CONNECTING SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION TO CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

by

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ABSTRACT

Child welfare social workers are struggling with soaring workloads and tremendously difficult situations in their work. Many child welfare social workers feel their social work education did not prepare them well for their job and they identified gaps between their social work education and child welfare practice. This study used a qualitative research methodology to explore child welfare social workers' experiences of their social work education and child welfare practice and the implications for the development of social work education.

This research reaffirms that child welfare social workers are overwhelmed by unmanageable caseloads and challenging situations. The findings indicate that although social work education is the foundation for child welfare practice, many feel it does not adequately prepare them to cope with the challenges they face in work. The study's conclusion suggests strategies that could help to bridge the gaps between social work education and child welfare practice.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

BSW   Bachelor of Social Work

LGTBQ   Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual and Queer

AI/AN   American Indian/Alaskan Native

MSW   Master of Social Work

CYS   Children and Youth Services

CSWE   Center for Social Work Education

CASA   Court Appointed Special Advocate

DCFS   The Department of Children and Family Services

Title IV-E Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Program

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CHAPTER 1   INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter describes the contexts of this research topic and lays the foundation for this thesis. It will present the challenges for front-line child welfare workers, as well as the challenges for social work students in child welfare practice and social work education. The purpose of this research will also be discussed. Finally, it will outline the remainder of the thesis.

Limited resources and stressful work conditions are major barriers for front line workers and contribute to persistent and high rates of staff turnover in this profession (Gilroy, 2000; Bellefeuille & Schmidt, 2006; Barbee, Antle, Sullivan, Huebner, Fox, & Hall, 2009).

Child Welfare work is especially a very stressful job. From my experience of child welfare, clients are children and families who are suffering poverty, abuse, and neglect, often along with personal, and intergenerational trauma. This work is heart-wrenching and potentially traumatizing. Students of social work should know about the risks they could potentially face on the job. Despite the many challenges faced by workers, available evidence also suggests that some people are able to enjoy long careers in the field (Tarja & Sinikka, 2013). Because some people are able to endure the stress, high rates of turnover may indicate that social workers new to child welfare are not always fully prepared for the impact that this work stress may have on their ability to settle into their career. If child welfare workers are leaving their jobs within four years on average

(Barbee et al., 2009), it is important to learn how their system of support is failing them. Are new child welfare workers being supported adequately in their transition through school and into practice? Exploring the answers of these questions could help to find the ways to better connect social work education to child welfare practice so that social work students would be able to better prepare for their child welfare work. This research proposed here will help answer these questions.

1.1 Challenges for Child Welfare Practice-from Perspectives of Front Line Staff

Research regarding the practicality of Social Work education reveals many challenges for front line child welfare workers. Gilroy (2000) used interviews with child welfare practitioners to discover what they considered the most critical issues facing them in their jobs. A lack of basic resources was one of the biggest issues identified in this study. Gilroy (2000) suggests that the child welfare system has failed to meet the needs of children and families and demands fundamental changes to the way services are organized and delivered. Gilroy also explains how insufficient resources such as lack of funding, along with high caseloads, and a legal process that makes it impossible to meet the needs of their clients, can lead to an "erosion of their faith in their own ability to meet clients needs" (Gilroy, 2000, p.34).

La Rose (2009) highlights research regarding the analysis of the child welfare social workers' strike over issues of workload in Toronto in 2000, the research discussed the fundamental changes in child welfare processes. The most significant change was that

child welfare services had moved toward "using tightly eligibility criteria within standardized service duration, investigation of abuse complaints and enforcement of minimum parenting standards"(p.224), instead of "community development, prevention services, investigation and protection functions, as well as supportive treatment services"(p.224). These changes led the child welfare system focused on paper work and brought significant increase in workloads. Heavy workloads led to high stress and low morale amidst child welfare social workers. The workers noted that it was almost impossible to have time and resources to analyze what had been happening in their work from a critical perspective, making it hard to fulfill clients' needs (La Rose, 2009). Without the ability to adequately help people from within a professional helping role, loss of motivation, burnout and high rates of turnover are more easily understood.

