemental materials needed to complete some of the forms, such as instructions or legal definitions, are also provided as needed on the course website. For each type of documentation, students must use their own critical thinking skills to complete major portions of the assignment, e.g. make recommendations about the permanency plan for Sam’s daughter, Lucy, now that she has been in foster care for six months.

The dictation or case note is a good example of how this documentation instruction/training process works. Case notes or dictation are a ubiquitous form of documentation in all social work practice areas. Generally, the important basic lessons in a case note training are: 1) to present pertinent facts from an interaction with a client concisely and accurately; and 2) unless clearly stated, avoid opinion or conjecture. Students receive this case note training from the instructors and then they watch the relevant film clip. In this particular clip, Sam Dawson is shown traveling to a supervised visit where he will meet with his daughter. The actual visit involves some telling statements by Lucy and is fairly representative of what might be expected in a visit between a developmentally disabled father and his child. The assignment is then turned in and graded to determine if students included important facts, avoided opinion and conjecture, and accurately captured the details of the visit depicted in the film. A similar pattern is used to teach other documentation such as risk/safety assessments, various court reports, family service plans, etc.

As was mentioned earlier, the film, *I am Sam*, ends without making it completely clear what court decisions were made about Lucy’s eventual care. This means that her case is an “ill-structured” problem, thus fitting the suggested parameters of problem-based learning. Therefore, students have put their own recommendations in the permanency report, which is the culminating documentation assignment. In order to complete this assignment successfully, students are required to justify their decision about Lucy’s permanent placement with cogent and logical arguments that would convince a juvenile court judge that their recommendations are sound and in the best interest of the child.

Relationship to Field Education Training

It should be noted that these documentation assignments are not intended to replace or replicate the formal new-employee orientation training that is in place at most public child welfare agencies. Rather, the purpose is to expose students to child welfare documentation so that they are not fearful or unaware of documentation practices when they start their field experience or are presented with their first case. Additionally, the instruction provides the reasoning and rationale behind completion of the paperwork, helping students understand the important role that documentation plays in practice. A student’s first case might be assigned during their internship or their first few weeks working as a child welfare worker when their new employee

training has yet to be completed. This training ensures that even the newest social work students working in child welfare will have been exposed to at least some documentation training before completing their first new paperwork task.

The Safety Assessment assignment used in this *I am Sam* exercise is a good example of the value of completing documentation training in both an academic setting and a field education/employee training setting. In the child welfare classroom, this form is explained in approximately 45 minutes prior to the movie clip that depicts the risks facing the child in this case. Students are then required to fill out the forms as explained, with the information presented in the movie. Students who go on to work in the child welfare field in the local area are required to complete a rigorous eight-hour training on this same form, which they must successfully pass before they can be assigned their first case. This training generally takes place as a part of the completion of their field education hours. The course instructors are aware of this fact, but have decided that the exposure to the various case recording forms and the repetition of learning are both valuable outcomes of the course.

Methodology

The primary purpose of this article is to introduce the previously described teaching tool and to report on the assessment of student perceptions and attitudes relative to their experience with that tool. What follows is a description of that assessment.

Sample

During the first semester of the implementation of these "*I am Sam*" documentation training exercises the authors recruited the 24 students in an introductory course on child welfare practice to participate in this simple assessment. The students were all undergraduate social work majors at a small, rural, teaching university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Demographically, participants were representative of the population from which the university generally draws its students. All students gave informed consent before participating in the research and appropriate human subjects approval for the research project was granted by the university's institutional review board.

Measurement Tool

The primary purpose of the measurement tools used here was to assess the perceptions of the students who participated in these documentation exercises. The authors created a simple, 12 item proprietary evaluation tool to determine whether students felt these exercises were effective (See Table 1 for a list of the 12 questions). The 12 Likert scale questions focused on the documentation training exercises and each asked a question about the "*I am Sam*" assignments and asked students to reply on a scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" (see Table 1). The questions were phrased and coded so that a higher score indicated more positive views of the "*I am Sam*" exercises.

The Likert scale items were part of a 36-item overall assessment of the course that included space for additional open-ended, qualitative student commentary. Open ended questions on the survey included items such as "The best thing about this class is:" or "One thing I would change about this class is:". Students could also provide open-ended comments following each of the 12 Likert scale questions.

