The relationship between caseworker education and client outcomes

Theresa Rebecca Brannon

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CASEWORKER
EDUCATION AND CLIENT OUTCOMES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Theresa Rebecca Brannon
June 2008
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5/28/08
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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, there has been a push to re-professionalize the child welfare field. Child welfare agencies are focusing, more and more, on hiring caseworkers with educational backgrounds in social work. As research continues to expound on the positive worker related outcomes that social work education has on the field of child welfare, the issue of improved client outcomes has been, largely, ignored. This quantitative study attempted to address this gap in the current literature by studying the effects of case worker education on children's length of stay in foster care and rates of successful family reunification.

The results of this study found no statistically significant relationship between caseworker education and rates of family reunification or the length of time children in the sample spent in foster care. Although a trend was observed in the number of months a child spent in foster care when their caseworker possessed a master’s vs. bachelor’s degree, it was not at a statistically significant level.
I would like to express my deepest thanks to the following people, who have contributed not only to this research but to my education and overall sanity through the past two years. In particular, to Dr. Janet Chang for her guidance through the research process and her consistent understanding during my all too frequent setbacks.

Thank you to my supervisors, Sally Richter and Olga Granillo, and the San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services for supporting and guiding me into such a challenging and rewarding field.

Thank you to the faculty of the Social Work department who have taught me not only about being a social worker, but about myself as well. Special thanks to Dr. Ray Liles who is both an excellent professor and has never failed to lend his compassion and wisdom when it was needed.

My sincerest thanks to my cohort, whose constant support has gotten me through this program: you are my models for what a social worker should be. In particular, I would like to thank my classmates and friends, Claudia Campos, Aida Quiñonez and Lizbeth Corrales, for always
being there to listen to me complain and never failing to make me laugh when I needed it the most. You’ve kept me sane through this crazy journey and that means more than I can say.

Finally, thank you SO MUCH to my family and friends for your unwavering support and for putting up with my frequent disappearances over the last two years. How bout that movie now?
DEDICATION

To my mother, who taught me the meaning of strength and the importance of sacrifice, I would be nothing if not for you.

To my family, whose limitless support and acceptance have gotten me to where I am today. If everyone’s family were as supportive as mine, the world would be a much better place.

Finally, to all those who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of social justice: you are my inspiration.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the research project. It documents the current push to re-professionalize the child welfare system and presents a history of the problem. It addresses why this is an important issue in social welfare and how the research relates to the generalist model of social work practice. The research hypothesizes that (1) workers with master’s degrees in social work will achieve higher rates of family reunification with their clients, in a shorter amount of time, and that (2) the children on their caseloads will have shorter average stays in foster care, than those of their non-MSW colleagues.

Problem Statement

Hiring and training skilled and competent child welfare workers has been an important focus of the social work profession for many years (Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991). This focus has led to a push to improve the competence and effectiveness of child welfare caseworkers by increasing the number of workers with educational backgrounds in social work. Despite this goal, however,
only about one quarter of child welfare services today are provided by staff with bachelors degrees in social work (BSW) or master’s degrees in social work (MSW) (Steib & Whiting Blome, 2003). Child welfare remains, largely, a field that is undesirable to many social workers for many reasons, including high caseloads, low pay, large amounts of paperwork, and the stressful nature of the job.

This was not always the case, however. In the first half of the twentieth century, social workers were a larger part of child welfare. This changed in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the introduction of child abuse reporting laws. These new laws were not accompanied by increased funding for staff and, because of this, there were not enough workers available to handle the flood of new child abuse referrals. To cope with these new workloads, public agencies had to reduce the educational requirements for child welfare workers in order to increase the numbers of available, affordable staff (Child Welfare League of America, 2002; Steib & Whiting Blome, 2003).

Increased focus on studying the effects that social work education has on the workers’ competence will help
to determine whether funds should be geared toward increasing the numbers of BSW and MSW workers (if there is a positive relationship) or searching for other methods of addressing the myriad of problems facing the child welfare system (if it is determined, through repeated testing, that there is no such relationship).