Dealing with child abuse and neglect without the resources available to alleviate societal problems such as poverty and addiction is one thing, but doing this work without applying a critical analysis is neglectful and leaves the door open for systemic abuse to develop against already suffering children and families. The system as it stands lacks sufficient funding which leads to a lack of human resources and increasing workloads as well. Social workers that do stay and work are keeping stressful and in high risk of burnout because they are immersed and overwhelmed by unmanageable workloads with crises and have no time or resources to take account of, or think about dealing with the systemic issues that work to prevent them from providing adequate services. This then leads to a multitude of completing demands on child welfare worker's time, and likely stressful working conditions. Those who practice from a critical lens face the challenge of

trying to manage such conditions while trying to provide good services to families. As Bellefeuille and Schmidt stated in 2006:

> The current situation for child welfare agencies is one of coping with overwhelming budget pressures stemming from soaring caseloads and inadequate resources for addressing the more complex needs of today's child welfare population (p.4).

The field of child welfare is not only plagued by limited human, funding and community services resources, but also by a troublingly high rate of turnover amongst new front line workers (Samantrai, 1992). Barbee et al. (2009) report findings indicating why graduates of specialized BSW child welfare education programs tend to leave the field after only four years. Poor supervision, a lack of emotional support, and organizational stress among other things prompted these highly qualified workers to leave the field. Organizational barriers identified included bureaucracy, inadequate resources, and insufficient time to fulfill the policy requirements for the caseloads assigned to them. Suggestions are given to improve supervision by instituting a more rigorous supervisor selection, preparation, and management process (Barbee et al., 2009). For work expectations and organizational stressors, they suggest transforming the bureaucratic model to a more professional model that focuses on clinical aspects of clients and their cases.

Regarding high turnover rates and to ascertain why child welfare workers seek alternative work, Barbee, Antle, Sullivan, Huebner, Fox, and Hall (2009) interviewed child welfare practitioners and they found the following reasons why child welfare workers leave the profession: other more lucrative work, lack of supervision and support, high expectations from supervisors, and work stress. These authors suggest hiring and training the right managerial staff and appropriate hiring practices along with improved training of supervisory staff may "rectify poor supervisory practices" and "buffer employees from organizational stressors" (p. 85).

Both Gilroy and Barbee et al. allude to the emotional stress faced by child welfare practitioners and how this may lead to persistently high rates of turnover. Samantrai (1992) highlights the child welfare worker's emotional suffering and identifies the following challenges in dealing with this issue:

1. Encountering suffering of their clients with no institutionalized ways for them to process these feelings.

2. Need to keep reasonability in front of their clients and the sense of " aloneness" since workers couldn't share their stress and feeling.

3. The unmanageably high caseloads and paperwork

4. A lack of support from supervisors

5. The threat of, or experience of physical harm on the job

When resources are limited such as they currently seem to be, child welfare workers can suffer emotional problems as a direct result of their commitment to children and families

and their contract to provide services to these clients. It seems logical to assume that emotionally stressful work environments require a system of adequate emotional support to help child welfare workers release stress or tension, reduce feelings of isolation and potentially also rates of turnover or even achieve significant financial savings.

Tarja and Sinikka (2013) find some child welfare social workers are able to enjoy long careers in this field. They report elements of the job that influence social workers to continue their career in child welfare. A commitment to the child welfare organization and a personal drive to care for vulnerable children were identified by practitioners as important in helping them to overcome difficulties in their work and organization and to carry on and be satisfied with their job. Tarja and Sinikka note that their results confirm that social work in child welfare can be experienced as "rewarding and professionally challenging" (Tarja & Sinikka, 2013, p.650).

