

Child Welfare Competencies for Social Work Education: The Process of Development, Implementation and Evaluation

Competencies for Whom?

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Purpose

The purpose of this presentation is to describe the development, implementation and evaluation of child welfare competencies for all Masters level social work students initiated by a consortium of graduate schools of social work and the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS), the city's child welfare agency. A document consisting of 63 competencies was created by agency professional staff and schools' faculty. We describe a series of initiatives including the work of creating, evaluating and disseminating the document, and activities that took place over the past several years that are on-going. We present a dynamic project and invite participant discussion relating to our work and work taking place in other settings.

Background

The concept of implementing child welfare competencies is not new. California through its CALSWEC group introduced competencies in 1992 as a cooperative project between graduate schools of social work and public child welfare agencies using Title-IV E funds. Since then, other states have followed suit. One state, North Carolina, began in 1999 to infuse its competencies statewide for educational purposes and to recruit new workers into public child welfare work. Both California and North Carolina employ rigorous evaluations of their projects. Most states employing competencies have focused their resources on students being funded by Title-IV E monies.

Project Goals

Our project began with somewhat equivocal goals: to guide ACS and other child welfare employed/internship students towards achieving competency in areas specified in the document; to encourage all social work students to work toward becoming competent in document specified areas; and, to infuse child welfare-related material into the curricula of participating schools. We were interested in both creating a workforce that was child welfare competent and strengthening the link between social work education and child welfare work. Although there have been scores of studies calling for this linkage, we cite just a few for economies of space (Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003; Zlotnick, Strand & Anderson, 2009; Zlotnick, 2002).

Creating the Competency Document

The 10 schools of social work in the New York City metropolitan area are invited to participate in a Consortium along with professional staff from ACS. The consortium is a formal partnership between the New York State Association of Deans of Social Work Schools and the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). Consortium aims include building and supporting a professional workforce through training, education and research to improve results for children and families (University at Albany, 2011).

The Competency Project began in 2007 when representatives from CALSWEC were invited to New York to describe their competency project and suggest ways for the New York group to begin. From 2008-2010, members of the Consortium met to create a document that went through several revisions and ultimately consisted of 63 competencies divided among 7 areas. By the summer of 2010, the document was thought to be ready for dissemination and implementation.

Distributing and Implementing the Competency Document

Each of the 10 schools was asked to consider infusing additional child welfare material into their curricula and to assist this process, they received a specially designed grid to list their child welfare-related coursework. The schools were asked to distribute the competency document to their curriculum committee members, faculty, field directors and administrators. It was also suggested that schools familiarize their students with the competency document.

All ACS field instructors received a copy of the document and a specially designed instrument where they were asked to indicate 5 or 6 competencies to address in their supervision with student interns. They were to choose the competencies based on the resources and needs of their sites and learning needs of their students. They received the instrument in November 2010 and they were to return it the following May.

Groups of ACS field instructors and task supervisors met regularly as part of a separate project. One of the topics discussed in these groups was the use of the Competencies for student education.

A pilot school was chosen, Yeshiva University, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, where special focus was to be given to the dissemination process. All students received a Survey Monkey version of the document that included a scale for respondents to self-rate their level of competency. They were asked to base their rating on their coursework. They were

asked to do this in October and again in May as a pre and post rating of their competency achievement.

Faculty members at the pilot school were asked indicate if they were teaching the competencies in their classes.

In addition, *Real Cases* were introduced to all schools. *Real Cases* is a guide created by consortium school faculty and ACS staff using three child welfare cases as a foundation for teaching child-welfare-related material in the Social Work curricula. Teaching guides exist for a number of social work courses to facilitate infusion of child welfare material into these curricula areas.

Evaluating the Process

An evaluation team set about determining the extent to which the Competency document was be used and considered useful. We were also interested in obtaining feedback regarding the possibility of reducing the number of items in the document to make it more user friendly.

A representative from each school was contacted and interviewed about their use of the document and suggestions for improving its content. They were also asked for ways that would assist them in curricula infusion and document dissemination.

Faculty and students were interviewed at the pilot school for their understanding and use of the document. Student survey data at the pilot school were collected for this purpose as well.

ACS field instructors and task supervisors were asked to comment on how they were able to use various aspects of the document in their work with students.

What We have Learned

1. There were differences in levels of commitment/ different agendas/different priorities among the schools. This was related to a variety of issues including CSWE Self – Study readiness, moving, restructuring curricula and competing curricula demands. Additionally, some schools already had a strong child-welfare focus while others were enthusiastic about infusing it into their coursework.
2. There were different levels of implementation - Even when schools were committed, the document did not always get distributed to all students.

3. Although we knew that there were too many items, this was confirmed through the surveys and interviews
4. Some schools felt that there was insufficient guidance regarding implementation. For example, a) we needed to explain the process of reducing the number of items more clearly. Some faculty wanted to know how a revised document would be created and how they might be evaluated in using them; b) Schools wondered “What are the costs and benefits to participation?”
5. Our original objective was perhaps too global and our goals unclear. We learned to ask the question: Competencies for Whom? Should the competencies be directed solely to students already working in child welfare as employees or as interns, or should all students be expected to be competent in, if not all, but many of the items listed? This is our next-step question to be addressed.

Next Steps

- We need to revisit the goals and objectives of the Competency Project. We need to better understand who we would like the target population to be. We need to answer the question: do we need two documents, one for child welfare workers and their field instructors, and one for all other students and their field instructors?
- We need to consider our funders. Do they expect outcome data to justify the cost of educating students? Currently ACS and the state Office of Children and Family Services invest a considerable amount of money for student social work education for child welfare workers.
- We need to clarify the differing needs of the consortium schools as they relate to infusing child welfare related materials into the curriculum. Introduction of the competencies may need to be more individually matched to the schools to achieve adoption.

We invite your in-put, suggestions and experience-based council

References

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