This issue is of significant importance to the child welfare system. The stated goal for the children in the system is permanency, preferably via family reunification, or, if that is not possible, by adoption. This goal has led to the establishment of timelines for parents to show progress towards reunification before losing parental rights and having their children placed for adoption, as well as a push to decrease the length of time children spend in foster care. Thus, because of these goals, the child welfare system should be especially interested in any factors that can help to meet these objectives.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to measure whether or not a child welfare worker's education has an effect on their client's outcomes. It compares MSW caseworkers'
rates of family reunification and the length of time children on their caseload spend in foster care to those of child welfare workers who do not have an MSW. The study hypothesized that (1) workers with master’s degrees in social work would achieve higher rates of family reunification with their clients, in a shorter amount of time, and that (2) the children on their caseloads would have shorter average stays in foster care, than those of their non-MSW colleagues.

The drive to re-professionalize the child welfare system has been complemented by research detailing the positive worker-related outcomes that seem to be correlated with the possession of a social work degree. The issue of whether child-related outcomes are, likewise, correlated with a caseworker’s possession of an MSW, however, has been, largely, overlooked (Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006). This quantitative study sought to address this gap in the current literature by analyzing available case data from a public child welfare agency in a Southern California county.
Significance of the Project for Social Work

Whether or not a caseworker’s possession of an MSW is correlated with improved child outcomes is an important issue because of the child welfare system’s emphasis on permanency for foster children and their focus on family reunification. Children face significant emotional and psychological trauma as they are bounced from foster home to foster home, sometimes for many years or until they age out of the system. If the educational level of the workers handling these cases improves the rates of successful family reunification and decreases the length of time children spend in foster care, it is important to know that so that child welfare agencies can increase their recruitment and hiring of MSW level social workers. Likewise, if there are no significant advantages to hiring caseworkers with MSWs as opposed to other educational training, that is equally important knowledge because the extra money that is being spent to pay these caseworkers can, then, be spent in a more productive manner.

When considering the generalist intervention model, hiring caseworkers with social work backgrounds has benefits in achieving permanence at every level. Schools
of social work train their MSW students in effective ways of engaging clients which allows them to form a relationship that is conducive to the helping process, enabling them to work more productively towards goals with clients. MSWs in child welfare are able to assess situations for risk to determine whether or not a child needs to be removed from their family, or whether it is safe to return them. Training in social work can also help to assess what services clients need the most. Advanced training in social work can help caseworkers to develop a plan regarding what steps need to be implemented in order to achieve permanence for children in foster care, whether through family reunification or adoption, and then implement that plan in order to achieve those goals.

MSW education also stresses the importance of evaluating the progress clients are making and teaches the skills necessary to either modify the plan (if it is not working) and attempt to find new methods of meeting client goals, or terminate services when the need is no longer present. MSW students are repeatedly taught these skills throughout their time in school. If there is a link between social work education and client outcomes in
the child welfare system, then the possession of these skills is likely an integral part of that connection. The question remains, then: Does a caseworker's education affect child-related outcomes?
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter covers the current literature addressing the issue of educational requirements in the field of child welfare. It relates the historical development of the allocation of Title IV-E funds for child welfare training and reviews what worker and client factors research has found to be related to education. Finally it discusses the theoretical perspective that guided this study and most of the available literature on this topic.

The Development of Title IV-E Funds

The push to re-professionalize child welfare can, perhaps, be most easily seen in the allocation of specific funds for training in the child welfare system. These funds were granted by Title IV-E of the Social Security Act beginning in 1993 precisely because of the belief that child welfare workers with social work education can provide better services than staff without this training (Jones & Okamura, 2000). Title IV-E provides federal money to reimburse states for 75% of the
costs of child welfare training and educational programs (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

Today, more than 40 states have developed collaborations between schools of social work and child welfare agencies. These programs prepare BSW and MSW students for work in the child welfare field and improve worker competence. They operate by providing students with funding for school with the condition that those students agree to work for the child welfare system for a certain amount of time after graduating, typically one year of work per year receiving the stipend (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). However, the extent to which each state uses these funds is quite different. Some states only provide small stipends to a limited number of students, while others have worked to ensure that all child welfare supervisors have a degree in social work (Zlotnik, 2006).

In California, according to Clark and Grossman (1992), the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) created the IV-E MSW Child Welfare Program because there was a significant shortage of MSW workers in the California child welfare system (less than 30%).
and the number of child abuse referrals was growing dramatically (as cited in Jones & Okamura, 2000).

In their study of a Title IV-E training program, Jones and Okamura (2000) found that MSW workers who had been part of the Title IV-E program were even better caseworkers than other MSW workers, in addition to performing better than caseworkers who did not have social work backgrounds. The IV-E workers scored higher on a test measuring child welfare knowledge and were more self-assured in their ability do the job required of them. These workers also remained in the child welfare field longer than their counterparts and reported finding making home visits in high crime neighborhoods to be less stressful, though court appearances were found to be slightly more stressful.