The reality of high turnover rates within a few years for new graduates in child welfare, along with the fact that some people can endure this challenging job over longer periods of time, is what intrigues me most. In this research I am interested in what factors lead new social work graduates to give up their career in child welfare and also what challenges these new graduates are encountering in their practice and how their education prepares them for child welfare social work.

1.2 Challenges for Social Work Students in Child Welfare Practice and Social Work Education

When analyzing challenges for social work students, the unique needs of marginalized groups should not be ignored. These include ethnic minority students, students with a disability and LGBTQ students. Assessing the needs from students' perspectives is an important step in helping them to overcome their additional challenges. It has been noted that culturally marginalized students possess their own personal knowledge and lived experiences about their communities that can assist the agencies that they work for and clients that are also culturally marginalized. It is assumed here that members of other marginalized communities (LGTBQ, People with disabilities) also possess knowledge of their own community that can contribute to an agency's ability to provide adequate services to these communities. Further more, respect for the diversity of people is the foundation of social work and child welfare practice. To ensure that marginalized people are successful in their education and employment after graduation, schools of social work need to attend to every student's identity and work to include information that is relevant to these groups within the curriculum. To retain these individuals as child welfare workers after graduation, it is necessary to value the knowledge that marginalized individuals bring to their job and work with academics to capture and preserve this knowledge.

Cross, Angelique, Gogliotti, and Pung (2013) surveyed the perceptions of 47 American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) BSW and MSW students enrolled in social work programs across the United States to determine the challenges associated with recruitment and retention. Students indicated a need for professors and mentors from their communities, a lack of opportunity for them to practice using their knowledge,

difficulty fulfilling their responsibilities to family and community while obtaining education or starting a career, feelings of cultural isolation at school and at work, and experiences of racism discouraging or deterring them from achieving their academic and work related goals. These authors make suggestions on how to improve this situation including building relationships with AI/AN communities, increasing the availability of field placement opportunities in marginalized communities, creating culturally specific support groups for students, and working to acknowledge and reduce racism in academic settings originating from white, western culture and communities.

Howe (2010) outlines challenges and opportunities educators and students face while attempting to develop a global perspective in social work. They found that very few social work programs organized international placements, and that some programs do not discuss issues of colonialism, imperialism or paternalistic ideas of what helping systems should consist of. Howe performed an in-depth case study of the historic and current day social politics in Cyprus in order to provide social work educators with international social work curriculum. Howe's motivation for this work was to help students of social work to develop a self-reflective approach to working with international issues. Understanding ideas of imperialism, colonization, and the global marginalization of many cultures by western nations is assumed by Howe to be prerequisite to developing international cultural competence among students of social work.

With an increasing diversity among the Canadian population providing quality and culturally appropriate services should be considered more of a pressing issue. For social

work students encountering increasingly more diversity amongst their clients, understanding the global perspective is imperative to ensure respectful and competent services. For Canadian social work students, critical reflection of colonialism and imperialism is still necessary for their study and practice.

Another important challenge that students of social work face is that in obtaining a degree in social work one is not guaranteed a complete education in the basic social work skills necessary for the job. For example, some social workers are not given lessons in how to develop their own personal relational or communication skills. Regulatory bodies in Canada differ regarding required content in social work programs. Most Canadian undergraduate social work programs are generalists, yet child welfare agencies expect them to have training in specialists areas such as child welfare (Armitage, Callahan & Lewis 2001; Gilroy 2009). Lefevre (2015) noted that programs in England are not consistent in the curriculum structures, content and pedagogical approaches they employ to teach and assess students' capabilities. Lefevre proposes a teaching strategy to help students develop generic communication skills that he says are vital to providing quality care but can be ignored or sidelined in social work education. Lefevre suggests that social work education provide students with a variety of experiential, personalized, participatory, didactic and critically reflective learning opportunities across both the taught curriculum and in practice placements to ensure that professional social workers are educated in utilizing the social skills necessary to assist clients living in poverty, neglect or crisis.