Table 1

Average Scores for Items on Evaluation Questionnaire (n=24)

Question	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
1. The movie, <i>I am Sam</i> and the corresponding paperwork help me to understand child welfare.	4.13	.61	3	5
2. The movie, <i>I am Sam</i> and the corresponding paperwork are interesting and keep my attention.	3.96	.62	3	5
3. The movie, <i>I am Sam</i> and the corresponding paperwork facilitate class discussion and participation.	3.96	.62	3	5
4. The movie, <i>I am Sam</i> is incorporated into the course well.	4.21	.72	3	5
5. The movie, <i>I am Sam</i> and the corresponding paperwork will prepare me for child welfare work in Pennsylvania.	4.42	.93	1	5
6. The movie, <i>I am Sam</i> and the corresponding paperwork are relevant and useful.	4.25	.74	2	5
7. The child welfare paperwork corresponds to the movie <i>I am Sam</i> .	3.83	.76	2	5
8. The movie, <i>I am Sam</i> is a good movie to use to teach child welfare paperwork.	3.88	.85	2	5
9. The examples/instructions for completing the child welfare paperwork are clear.	4.04	.86	2	5
10. The movie, <i>I am Sam</i> and the corresponding paperwork are a creative way to learn social work practice.	4.13	.90	2	5
11. The movie, <i>I am Sam</i> and the corresponding paperwork are a creative way to learn child welfare paperwork.	4.04	.81	2	5
12. I enjoy using the movie, <i>I am Sam</i> to learn about child welfare.	4.38	.58	3	5

Data Collection and Analysis

Each student in the class was invited to complete the questionnaire during class and were given time to do so. Averages for the 12-item Likert-scale questions were calculated together with a total overall average to assess general satisfaction with the teaching tool. A simple thematic analysis of the open-ended qualitative responses was conducted in order to get a general sense of student's perceptions of the teaching tool.

Findings

Generally, student responses to the Likert scale questions ranged in the "Agree" to "Strongly Agree" area. The overall average for all 12 questions was a 4.1 (SD = .47) out of a possible five (n=24) (see Table 1). The question with the highest average score (M = 4.42, SD = .93) was: "The movie, *I am Sam*, and the corresponding paperwork will prepare me for child welfare work in Pennsylvania." The question with the lowest

average score ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .76$) was: “The child welfare paperwork corresponds to the movie *I am Sam*.”

In response to the overall question “The best thing about this class is:” some students’ responses focused on this specific “*I am Sam*” training:

- Having hands on experience in the classroom. Example: Watching the movie, *I am Sam* and doing paperwork on it.
- The movie [*I am Sam*] was able to help me better understand the text. It allows me to apply the theories.
- I like how we actually get to go through the process/paperwork.
- The opportunity to practice/learn how to do child welfare paperwork.
- The use of the movie to assist with the paperwork made the class very interesting.

The primary critique listed by students is the need for additional instruction on how to complete the various types of paperwork. As is true with many courses, it is sometimes difficult to include all the content intended and in some cases the students reported that the “*I am Sam*” training was rushed. Students also faced some of the frustration and confusion expected by anyone who faces child welfare paperwork for the first time. The following are some representative examples of responses students gave when asked what they would change about the class:

- Being more prepared with the paperwork and allowing enough time to thoroughly go over it.
- I’m still a little confused on all the different paperwork. Largely because of the paperwork itself. It is not easy to distinguish some of it from the other forms. But I know I’m not supposed to be a paperwork genius overnight.
- The papers that we have to fill out for *I am Sam* got tedious and the movie got a little old after a while.
- *I am Sam* was a great idea. The only problem was there was not enough information to complete the paperwork. I felt like I was reaching for stuff to put down.

One of the more insightful critiques from a student looked at the overall structure of the “*I am Sam*” training exercises:

I would choose a movie most people have not seen/do not have access to. In real life, there is no re-wind button and we cannot fast forward to the end of the sessions to determine what is/is not effective. Also, watching the video, we had more background information on the client than we normally would. I felt it jaded our view of the client, sympathizing with Sam when in a normal situation we may not have.

Not only did this student understand that the movie made the situation clearer than it would be in an actual case, but she recognized that the film definitely has a hero or protagonist the viewer is supposed to identify with. She also recognized that if this were a real case it would not necessarily be appropriate to see the developmentally disabled father as a caretaker for his daughter, even if it makes for a better movie. This insight parallels the opinion of one of the guest speakers in the class who reported his opinion that *I am Sam* is an unrealistic film from a child welfare practice perspective because his experience has taught him that very few clients with Sam Dawson’s abilities can provide adequate care for a child.

Discussion

Responses to the Likert scale questions suggest that students generally had quite positive experiences with the exercises and the qualitative responses indicate that most students found the “*I am Sam*” exercises to be quite beneficial. Thus, the results of this simple, preliminary evaluation are quite promising and it seems

that the methods used are effective in at least meeting the recommendation that students are exposed to the practice of child welfare documentation prior to their field education and employment (Kagle & Kopels, 2008; Sidell, 2015). It is clear that there is room for improvement in the method, such as increasing the amount of time spent on training students in completing some of the more complex forms. It can be argued that students' comments regarding their frustration and the tedium of the paperwork assignments are a sign that they were exposed, to a limited degree, to the difficulties related to completing paperwork successfully and that they faced an appropriately designed "ill-structured" problem as recommended in the problem-based learning literature (Altshuler & Bosch, 2003; Barrows, 1986; Hartsell & Parker, 2008). In spite of this current negative reaction, the students should be better prepared for the first time that they face the paperwork requirements of a full-time child welfare caseload.