Education and Worker Related Outcomes

There has been a significant amount of research dealing with the effects of social work education on worker related outcomes. Much of this research has dealt with the issue of reducing turnover among child welfare employees. This is not surprising considering the fact that turnover in the field often exceeds 50% per year.
(Child Welfare League of America, 2002) with the average worker remaining less than two years (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Hess, Folaron, and Jefferson (1992) argue that the answer to reducing turnover lies in hiring workers who are prepared for the type of work required in child welfare and that recruitment should be geared toward hiring workers with relevant education and experience. Fortunately, research in this area agrees. Child welfare workers with educational backgrounds in social work have been found to remain in the field significantly longer than their counterparts (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Jones & Okamura, 2000; Jones, 2002; Lewandowski, 1998; Robin & Hollister, 2002; Rycraft, 1994; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

This increase in tenure has been attributed to the demanding training of social work programs, including rigorous internships, coursework and training required by the curriculum of the program (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Given this near universal finding, then, it is surprising that more child welfare agencies do not require that workers have educational backgrounds in social work. Most agencies only require four years of
college to become a child welfare worker. Only one state, Hawaii, requires that all child welfare workers possess an MSW (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, 1998). Furthermore, fewer than 15% of child welfare agencies require that workers hold a degree in social work (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

If this body of research is accurate, then hiring workers educated in the social work field would significantly reduce the field’s high turnover rates. This is important because high turnover creates a shortage of staff which causes available employees to be overwhelmed by high caseloads, making it impossible to provide quality services to clients (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

Research has also linked worker education with other positive outcomes including job satisfaction (Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991), levels of preparedness (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988), and self-efficacy and caring (as cited in Steib & Whiting Blome, 2003). One of the first studies to address this subject, and the most widely referenced, Booz-Allen and Hamilton (1987) found that the best predictor of performance for child
welfare workers was whether or not they had an MSW (as cited in Child Welfare League of America, 2002). In another study, conducted by Dhooper, Royse and Wolfe (1990) caseworkers with MSWs scored higher on merit exams and in their commitment to social work values. Their work performance was also rated at a higher level than that of their colleagues by supervisors.

Given these findings, some researchers have gone further, making recommendations on how to entice more social workers into the child welfare field and what jobs they should be performing there. Bernatovicz (n.d.) found that workers with social work degrees showed a better “goodness of fit” in child welfare and recommends that agencies work to recruit more MSW level workers by offering educational leave to complete schooling. Such policies, he proposes, must ensure that workers’ caseloads are adequately covered in their absence and provide options for fulfillment of the internship requirements of the program.

Rittner and Wodarski (1999), meanwhile, argue that all child welfare workers should possess either a BSW or MSW. BSW workers, they propose, would work for the State Central Registry (abuse hotlines) or with low-to-moderate
risk families. MSW workers would fill positions such as program evaluators, administrators, program developers, direct services supervisors, risk assessment investigators, and caseworkers for moderate-to-high risk families.

Obviously, there is a good deal of evidence suggesting that social work education has a positive impact on worker-related outcomes. It would have, thus, been rather useless for this study to have analyzed these same issues, especially when there is another area of this subject that has been, largely, neglected by researchers.

Education and Client Related Outcomes

Though there has clearly been a fair amount of research conducted on how education affects worker related outcomes, the literature available on how education affects client outcomes is severely limited, with only a few researchers addressing this subject. In addition, the findings of those studies that have been conducted have not been consistent.

In their study of 5,726 children in foster care, Ryan et al. (2006) found that children whose case workers
had an MSW spent an average of 5.15 months less time in foster care than their peers whose caseworker did not have an MSW. However, the same study found no significant relationship between rates of family reunification and worker’s educational level.

In a similar study, designed to assess factors affecting permanency planning in foster care, Albers, Reilly, and Rittner (1993) found that workers with an educational background in social work, both at the bachelors and masters levels, were significantly more successful in getting children into permanent placements within three years than were workers who did not have a social work degree.

Other studies have had similar findings. Huebner (2003) found child welfare workers’ education to be related to the achievement of permanence, stability and well-being of the children on their caseload (as cited in Steib & Whiting Blome, 2003).

