

CHILD WELFARE AND SOCIAL WORK: ARE THEY COMPATIBLE?

◆ Peter Dudding ◆

The histories of social work and child welfare have been closely related and highly intertwined as they have evolved over the past 125 years. While this relationship has demonstrated harmony and consistency of purpose, it has also demonstrated conflict over means and ends. It has always struck me as odd that there is such an ambivalent relationship between them.

Social work has claimed "child welfare" as an area of predominant influence. Other groups, such as child and youth workers, psychology or child development workers, have usually been relegated to ancillary support roles within a primary social work setting.

Child welfare has also traditionally been viewed as an area of practice to be avoided by social workers. In my opinion, it is under-represented in professional school curricula and undervalued by professors, practitioners and students alike. Ironically, the majority of social work practitioners employed as new graduates work in child welfare agencies across Canada.

It is also true that child welfare organizations have experienced considerable difficulty in the recruitment and retention of staff, particularly in the areas of front-line child protection work. The average lengths of stay/turnover and amount of prior experience in these positions have been ongoing challenges for child welfare employers. These problems are growing, and they are important factors in determining the future capacity of the child welfare system to attract, recruit and retain well-trained and motivated child welfare workers. An issue for many concerned with the development of child welfare is the scenario in which a new young social worker is hired to do child protection work and stays in this role for only one or two years. An effective child welfare system is based

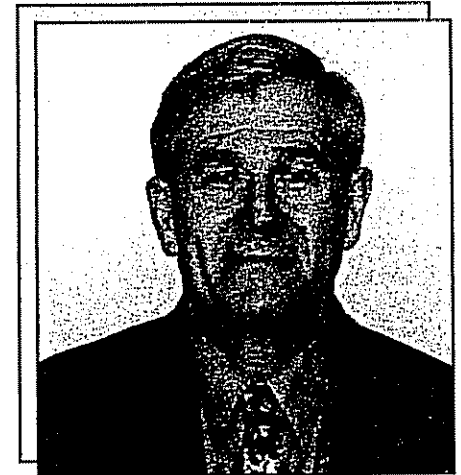
upon having skilled and experienced staff in front-line positions.

During the past decade, many child welfare organizations began developing new child protection training and preparation programs as part of an overall strategy to improve recruitment and retention. For the most part, these training programs focus on specific aspects of child abuse and neglect, risk assessment, case management and child development. Training has been offered to newly hired employees with and without social work qualifications. As well, to improve their employment strategies, child welfare organizations have increased remuneration and benefits and improved workplace conditions.

It is important to understand that these organizations have faced considerable challenges, with rapidly growing caseloads and administrative demands, increasing focus on child protection and safety issues, worker risk and liability concerns, diminished community resources, and value discrepancy. Overall, the malaise of working in child welfare at all levels in the 1990s was fostered by a highly politicized environment, growing demands and stress on resources.

In this context, there is an active debate about the role, influence and impact of social work professional education on the development of child welfare. The concern voiced by child welfare managers is that new social workers are dissuaded from and poorly equipped for the rigours of child welfare practice. Social work educators express worry because they feel their role is not to produce technicians, but rather to ensure that the beliefs, values and principles of social work are instilled in their graduates.

These positions can be reconciled by recognizing the need for professional education to be augmented by specific on-the-job pre-service training within



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organizations. Importantly, there are increasing instances where this is occurring. An interesting example is the new education and awareness program of the National Youth in Care Network in which representatives of youth in care attend social work classes to discuss the issues and experiences of children who grow up in the public care system. There is great value in this approach in breaking down myths and promoting better understanding.

However, this debate also raises some fundamental tensions and the need for further dialogue and discussion among child welfare providers, social work educators and others. There are many "controversial" questions to be addressed. Here is a sample:

- Are the fundamental values of social work and child protection compatible?
- Is there a need to choose a primacy of rights of child or family?
- Is social control a social work function?
- How can we reconcile the expectations of the child welfare employer and the profession of the social worker?

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Affirming the Role of Social Work

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No doubt the list goes well beyond this short but reasonably representative sampling of questions that arises in the debate. Nonetheless, they do illustrate an important paradox between social work and child welfare. As well, they point to the question: why does social work both embrace child welfare as an area of primary involvement for the profession and yet generally not regard the field well? Clearly, it is a contradiction that serves neither the profession nor the vocation.

However, behind every contradiction lies a new level of understanding about the issues and forces at play. There is an important need for dialogue between social work and child welfare professionals.

I do not believe the answers are simple or easy. If they were, we likely would have discovered them already! However, I also do not believe in the "oppression of the OR" and the predilection of the

Western mind to believe that it must be an "either/or" situation. Rather, we need to search for ways to better understand and reconcile both sides.

In my opinion, the very essence of social work is to address the relationship between the individual and the group – at the family, community or societal levels. Thus, social work values are based upon respect for the individual and understanding of his or her relationship with others. These, too, are fundamental elements of good child welfare practice.

As well, the principle of advocacy is an established dimension of social work. It has enabled us to challenge the conventional wisdoms and assumptions of our time, and to promote the development of new or alternative ways of understanding human behaviour and interaction. The transformations of our concepts of rights, empowerment and respect have supported the development of the children's rights agenda, which is now recognized globally.

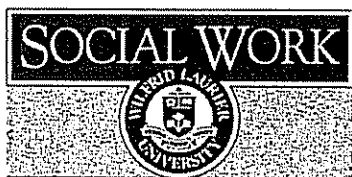
We live in an era of unparalleled change. Changes are taking place faster than ever, and are of a much greater magnitude, thereby having that much stronger an impact on human beings. The challenges and opportunities of this process of change

will require unprecedented ingenuity to adapt successfully. The values and approach of social work can make an enormous contribution to the lives of children and families. Increasingly important is our willingness to challenge each other and ourselves about the role and relationships of the individual in society, about promoting principles of rights, respect, inclusion and participation, and about the conventional wisdoms of our times.

In our training as social workers, we embrace change and learn that, through challenges and crisis, opportunities for new learning and understanding emerge. I anticipate the future development in child welfare – focused on protecting children from harm and promoting their optimal development – will require the creative skills of committed social workers to provide the necessary guidance and wisdom. It is our challenge to ensure that, in the future, there is a better alignment of social work knowledge with child welfare policy and practice. Following this path will ensure the relevance of child welfare and social work to the people we serve.

Peter Dudding, MM, MSW, RSW, is the Executive Director of the Child Welfare League of Canada. Also, Peter is one of the two social work leaders who were selected to be featured in this year's celebration of National Social Work Week, and a profile on him can be found on OASW's website: www.oasw.org.

CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMS, FALL 2004



The Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University is committed to offering ongoing professional education for social workers and other human service professionals. Our Fall 2004 programs will include:

- Understanding and Treating Anxiety Disorders, with Dr. Martin Anthony,
- Mindfulness Meditation with Dr. Theresa Castilles Reis, and
- Introduction to Life Skills Coaching.

For information about these and other program offerings, visit www.wlu.ca/fsw/programs/cenew or contact Debbie Grant in the Continuing Education Office, dgrant@wlu.ca, 519- 884-0710, ext 2028.

NEW MEMBERSHIP SERVICE: PRIVATE PRACTICE ONLINE REFERRAL SITE

A new OASW website, findasocialworker.ca, is expected to be launched this summer. It will be a comprehensive Private Practice online referral site accessible to the public, EAP companies, etc.

Further details regarding cost, registration procedure, etc., will be provided electronically, so please ensure that OASW has your current e-mail address by sending it to <membership@oasw.org>.