How to effectively communicate with clients in child welfare practice is challenging for junior social workers and students. From my social work education experience, some students have few opportunities to practice communication before their first placement since social work curriculum structure and content are not consistent with corresponding practice. The ability to communicate well in stressful, emotional or dire situations is a foundation skill for child welfare social workers, and schools of social work may need to focus more on fostering these basic skills in their students.

1.3 Purpose of Thesis

My research suggests that schools of social work and agencies of child welfare need to find ways to work together to educate social work students and prepare social workers for practice. How might social work educators and child welfare agencies work together to streamline the system or to improve child welfare services overall by supporting new workers? How might this influence the quality of services available to clients they serve, and/or the retention of workers? These questions are further explored in the literature review.

My research interests are in discovering how new social workers feel about their education, how it helped them, and what could have been better. Do they find that this academic understanding is helpful to them in their child welfare jobs? What gaps exist between learning social work and being able to apply these ideas in practice?

The purpose of my research is to explore the preparation of social work students for the practice of child welfare, from the perspective of graduates, and also to explore some of the challenges faced by social work students as they experience the transition from school to work. The research proposed here will help answer this question. Participants will be asked to indicate gaps and congruencies between the education and support that they did receive and in their actual needs as new child welfare workers.

The next chapter further examines the cooperation between social work education and child welfare practice through a review of the relevant literature review. Chapter three presents the methodology of this research, chapter four provides research findings, chapter five discusses data analyses and chapter six presents conclusions.

CHAPTER 2   LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will review available literature pertaining to the research topic about how social work education prepares students for child welfare practice. It will begin with a review of how social work schools and child welfare practice communities work together to help social work graduates prepare for child welfare work. This chapter will also discuss the diverse list of challenges in developing and maintaining cooperation between schools of social work and government run child welfare services. Chapter two concludes with discussion and reflection about gaps in the system that have become apparent.

2.1 Cooperation Between Social Work Schools and Child Welfare Practice Community

One way to improve on current conditions within the field of child welfare is to work towards greater cooperation between social work educators and the child welfare system. Steib and Blome (2003 and 2004) assessed a child welfare system in the United States and suggest that the fundamental issue affecting the quality of services available was the ability of the child welfare personnel to do their job due to only about one-fourth of child welfare services being delivered by staff with social work degrees. (Steib & Blome, 2003). The system was failing to meet families' needs because of a lack of skilled professionals with an understanding of human behavior, social systems, and child maltreatment's underlying factors (Steib & Blome, 2004). Steib and Blome also highlight the important role of social work education in the practice of child welfare and assert that qualified child welfare personnel are the foundation of child welfare service and that only

quality social work education can guarantee a qualified worker. It is also noted that providing a quality social work education requires cooperating with the child welfare practice community.

Young (1994) described a clinical group supervision arrangement between Children and Youth Services (CYS) of Delaware County, Pennsylvania, and the Master of social work program at Widener University's Center for Social Work Education (CSWE) in Chester, Pennsylvania. The two main components of the arrangement were as follows:

> (1) The use of federal funds to pay tuition for CYS staff members who were admitted to SWE's Master of Social Work Program, and (2) The provision of clinical supervision for these staff-students by CSWE faculty, as part of the students' field placements (p.1).

Young concludes that the program "promotes greater clinical competence among public child welfare staff members" (p.7), and also that the partnership that developed between CYS and CSWE as a result of the program will promote future collaboration.

As noted previously, supervision or competent management is very important for new child welfare workers and poor supervision can create issues for front line workers in general. By providing supervised experience to new child welfare workers, the program described by Young (1994) may help to ease some of the stress associated with learning a difficult job and helped new child welfare social workers "make the transition or role

shift from case manager to clinician/case manager" (Walter & Young, 1999, p.85). With less organizational stress to deal with, agencies may be able to retain workers for longer.