In contrast, in a 2006 study done by Perry, which examined supervisors’ performance evaluations of caseworkers, there were no significant differences found in the evaluations of workers with degrees in social work when compared with workers whose degrees were in other
academic fields. This, the author argues, indicates that educational background is a poor indicator of employee performance. Similarly, Festinger (1996) found no relationship between a caseworker’s educational level and children’s reentry into the foster care system.

There are a few possible explanations for these inconsistencies. Each study is looking at differing variables and using different measures. They all have widely varying samples of social workers from different parts of the country. This is important to note because states have given the issue of re-professionalizing child welfare dramatically different levels of attention. In California, for example, it is estimated that nearly 60% of caseworkers and 70% of supervisors have a master’s degree (Clark & Fulcher, 2005). Conversely, in Florida, fewer than 10% of child welfare workers have master’s degrees and social work programs place little focus on the child welfare system (Perry, 2006). Factors like these must be considered when comparing studies from different parts of the country. It may be that, had Perry conducted the same study in another part of the country, his results would have been dramatically changed.
The limited number of available studies done on this subject, and the contradictory nature of the findings that are available, indicate that this is an area in need of further investigation. This study attempted to begin to address that need.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

This study, like the current literature on the subject, operated from a perspective of systems theory. The goal of the research was to determine what education levels of social workers improve client outcomes so that the child welfare system can better serve its clients and protect the best interests of the children in its care. If the research hypothesis that child outcomes are improved when a worker has an MSW was supported, then the goal would be to increase the number of MSW level caseworkers in child welfare. Making this change in one portion of the huge system that is child welfare would cause dramatic changes in the rest of the system. Children would achieve permanence more quickly, freeing funds to develop other programs which would each have their own impact on the system.
The Child Welfare League of America (2002) puts the situation in context quite powerfully:

No issue has a greater effect on the capacity of the child welfare system to effectively serve vulnerable children and families than the shortage of a competent and stable workforce. Without an adequate workforce, agencies are not able to adhere to national service and caseload standards, maintain a climate that supports the delivery of high quality services, or adopt evidence-based practices. (p. 1)

In addition, intervening with these families and providing children with permanence before more trauma can be done, would help to prevent the children entering the system from perpetuating the cycle of abuse and ending up back in the system as adults. This too would make more funds available for other beneficial programs.

Finally, making such changes in the lives of these families enables them to become more productive members of society. Having overcome their personal problems, families can have a positive impact on their broader communities and those communities can impact the world.
Summary

The allocation of federal funds to increase child welfare training has paved the way for the re-professionalization of the field. This increased focus on education is improving the field’s desirability and enhancing worker morale and performance (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Education has been linked to employee retention, job satisfaction, performance and achievement of permanence. However, there remain large gaps in the literature regarding the effects of education on client outcomes. This study sought to help fill in some of these questions, which are currently left unanswered.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter details the methods that were used to develop the study. It covers the study design, how the sample was obtained, how data was collected, procedures, the protection of human subjects and how the data was analyzed.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between a child welfare caseworker’s education and their clients’ outcomes. The research was designed to determine whether or not a worker’s possession of a MSW is correlated with higher rates of family reunification and/or shorter lengths of time spent in foster care.

This research took a quantitative approach and utilized a comparative, post-test only research design, in that it compared MSW caseworkers to non-MSW caseworkers. Quantitative analysis was chosen for this project because it examined existing data in order to determine the relationships between the independent and
dependent variables, rather than analyzing self-reported data.

Secondary data was gathered from the Department of Children’s Services in a Southern California County. These data were obtained from existing case files in a computer system at the agency. The findings of this study are limited to this sample and cannot be generalized to the broader population. The study hypothesized that cases whose workers have MSWs would be found to have higher rates of family reunification and shorter overall time spent in foster care.

Sampling

The sample for this study was obtained randomly from CMS case data in San Bernardino County, Department of Children’s Services. Cases qualifying for this study entered the child welfare system between January 1, 2005 and January 1, 2006. One hundred cases were randomly selected. This includes fifty cases in which family reunification was successfully achieved within 12 months of placement and which had not re-entered foster care one year after reunification. The other fifty cases that were
selected consist of cases that were not successfully reunified within one year of placement.

