



Integrating Research and Practice in Baccalaureate Field Education Through Collaborative Student/Faculty Research

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Introduction

Social work students are expected to learn to be both consumers and creators of research. This article will describe the efforts of the Shippensburg University Department of Social Work and Gerontology BSW program to integrate research and practice in field education. In 2004, a large number of students had their final semester internships at child welfare agencies in the counties surrounding Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. Four students also participated in the Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates (CWEB) program, and collaborated with faculty to conduct qualitative and quantitative research at their placement sites. Benefits and dilemmas of the CWEB program are presented.

Integration of Research and Practice in Field Education

The Council on Social Work (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) outlines the research competencies expected of graduating BSW students (CSWE, 2008). These competencies mirror the stages of learning described by Dietz, Westerfelt, and Barton (2004):

1. Acquire knowledge about research
2. Develop a critical perspective
3. Use knowledge to develop interventions
4. Evaluate interventions for improving practice effectiveness and building knowledge
5. Report results of research to others; contribute to the social work body of knowledge (p. 81).

Field education offers excellent opportunities for social work students to integrate research and

practice. A number of social work schools have spearheaded efforts to collaborate with field agencies in teaching and applying research principles. Schools like Iona College in New Rochelle, New York have created social research centers. In addition to enhancing the school's visibility and multidisciplinary collaboration, the centers provide relevant teaching material and experiences for research classes and involve students in interviewing, data collection and analysis. Several schools, especially those involved with the Hartford Project, are working closely with field agencies on gerontology research (Dorfman, Murty, Ingram, & Li, 2007; Rosen, Zlotnik, & Singer, 2003).

The BSW program at Shippensburg University has been in existence since 1974. Following the completion of their coursework, BSW students begin their final semester, during which they complete a block field placement. In the spring 2004 semester, the BSW program launched a collaboration among students and faculty in research in field education. The four students in the Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates (CWEB) program were interested in the legislative and policy changes affecting the placement of children in kinship care in the region (Stevenson, 2003). CWEB is governed by the federal Title IV-E regulations and implemented through a cooperative effort between the US Administration for Children and Families, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, and fourteen undergraduate social work programs in Pennsylvania accredited by CSWE (University of Pittsburgh, 2005).

Field education at the Department of Social Work and Gerontology at Shippensburg University takes place during the BSW student's final semester. The field course is taught concurrently with a Senior Seminar where course content, activities, and assignments are designed to facilitate the integration of previously acquired knowledge in the students' field practice experience. The major activity in the Senior Seminar is a weekly peer supervision experience facilitated by one of the three faculty assigned to the field and seminar courses. The major assignment in the Senior Seminar course is a student-led, agency-based research project completed by every field student in their practicum agency. Students receive a stipend for this research. This project includes the completion of a human subjects review by the university's review board and a poster presentation of the results during "Senior Presentations". Senior Presentations takes place in the student union building during the last week of class every semester. All social work majors are required to attend the Senior Presentations. Most of the graduating field students invite family, friends, coworkers, and field instructors to witness the culminating moment in the students' undergraduate social work education.

Representative Examples of Faculty-Student Research

Although all four students in the CWEB program presented research projects focused on the topic of kinship care of children in public child welfare agencies, each project was independent in many ways. One qualitative project focused on grandparents as kinship providers, one qualitative project sought to determine whether the needs of Hispanic kinship providers were being met in the county; and the final qualitative project focused on the caseworkers' perceptions and needs as they worked with

kinship placements. The lone quantitative study compared the stability of kinship versus traditional foster care placements.

The qualitative grandparent study found that research corroborated findings reported by Roe and Minkler (1999) that first, many kinship providers are the grandparents of the child in custody and second, “although grandparent raising grandchildren experience many rewards, including a renewed sense of purpose and a special bonding with the children in their care, the challenges and difficulties they face should not be underestimated” (p. 28). Specifically, the grandparent participants in the research all mentioned that they care about their grandchildren and want what is best for them, but at the same time are dealing with many new and difficult issues that make their caregiving task challenging. The major unique finding of this project was that local child welfare caseworkers did not understand or implement the new kinship policy appropriately. This meant that these grandparents were not initially given preference when caseworkers were looking at placement resources for their grandchildren. This disturbed the grandparent kinship care providers who participated in this study.