Wilson and Smith (2011) describe how child welfare can benefit from the cooperation with schools. These authors assert that the relationship can benefit child welfare because universities have important resources to help agencies pursue child welfare goals. The other side of this is the experience that students who participate in work placement received adequate support from child welfare agencies that could be beneficial for their competence and longevity in the field.

New social workers especially social work students need help in practice. Sufficient support is one way to help guarantee effective learning and competent services. Dana (2013) did a qualitative assessment of a newly developed partnership between a child welfare agency and seven institutes of higher learning. This report discusses many benefits to the arrangement including a "contribution to professionalism and commitment among child welfare workers" (p. 748).

Berrick and Durst (2014) describe an initiative taking place in one MSW program where students are encouraged to serve as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) and are paired with an individual child or youth in foster care. The purpose is to offer students a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of children in care. In return students of the program can provide children and youth in foster care additional support as they experience the system. Participants in this study noted that each of the various

components of the program (instructional and experiential) contributed to their development as social workers. The authors propose that efforts to professionalize the public child welfare workforce should include developing a sensitivity among students for the complex needs that children and youth in care have. This understanding or sensitivity is necessary to ensure that children in care have access to their human rights while in the care and custody of child welfare agencies.

Nguyen (2013) reports research done to investigate the return on investment when training new child welfare workers and demonstrates the value of training from an economic perspective. The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in Los Angeles County matched administrative data from the first year of an academic training program to individuals still working with DCFS almost 20 years later. They reported a significant financial return on their investment with a 12:1 return on child welfare savings and a 50:1 return overall (p.78). This research showed that investigation for the training of child welfare social workers could bring back a lot of social monetary benefits back because of more qualified child welfare services. The fact that training programs can save money indicates the social need for these programs as well. Working with children and families with complex needs is a very difficult area of practice that requires a diverse range of skills. Furthermore, the clients that child welfare workers serve are the most innocent and the most vulnerable members of our society. Child welfare practice requires a very high level of expertise and so investing in training programs may not only save money, but it could also save lives and preserve families. Because the investment for the social worker training programs could bring back tremendous monetary and societal

benefits, getting understanding from the general public and from policy makers may be the next step on the way to advocate for additional resources required to improve child welfare practice. If the general public is better informed they will be more helpful in advocating for changes.

Rheaume, Collins, and Amodeo, (2011) focused on the perceptions of state and county child welfare agencies regarding Title IV-E (Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Program) training partnerships with local colleges and universities. The data suggested strong support for these partnerships which were found to enable resource sharing; establish positive work relationships; provide easier access and convenience to the available resources; facilitate workforce recruitment and retention, and; allow programs to develop strengths in particular areas (Rheaume, Collins, & Amodeo, 2011).

2.2 Challenges for Cooperation Between Social Work Education and Child Welfare Practice Community

Excepting studies from the perspective of positive effects of the cooperation between social work education and child welfare practice, some researchers are more focused on analyzing the relationship between social work education and child welfare practice from a critical perspective. These authors discuss foundational contradictions between social work education and child welfare practice, for example the critical research perspectives of social work academy and the reality of fulfilling clients' needs with limited resources in practice.

Dana (2013) identified challenges for cooperation between social work education and the child welfare practice community including "high staff turnover, consistency of procedures across different sites, and an absence of continuing education for existing staff" (p.748). It is essential to have ongoing and accessible training, performance monitoring, and feedback for practitioners to enhance and refine their skills. A more open or critical organizational climate and a clear career advancement process within the agency may also need to be addressed in order to develop mature agency–university partnerships (Dana, 2013).

Richards, Bhatti-Sinclair, Borrill, Dominelli and Waldman (2000) describe egalitarian and paternalistic relationships as two paradigms, or approaches to practice that operate within, or influence the relationship between social work education and practice.

> In egalitarian partnerships the partners' complementary attributes enable co-operation and collaboration to occur. Its opposite, the paternalistic relationship, can be experienced as authoritarian. Here one party dominates the other, albeit with the intention of getting the best possible outcomes from the arrangement (Richards et al., 2000, p. 193).