For the purposes of this study, successful family reunification was defined in this way because the child welfare system's focus on permanency has led to the adoption of the six-month timeline for parents to demonstrate progress toward treatment goals. If parents cannot achieve reunification with their children or demonstrate that they are making progress within six months, the process to terminate parental rights may begin. If they have made some progress, but are not yet ready for reunification, they may be granted six more months to continue to improve. This extension may be granted twice, meaning that a parent may have no more than 18 months to meet their case plan goals. Because the preferred outcome is that reunification be achieved within six months, this study has limited successful reunification to one six month extension, rather than the two that may, sometimes, be granted. Due to these limitations, cases qualifying for the sample must have been originally placed into foster care at least two years before data collection began.
The sample was also limited to include only cases that had no more than three caseworkers assigned to the case during the family reunification process. In addition, only the education of the caseworker who was assigned the case for the longest period of time was recorded. This limitation was designed to control for the fact that many cases are transferred to different caseworkers several times and, thus, it would have been difficult to determine to which worker the outcomes of the case should be attributed. For this study, the educational level of the caseworkers in the sample was obtained from the Human Resources department in the agency, via personnel files.

Data Collection and Instruments

For this study, data on three specific variables was collected, in addition to general demographic information. The independent variable is the caseworker’s education. This variable was measured nominally by determining each worker’s specific degree (e.g., MSW, BSW, Marriage, and Family Therapist, etc.).

There were two dependent variables in this study. The first is whether or not family reunification was
achieved successfully, as defined earlier. This variable was measured nominally, with Yes or No value labels. The second dependent variable is the length of time spent in foster care. This variable was measured as a ratio variable by number of months.

Demographic information was also recorded. This information includes the child's age at entry into the child welfare system, their gender and the reason for their placement. Age will be recorded as a ratio measure. Gender and reason for placement will both be recorded nominally.

Procedures

Data collection for this study took place from January to March 2008. Human Resources pulled family reunification cases from the designated time frame from CMS. Every fifth case on this list was reviewed and the researcher then determined if the case met the previously stated qualifications to be included in the sample. Once a case qualified for the sample, the information for the data being analyzed was recorded, for that case, under the identification number assigned to it. Data collection took place at the Department of Children’s Services and
only the specific data being measured was removed from
the site for analysis.

Protection of Human Subjects

In order to protect the confidentiality of the
clients as well as the workers whose cases were analyzed,
no information was recorded beyond what was being
measured. All identifying information, including names,
addresses, zip codes and health problems were removed, by
the researcher, before the data were recorded. Cases were
given identification numbers to use as a reference during
data collection. The key matching the identification
numbers to each case was not removed from the Department
of Children’s Services and was destroyed once data
collection was complete. Finally, no case files were
removed from the Department of Children’s Services. The
data being gathered for analysis was only removed from
the site once data collection had been completed and
access to the case files was no longer needed.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed to determine the
relationship between worker education and client outcomes
to test the research hypothesis. Analysis included both univariate and bivariate analysis.

Univariate analyses analyzed the frequency of distribution for each variable to determine the number of cases and the percent of the sample that fell under each value label. Bivariate analyses were used to measure the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variables. The relationship between caseworker education and successful family reunification was measured by the utilization of a chi-square test. Worker education and length of stay in foster care was analyzed through the use of a t-test.

Summary

This quantitative study was intended to explore the relationship between worker education and client outcomes. Secondary data was gathered and analyzed for this purpose. Ensuring the confidentiality of all those involved with the cases in the sample was given the utmost attention.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter details the findings of the research project. It describes the sample and presents the demographic information that was measured. Bivariate analyses, in the form of chi-square tests and t-tests were conducted to determine the relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

Presentation of the Findings

The sample consisted of 100 cases that entered the child welfare system for the first time in 2005 and were designated as family reunification cases. Half of these children (Group A) were successfully reunified with their parents within one year of placement. The other fifty cases (Group B) were not successfully reunified within twelve months.

Table 1 (below) presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. Fifty-three percent of all children in the sample were male (n = 53) and forty-seven percent were female (n = 47). Age was measured for the children in the sample from their age when they were
originally removed and placed in foster care. These children ranged in ages from less than one year old to sixteen years old. The mean age was 6.1, with the highest number of children being less than one year old \((n = 15)\), followed closely by 4 year olds \((n = 14)\). Among children in Group A, the mean age at removal was 6.68, with the mode being less than one year old \((n = 9)\). The mean age for Group B was 5.52 years, with the mode being four years \((n = 9)\).