In the Hispanic kinship needs assessment project, caseworkers involved with kinship placements and kinship care providers were interviewed. These respondents identified some of the common benefits and problems with kinship care that are also identified in the research literature. The study found that with kinship care the child already knows the caregiver, the child has an attachment to the provider, the provider knows the child’s needs, and the transition into care is less traumatic. In other words, “kinship care preserves the continuity of care, relationship, and environment that are essential to a child’s overall well-being” (Crumbly & Little, 1997, p. 1). On the other hand, the findings suggest that it might be beneficial for children to be removed from extended families entirely in order to distance them from the family’s issues and problems. The kinship care providers interviewed in this study consistently saw kinship care as beneficial but found working with the child’s biological parents (their own relatives) to be very stressful. Unfortunately, this research found that the Hispanic population was not being adequately served by the services available to them. This may be due to language barriers, lack of awareness about kinship care, and the immigration status of many of the itinerant workers that make up much of the local Hispanic population.

The third qualitative study examined caseworker perception of kinship care and involved interviews with 18 caseworkers that work with children in kinship care placements. The analysis of these workers’ responses showed that when a caseworker has one kinship placement on her caseload she is essentially working with two cases in one: the child’s biological family who has to meet goals and receive services, and then the kinship caregiver who must be oriented to the new system and its services. This case management difficulty is partly due to the paradoxical position in which kinship care providers find themselves. As relatives, they provide increased contact to biological families; this simultaneously reduces the trauma experienced by a child in placement while also exposing the child to the perpetrators of their maltreatment more often than a worker would typically allow. As noted

by Beeman and Boisen (1999), a lack of resources for kinship families and conflict with biological parents are major problems faced by kinship care caseworkers.

Finally, the quantitative project used an independent samples t-test to compare the stability of kinship versus traditional foster care placements for all placements in her agency for the past two years. The findings suggest that children in kinship care experienced fewer placement disruptions than children in foster care, and they were in their placements longer than children in traditional foster care. In other words, the children in kinship care experienced greater continuity and stability than the children who experienced a foster care placement. It was noted that there is literature (Geen, 2003) that posits extended stays in kinship care may not necessarily be positive and may result from the perpetrating parents' more intractable issues and resulting lack of motivation. In other words, the lack of motivation occurs because children in kinship care are more likely to come from homes where problems such as maltreatment and substance abuse are the cause for removal and these take longer to treat and overcome.

With each of these projects, the students were serving as interns at local child welfare agencies. At Shippensburg University, students prepare for their internships by taking a one credit "Preparation for Practicum" course. Their sole purpose in that course is to investigate possible practicum placements, apply to those internship sites, and finally interview at those sites to finalize their field placement. In order to facilitate the placement process, the faculty member who serves as a field coordinator works to create relationships with potential internship sites. In this case, the interns were placed through the collaboration of the field coordinator and the Title IV-E program coordinator. Shippensburg University has had a long-standing relationship with Cumberland County Children and Youth Services (CCCYS), located in Carlisle, PA. As with other internship sites, CCCYS provides students with an office and field instructor and any other resources they need to complete their internship. In this instance, they also provided access to clients and client files so that students could collect qualitative and quantitative data related the kinship placements they were investigating. Faculty and students worked closely with the agencies in which the students were completing their fieldwork to ensure that the research topic was relevant to those agencies.

Agency staff members are some of the primary attendees at the Senior Presentations event where student posters are showcased. In addition to presenting at the Senior Presentations event, students are expected to present their research findings at their practicum agency. Most take the opportunity to do that, and faculty receive consistently positive reports about the value of these presentations to the practicum agencies. The kinship policies they were working with were new and unfamiliar to the agencies; the students' expertise obtained through their research was seen by the agencies as a positive resource.