These authors are indicating underlying tensions that naturally exist between educators of social work and child welfare agencies. Academic or theoretical social work is not restrained by a lack of resources like the child welfare agencies are. This makes egalitarian relationships between academic and practical social work difficult because

what academics consider best practices may not always be the most practical solution in a resource limited environment. Instead, child welfare agencies budget their resources to make the most of their political and historical situation.

Richards et al. (2000) suggest that the partnership arrangement must be done in a way that enables both parties to provide access to practical education for students within child welfare agencies without disrupting the operational responsibilities of these agencies. It is imperative that agencies of social work acknowledge the limitations of the system as it currently exists and appreciate the importance of providing social workers with an education that allows them to develop an understanding of the role that they will play in a system that tends to undermine their ability to provide adequate services. In this partnership educators are responsible for protecting the credibility of child welfare as a helping profession by producing students that comprehend the role of a child welfare social worker as part of a greater system that is limited in its ability to provide adequate services. Richards et al. note that for this relationship to be successful both partners need to remain open and sensitive to hearing the others' specific concerns (Richards et al., 2000).

Armitage, Callahan and Lewis (2001) discuss issues of social work education and child protection and discuss the enormous and continuing pressure to improve child protection since the publication of the Gove Inquiry into Child protection in 1995. They explain, "Tensions have been exposed between competency training and critical pedagogy and between government influence and university autonomy" (p.9).

The resulting tensions are evident in relationships between the academic and non-academic worlds, among various disciplines, between the generalist specialist orientation, among the schools themselves, between the conflicting agendas related to the First Nation education for child welfare, and for practitioners, between mounting a anti-oppressive challenge to quality, while being employed by institutions of social control (p.22).

It seems that methods of managerialism employed within the system of child welfare have come into conflict with what academics consider to be postmodern and professional practice. These authors explain that schools of social work are trying to deliver curriculum that prepares students for practice while also preparing them to be critical of current practices. Providing students with a critical understanding of social work is proving to be a struggle. Challenges so far include defining critical social work as an expertise and ensuring that practitioners fully understand the pedagogy (concepts, skills, and ethics) necessary to ensure professional practice.

Drisko (2014) explores several issues related to better integrating clinical practice and research in social work and in social work education. He talks about differences in the purposes, professional cultures and professional organizations of clinical social workers and social work researchers. For example "Practitioners focus on the needs of a particular client and client system; questions of concern are defined by the client and address localized, unique needs. Researchers tend to focus on the needs of funders, policy planners and academics" (Drisko, 2014, p.183). Finally the processes and methods of

clinical practice and research are systematically compared and contrasted and he offers suggestions for how social work education can integrate practice and research. These suggestions include practice-informed research, research-informed practice and rewards and support for integrating practice and research in the workplace.

The division between academy and practice within the profession of social work has happened naturally with the development of social work theory including postmodern or critical theories. This has culminated in tension between and amongst academics and those who practice social work of all kinds. The effect that this problem is having on students of social work is unknown. It is supposed here that students of critical social work are bound to experience certain difficulties not previously experienced by social work students during their work placements. Providing quality education is prerequisite to producing qualified practitioners and so if this is the case it seems pertinent to discover what these problems are and how they might be incorporated into the social work curriculum.

2.3 Conclusion: Reflection from Practice and Bridging the Gap

Edith M. Freeman (1996) discusses how policymakers' biased definitions of self-sufficiency and related social program reforms have become barriers for families and communities. She suggests critical reflection at the policy level is necessary to overcome systemic issues that stem from a colonial history and proposes that social work education reintroduce or develop concentrations in community practice and make sure all social

workers develop substantive knowledge about the community as a system and its impact on family and organizational functioning (Freeman 1996).