Table 1. Child’s Gender and Reason for Removal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for Removal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caretaker Absence/Incapacity</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Neglect</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe Neglect</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Abuse</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploitation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial Risk - Abuse of Sibling</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For each case, the reasons for why the children were removed were recorded. Because this was a multiple response variable, many children had more than one reason for removal. Fifty-four percent of children in the sample had caretaker absence/incapacity listed as a reason for removal (n = 54). Forty-six percent of children experienced general neglect (n = 46) and 16% experienced severe neglect (n = 16). Fifteen percent of cases experienced physical abuse (n = 15), 2% experienced sexual abuse (n = 2), 6% experienced emotional abuse (n = 6), and 2% experienced exploitation (n = 2). In addition, 11% of children were removed because there was a substantial risk of future abuse, due to the abuse of a sibling (n = 11).

The statistics on the total number of months children spent in foster care were recorded for both groups. For Group A, those with successful family reunification, the mean number of months children spent in foster care was 5.58 and the mode was three months (n = 10). The number of months for Group A ranged from one to twelve. For Group B, unsuccessful reunification, the mean number of months in foster care was 23.62 and the mode was 18 (n = 8). The number of months in this
group ranged from 14 to 38. Among this group, 46% of children were still in foster care at the time data was collected (n = 23).

Table 2. Caseworker Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caseworker Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSW</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s of Marriage and Family Therapy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s of Psychology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s of Psychology</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s of Counseling</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s of Educational Counseling</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each case, the level of education of the caseworker was recorded. Out of the 100 cases studied, the caseworker’s education on three cases could not be found and were recorded as ‘missing’. Table 2 depicts the type of degree for the remaining 97 cases. Approximately 40% of caseworkers held an MSW (n = 39) and 6.2% held a BSW (n = 6). 19.6% of caseworkers held Master’s degrees in Marriage and Family Therapy (n = 19); 11.3% held a Master’s degree in Counseling (n = 11); 9.3% held a
Bachelor’s degree in Psychology (n = 9); 6.2% held a Master’s degree in Educational Counseling (n = 6); and 4.1% held a Master’s degree in Psychology (n = 4). The remaining 3.1% of caseworkers held some other type of degree (n = 3).

To analyze the relationship between variables, caseworker education was recoded into two separate variables. The first compared caseworkers with an MSW to caseworkers with other degrees. Approximately 40% of caseworkers held an MSW (n = 39) and 59.8% held another type of degree (n = 58). The second recoded education compared workers who held master’s degrees to those who held bachelor’s degrees. Approximately 84% of caseworkers in the sample held a master’s degree (n = 81) and 16.5% held a bachelor’s degree (n = 16).

Multiple bivariate analyses were performed to determine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Chi-square tests were conducted to assess the relationship between caseworker education and whether or not a child was successfully reunified within twelve months.
Table 3. Reunification Chi-square Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Degree</th>
<th>Child Reunified within 12 months?</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW vs. Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s vs. Bachelor’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among MSW vs. other degrees, nearly half (20 out of 39) of cases with an MSW worker and 50% of cases with workers who had another type of degree (29 out of 58) did not successfully reunify (see table 3). Thus, a significant relationship was not found ($x^2 = .015$, df = 1, $p = .901$).

Similar results were found for Master’s vs. Bachelor’s degrees. Among caseworkers with a master’s degree, 42 cases were successfully reunified and 39 were not. For those with bachelor’s degrees, a higher number of cases did not successfully reunify (n = 10) than those that did (n = 6) (see table 3). However, this finding was not statistically significant ($x^2 = 1.101$, df = 1, $p = .294$).
T-tests were performed to determine the relationship between worker education and the number of months a child spent in foster care. Table 4 (below) depicts the results of those tests. For MSW vs. other degrees, no significant relationship was found. The mean number of months children with MSW workers spent in foster care was 14.46. Among other degrees, the average was nearly the same at 14.98 months. These findings were not statistically significant (t = -2.34, df = 95, p = .815).

Table 4. Number of Months in Foster Care T-test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Months in Foster Care</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>14.46</td>
<td>-0.234</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>.815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Degrees</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>14.98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>14.37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A trend was observed among cases with a worker who possessed a master's degree vs. those who possessed a bachelor's degree. For those with master's degrees, the average number of months children spent in foster care
was 14.37. Among cases with bachelor’s level workers, the average number of months spent in foster care was 16.81. This indicates an average of 2.5 more months spent in foster care for cases with bachelor’s level workers. However, though this trend may be relevant, it was not statistically significant ($t = -0.834$, $df = 95$, $p = 0.406$).