Benefits

The project has been successful in many ways. Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, and Lerner (1998) found that retention of undergraduate students was positively affected by involvement in research collaborations with faculty. Although Smith and Gore (2006) noted that students generally lack enthusiasm for research content and experience, they found that reactions to a hybrid research/practice course were generally positive. This suggests that the application of research concepts in a real-world setting may be a key to improving student perceptions of research. In this instance the involved students also received a meaningful stipend in exchange for their research participation, which would also likely improve student perception of the research experience. These BSW students said that they appreciated being exposed to genuine research activities. The students were proud to present their work, and believed this faculty-mentored research would help their graduate school applications.

The most promising long-term outcomes of this project are the career paths that the involved students have taken. One of the students is currently employed as a tenure track social work professor at another state system university in Pennsylvania, having recently completed a PhD program, and another is currently working on her PhD at yet another university in Pennsylvania. The other two students went on to complete masters in social work degrees and continue to work in the child welfare field; one in the traditional child protective services setting and the other in an agency serving immigrant and refugee children. It is obviously inappropriate to make causal statements from such a small sample, but in this case there are four students who collaborated in a formal research project with a faculty member and all of them went on to get an MSW degree and two more went on toward earning a doctoral degree.

An unexpected benefit to faculty could be the increased opportunity and encouragement for research publication. Although this is not the primary aim of a program to integrate research and field education, working with students can invigorate faculty, and collaboration with field agencies can offer rich resources for future research.

Concerns

Implementation of the project has brought to light several issues for consideration. The first issue is the importance of forging closer links with agencies and their field instructors around research. The second is the importance of close attention to the process of faculty-student collaboration. The third is the current paucity of opportunities for students (especially BSW students) to present their research. First, collaboration of academics/field educators and agencies around research is not without tensions. Agencies may be distrustful of any research efforts in their sphere of influence. They may not support field instructors' involvement with research if it interferes with productivity. Field instructors are not always confident in their ability to teach research to students; for example, a recent survey of field instructors affiliated with Longwood University revealed that one of their stated needs for continuing education was engaging in research-informed practice and practice-informed research

(Massaro and Stebbins, 2015). In this case, the author, as the faculty coordinator for CWEB, was available for consultation; field liaisons can also offer support to agencies in research efforts. Second, students must not feel exploited when they collaborate with faculty. Close attention to the collaborative process is important. The differential in power between student and faculty must be acknowledged and discussed. Students and faculty should negotiate a contract at the beginning of any project, discuss roles and expectations, and perhaps have a written agreement about details like time frame and authorship. The final manuscript and any subsequent revisions should be reviewed with every author, as well as with participants such as field instructors (Moore & Avant, 2008; Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998; Strassburger, 1995; Tompkins, Rogers, & Cohen, 2009).

One of the most disheartening problems is the difficulty in disseminating BSW research findings, even though a poster presentation at the school receives a warm reception. The national conference of the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD) provides opportunities for student poster presentations, but BSW students may have graduated by the time of the conference, or cannot afford to attend a national conference. CSWE could also be a good venue for student poster presentations, but BSW presenters may have to compete with MSW student presenters at a poster session at CSWE APM.

Publication of BSW projects is difficult because the 16-week time frame of the program is so short. The initial plan was to compile the students' research findings into one article and submit it to a journal, but no appropriate journal could be found for BSW student research. Journals like the *Keystone Journal of Undergraduate Research* (http://www.ship.edu/keystone_journal) are not social work specific or intended for a national or international audience. Publication of BSW field-oriented research is possible in journals like the *Field Educator* (fieldeducator.org), which has a Students Speak section devoted to student writing. However, the social work profession is in need of a research journal specifically for manuscripts by undergraduate students (and collaborating faculty).

Conclusion

In summary, the Shippensburg University BSW faculty-student collaboration was successful in integrating research and practice in field education. Four students produced qualitative and quantitative research whose results were germane and helpful to their field agencies. The research effort gave them satisfaction, and enabled them to finish their undergraduate program with success and move on to positive career paths. However, these collaborative efforts require regular support for participating field agencies, and careful attention to faculty-student dynamics. Most important, social work educators need to find ways to encourage presentation and publication of these worthy efforts.

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