Creating conditions to retain front line social workers in the field of child welfare requires effort and ingenuity from social work educators as well as child welfare managers and supervisors. On one side, social work educators can help to prepare social workers for their professional mission by teaching a critical approach to their work and an understanding of the environment and positionality that they will occupy as a novice child welfare worker. The emotional strain that stems from inadequate access to resources and dealing constantly with crisis and trauma is something that may be very difficult to prepare social workers for academically. However for social work students, an understanding of how the system will not accommodate them for this emotional strain is important to ensure that people who become child welfare workers are both capable and confident in their ability to deal with the level of stress that this job can exert. On the other hand agencies of child welfare programs can work to alleviate work stress and support workers in dealing effectively with the crisis and trauma that they encounter at work.

The child welfare administration could develop a more supportive work environment for front line workers and lobby for access to adequate resources. Perhaps schools of social work could alter their admission and education system for the purpose of selecting and fostering students who have the strongest personal commitment to child welfare along with adequate coping skills to sustain and endure emotionally stressful work

environments. Social work educators can help students realize the reality of working within the field of child welfare and provide adequate placement experience and supervision.

The gap between child welfare practice and social work academy can be described as the difference between a practicing social workers' focus on a client's immediate situation and the academic researcher's focus on policy and funding. How to bridge this gap is a valuable research topic in the development of both child welfare practice and social work education. The literature reviewed here suggests that narrowing this gap requires a high degree of cooperation between the practice community and social work school. The direct benefits of this type of cross-silo relationship building have already been demonstrated by Young (1994), Dana, (2013) and Steib and Blome (2003 and 2004). But "breaking down the silos and building a true synthesis between practice and research will require clear incentives, strong policy level support and encouragement at the micro-level" (Drisko, 2014, p.191). Silos help to maintain the status quo and to keep structural inequality in place.

For challenges related to funding, getting recognition and support is necessary. Regarding the challenges noted above in defining roles and responsibilities between academy and practice, sustained research should continue to focus on exploring effective partnerships between academia and practice. Social work students are junior practitioners and still learning. Adequate supports are especially vital for them as they transition from school to work. The academic sector has a responsibility to conduct social work education from a

critical perspective and to work with government departments and practice communities of all kinds to reflect on pertinent social issues. Demonstrating and practicing new concepts in the field of social work and providing space and process to reflect critically on the implementation of these processes is important for the professional development of competent social workers working for child welfare authorities and also in educational settings.

For the practicing community, social work agencies may benefit from improving supervision and the management processes (Barbee et al., 2009) to ensure adequate support for social work students and new practitioners. Last but not least, schools of social work may need to adjust their curriculums and administration to fulfill both students' common needs for practice opportunities (Lefevre, 2015) and diverse cultural needs for minority groups (Cross et al., 2013). As the Canadian population becomes more diverse, social work practice must accommodate this shift. Using outdated or culturally inappropriate theories to assist marginalized groups at this time in history is to perpetuate systemic racism unnecessarily.

This chapter offered some insight into how social work schools and child welfare agencies can work together to improve child welfare services and support new child welfare workers. Challenges and barriers to cooperation between school and practice communities and the critical reflections in education and practice institution child welfare were also discussed. The next chapter will present the research design and methodology along with the study's objectives, strengths, limitations, and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter includes a brief summary of the research objectives with my interests of this topic, a rationale for the study's qualitative research design, as well as methodologies utilized for sampling, data collection, and data analysis. A discussion about methodological strengths, limitations, and ethical considerations is also included.

3.1 Research Objectives

There are three primary why I chose this topic. The first is that I have strong interest in the field of child welfare and I want to work in child welfare in the future. I believe that this is very important work because child welfare social workers aim to protect children from abuse and neglect. Protection of the well-being of children is meaningful for me so I want to work in this area. In addition, choosing child welfare as my field placement was significant for my social work career development. Child welfare is related to so many individual, family and societal issues, and requires that we work with many professionals. Therefore, if I could work in child welfare, I will have the opportunity to have meaningful experiences and acquire knowledge from many areas of social.