Table 5. Presently in Foster Care Chi-square Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Degree</th>
<th>Presently in Foster Care?</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW vs. Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s vs. Bachelor’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square tests were conducted to determine the relationship, if any, between worker education and whether or not children who were not successfully reunified within twelve months of placement were still in foster care at the time of data collection. For MSW vs. other degrees, half of children whose caseworker possessed an MSW were still in foster care ($n = 10$). Among other degrees, a slightly higher number of children
had left foster care than those who had not \((n = 16, n = 13)\) (see table 5). This finding was not statistically significant, however \((x^2 = .127, df = 1, p = .721)\).

For master’s degree vs. bachelor’s degree workers, a slightly higher number of children whose caseworkers held master’s degrees had left foster care \((n = 21)\) than those that had not \((n = 18)\). Among bachelor’s level workers, these numbers were evenly split, five children had since left foster care and five were still in foster care (see table 5). Again, however, these findings were not statistically significant \((x^2 = .047, df = 1, p = .828)\).

Summary

Chapter four presented the findings of the research project. Descriptive statistics for the variables that were measured were reported and bivariate analyses including chi-square and t-tests were generated to test the research hypothesis. The research hypothesized that cases in which the worker held an MSW would see higher rates of family reunification and fewer months spent in foster care. The findings of the study did not support these hypotheses and there were no statistically significant relationships found between caseworker
education and client outcomes. However, a trend was found between the length of stay in foster care and whether or not the caseworker held a master’s degree or bachelor’s degree.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter five discusses the conclusions reached as a result of the findings of the research project. In addition, it details the limitations of the research project and offers recommendations for social work practice, policy and future research.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to study the effects of case worker education on children’s length of stay in foster care and their rates of successful family reunification. The research hypothesized that (1) higher rates of successful family reunification would be found among cases in which the worker possessed a graduate degree in social work and that (2) the children on these cases would have shorter average stays in foster care, when compared to cases in which the worker possessed a degree from another field.

Chi-square and T-tests were run to test the research hypotheses. The research compared the total number of months spent in foster care and the rates of family
reunification to caseworker education. Caseworker education was coded in two ways: (1) MSW vs. other degrees and (2) master’s vs. bachelor’s degrees. In addition, the study also compared worker education to whether or not children who had not successfully reunified within twelve months of placement were still in foster care at the time of data collection.

The average child included in the sample was six years old and male. Among children who were successfully reunified, the average number of months spent in foster care was 5.58, for those who were not successfully reunified, it was 23.62. The vast majority of caseworkers (83.5%) possessed a master’s degree, with 40.2% of these degrees being in social work.

Current research on this subject has produced contradictory findings. This study continues that trend. Ryan et al. (2006) found no statistically significant relationship between caseworker education and rates of family reunification. This study supports those findings. However, Ryan et al. (2006) also found that children with MSW level caseworkers spent an average of 5.15 fewer months in foster care than their peers. This study also noted a trend regarding the length of time children spent
in foster care; however, this trend involved cases with
master’s degree level workers vs. bachelor’s degree
workers. Children whose workers possessed master’s
degrees spent an average of 2.5 fewer months in foster
care than did their peers. Though this trend was
observed, however, it was not at a level significant
even to determine a correlation between the two
variables. In addition, no relationship was found between
time spent in foster care and MSW vs. other workers, nor
was a relationship found between caseworker education and
whether or not a child was still in foster care when data
collection occurred.

Although the findings of this research project did
not discover significant relationships between caseworker
education and client outcomes, there has been literature
which has indicated differently as well as literature
which supports the findings of this study. Perry (2006)
and Festinger (1996) both found that caseworker education
was not an adequate predictor of child outcomes.
Conversely, other research has found that education was
related to permanency (Reilly & Rittner, 1993) and to
significantly fewer months in foster care (Ryan et al.,
2006). In addition, the research has been abundantly

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clear regarding the positive effects of social work education on worker related outcomes, including job satisfaction (Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991), retention (Lewandowski, 1998), preparedness (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988), and self-efficacy (as cited in Steib & Whiting Blome, 2003). These outcomes are important because, as workers stay in the job longer, are more prepared, and enjoy their job more, they are more able to provide better services to the clients on their caseloads. For clients to have the opportunity to achieve positive outcomes, they must have access to the resources they need to reach those outcomes. Competent social workers, who are familiar with their clients' needs and the resources available to them, can help to provide those opportunities.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study which make it impossible to generalize the findings to the broader population. To begin with, the number of cases sampled (100) was relatively small and they were all taken from one Southern California County. In addition, the sample was somewhat skewed in that the vast majority
of caseworkers in the sample held master's degrees and, at over 40%, the most represented degree was the MSW. The next most frequent degree was the Master's of Marriage and Family Therapy at 19.6%.