While these preliminary evaluation findings are promising, some of the most rewarding responses regarding this documentation training have come from former students who now work in the child welfare field. Students who move into the child welfare field after taking this class consistently return to report anecdotally that this documentation training was useful for them. They are especially relieved when they are handed their first form of documentation and they are not blind-sided; they recognize it and at least have some sense of how to complete it. Some, however, have reported that they wished more time had been spent on these documentation assignments prior to starting their internship or work responsibilities. Apparently, at least some of the students who have gone through these exercises found long-term value in them and wished for more extensive training in child welfare documentation.

Limitations

The primary purpose of this article and the limited evaluation presented here is to describe the basics of an engaging, multi-media teaching method that other BSW educators might adopt. However, this evaluation is clearly limited; limited to one class, during one semester, at one university, in one state, and in one country. It is also clearly limited to an assessment of student perceptions of the teaching tool and does not present any findings about the actual effectiveness of the method or the learning outcomes associated with it. Therefore, the results of this evaluation are seriously limited in terms of whether they are generalizable to other settings. This initial evaluation would have benefited from a more rigorous experimental control group design in which one class without documentation training is compared to a class that was exposed to the training. A pre-test/post-test design to assess learning is another option that could provide more rigor. Further, this preliminary evaluation also lacks any type of follow-up to see if the learning has any type of long-term impact on actual job performance or retention.

Implications for Teaching, Practice, and Research

Investigation and reporting about this particular documentation teaching method opens up a number of questions and further follow-up research opportunities similar to those mentioned in the limitations section. First, the findings from this initial evaluation reported here are very preliminary and should be investigated further by interviewing child welfare professionals who have completed the training so that the application of the learning to the field experience can be assessed. Second, the status of child welfare documentation training and social work documentation training in general must be investigated further.

Professional Child Welfare Practitioner Assessments

Clearly the assessment of this documentation teaching method is preliminary and based solely in academia. Further, more intensive evaluation with graduates of the course is recommended and could be accomplished using the previously mentioned pre-test/post-test model or a control group design. However, a more thorough and meaningful follow-up evaluation with graduates of the program is recommended as most feasible and useful to the profession. The compilation of actual qualitative and quantitative follow-up data with grad-

uates working in the child welfare field could determine if the extra exposure to child welfare documentation training was beneficial to the new employees as they transitioned into professional child welfare practice.

Documentation Training Investigations

During the course of producing this article, it became clear that there are a number of unanswered questions regarding child welfare education in BSW programs and regarding the teaching of child welfare documentation in BSW programs. For example, it is not clear whether child welfare education is a part of the normal curriculum of BSW programs nationally. Do most social work programs have a separate child welfare course, or is child welfare content infused into other practice courses? Within these child welfare courses, are documentation procedures a part of the course content? If documentation practice and procedures are part of the child welfare curriculum, then what types of paperwork are covered and how is the content being taught? Also, if documentation is not being taught in child welfare courses then what are the reasons for this omission?

With regard to social work documentation in general, some of the above questions remain unanswered despite having been raised by previous authors (Ames, 1999; Ames, 2002). It is not clear whether documentation procedures in general are a part of social work practice courses nationally. If documentation is being taught in social work practice courses, it is not clear how it is being taught, what specifically is being taught, and what resources are used to teach it.

In the case of child welfare documentation training specifically, and social work documentation training generally, a national or perhaps international survey of accredited BSW and MSW programs could potentially answer many of the questions mentioned previously. Current web-based survey technology might enhance the efficacy of such efforts and facilitate a comprehensive assessment of the status of documentation training throughout the field of social work education.

Conclusion

Documentation is an important but somewhat neglected aspect of child welfare education at the BSW level. The method reported here appears to be appreciated by students, based on preliminary evaluation findings. It should be simple to replicate this problem-based/case-based method of training in any number of academic settings to ensure that social workers are adequately trained in child welfare documentation prior to graduation.

Child welfare practice is often characterized as chaotic and unpredictable. The behaviors and needs of perpetrators and victims cannot be scheduled and planned. Much of what fills the schedule of a child welfare worker is outside of their control. Professional documentation of case work is something that the worker has the ability to control. It can be scheduled and it can be planned for so that it is successfully completed. But successful documentation is only possible if the worker has been adequately trained. Such training should take place in BSW programs, in field education settings, and the workplace so that documentation does not become one more chaotic stressor in the life of the new child welfare professional.

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