Another limitation of the research involved the limited information available for the caseworkers on the selected cases. Because the research was done using secondary data analysis, the research was severely limited in regards to what data was available to be measured. This meant that no demographic information was available for caseworkers. Information such as the caseworker's gender, age, ethnicity, and, especially, their length of time in the field of child welfare may have provided important insight into the different influences affecting child outcomes.

Finally, a significant limitation of this research involved the way in which successful outcomes were defined. For the purposes of the study, the outcomes measured were whether or not reunification was achieved and how long the child spent in foster care. This is severely limiting because it fails to look at the wide array of other positive outcomes that are possible on any given case. Future research should take into account
outcomes such as adoption and guardianship as well as whether permanency was achieved in terms of the number of placement changes a child experiences. Cases of family maintenance should also be explored to determine if worker education has an effect on the positive outcomes of these cases. By broadening the scope of desired outcomes, it would provide more relevant findings for cases in which family reunification may not be possible or may not necessarily be the most desirable outcome.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Based on the findings of this study and the numerous contradictions in the available literature, it is clear that more research needs to be conducted in this area. Such research should be conducted on a broader scale and include multiple types of successful outcomes. It should also include a focus on the positive effects that workers coming from Title IV-E programs may have on their cases. Such research will help to clear up the contradictions in the literature currently available.

Additionally, research should be done to analyze the different roles that MSW caseworkers may be playing in child welfare agencies. In addition to examining the
effects of Title IV-E programs, Jones and Okamura (2000) suggest that research needs to evaluate whether or not workers with MSWs tend to be given higher caseloads or receive more difficult cases. If this is the case, it may help to explain the lack of more observable effects of education.

Further, both policy makers and researchers should reassess the definition of a successful outcome. As Hess, Folaron, and Jefferson (1992) point out, promoting family reunification as the only successful outcome is not only misleading, it is dangerous. It moves toward placing family preservation before the well-being of the child. Thus, it is important to look at the types of cases in which family reunification may not be the best option and definitions of successful outcomes should be expanded.

There is also a need for more worker related data to be recorded and accessible for future studies. In order to fully explore the issue of the effects of caseworker education, demographic information on workers should begin to be kept by counties whenever possible. Such data could include things like the worker’s number of years in the child welfare field, whether the worker came from a Title IV-E program, and the name of the school where they
earned their degree, along with more general information such as their age, gender, ethnicity, and marital status. Making such data available for research purposes would allow for a much more in depth look into these issues, as well as many other important areas of interest.

Finally, the lack of positive results found in this and other studies indicate a need for graduate social work programs and Title IV-E programs to modify the educational curriculum students receive so that it is more effective for child welfare practice. If the goal of these programs is to prepare students for entry into the child welfare field, there should be clear and observable benefits to this training, both for the worker and for the clients they are serving. As these results do not appear to be consistently observable, schools must, then, begin to assess whether or not the content they are providing students with is adequate.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between positive client outcomes and the education level of the child welfare worker assigned to the case. It measured caseworker education in comparison
to rates of family reunification and the total number of months children spent in foster care. This study hoped to begin to address a gap in the current research on this subject. Although no significant relationships were found, the conflicting nature of the available literature on this topic and the limitations of the study suggest a need for further research to be conducted on this issue.
APPENDIX A

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT
Data Collection Instrument

ID#: _____

Child reunified within 12 months of placement?
1) Yes _____ 2) No _____

Number of months in foster care: _________

Is child presently in foster care?
1) Yes _____ 2) No _____

Caseworker’s highest degree held: __________
In what field? ________________________________

Age at removal: _________

Gender: 1) Male _____ 2) Female _____

Reason for Removal:

________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________

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APPENDIX B

APPROVAL LETTER FROM DEPARTMENT OF

CHILDREN'S SERVICES
January 10, 2008

Dr. Teresa Morris
Department of Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, CA 92407-2397

Dear Dr. Morris:

This letter serves as notification to the Department of Social Work at California State University San Bernardino that Teresa Brannon has obtained consent from the Department of Children’s Services, San Bernardino County to conduct the research project entitled “The Relationship Between Caseworker Education and Client Outcomes.”

Sincerely,

DeAnna Avey-Motikcit, Director
Department of Children’s Services
REFERENCES