The second reason is rooted in my reflective thinking about social work education form students' perspective. In my experience of this master of social work program, I leant that some students are concerned that their social work education was not practical enough and could not prepare them adequately for their social work practice. Because of my

interest in child welfare, I want to explore how social work education could help students to better prepare for their child welfare practice.

My third reason is that when I tried to review the current literature on this topic, I discovered that there were very limited researches studying this topic in Canada. This fact further inspired me to do my thesis research on this topic.

The objectives of this research are to explore how social work education is preparing social work graduates for child welfare practice in order to better understand the implications of the development of social work education on child welfare practice. My research investigated the following questions: "from the perspectives of social work graduates, what congruency exists between their social work education and child welfare practice? What gaps exist and what might be the best ways to bridge these gaps?

3.2 Study Design

A qualitative study design was used to gain a better understanding of social work graduates' experiences of their education and beginning practice in the field of child welfare. A qualitative design was found to align well with this study's objectives. As explained elsewhere, a qualitative inquiry is useful when trying to explain a phenomenon from the perspective of those who exist within the situation under study (Bouma, Ling, & Wilkinson, 2012). The research questions put forth in this report are not easily quantified and require a more in depth approach than what a quantitative study design might allow.

Qualitative methods allow for a focus on special circumstances or situations and work as an approach to the study of human nature by taking a lived-experience approach. (Bouma et al., 2012; Rubin & Babbie, 2011). In this way, and in this case, qualitative research gives value to social work graduates' individual experiences while finding the answers to relevant questions in this field.

3.3 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit study participants for this study. Purposive sampling is a way that researcher use their own judgment to select the best people to study to avoid generalizing to a larger population (Bouma et al., 2012). In this research, child welfare social workers that had taken their social work education within the past ten years are my study target population. It has been noted that child welfare workers in Nova Scotia tend to stay in the field longer than the average length of practice for child welfare workers. This may be partly due to the more limited job opportunities in Nova Scotia. In rural areas especially there are fewer jobs, hence social workers have less career mobility.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the research population had effective experience of current social work education and child welfare practice and avoid unnecessary cost of time and resources for ineffective recruitment. The recruitment method used here involved asking permission from the Department of Community

Services to utilize the department's email network to disperse a recruitment poster (please see Appendix A: Recruitment Poster).

Each study participant had to meet the following inclusion criteria to guarantee that they have effective experience of current social work education and child welfare practice: (1) BSW graduates within the past 10 years (2005-2015) were recruited to guarantee participants had timely social work education experience. (2) Current or past front line child welfare workers who leave their work within the past 10 years (2005-2015) were recruited to guarantee participants have timely child welfare work experience. If the study had not been able to recruit enough participants from current workers, then people who left their child welfare work within the past 10 years were also eligible. This research did not differentiate in terms of culture, race, religious or sexual orientation. There were no other foreseeable criteria deemed relevant to this research.

A letter of information and disclosure of intent were provided to every participant at first contact (Appendix B: Consent Form and Signature Page). The Consent Form was reviewed by participants prior to the interview and signatures were collected from them at the interview. Participants were screened and selected according to the above criteria, as well as being willing to consent to the reproduction of any words, phrases or sentences they provided in the interview.

3.4 Data Collection

Data was collected in the form of an interview including a short series of questions (see Appendix C: Interview Guide). Study participants were also asked to complete a demographic survey (see Appendix D: Demographics Survey). Participants completed these interviews in the personal space that was most convenient for them, and as their schedule allowed. Interviews conducted in person with the researcher were audio-recorded and transcribed into text at a later time.

3.5 Data Analyses

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Thematic analysis is "A method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data" (Braun &Clarke, 2006, p.79). Thematic analysis is used to collect data from individual interviews and encode and analyze this data to allow for discussion and reporting (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis can be used within any theoretical framework the researcher chooses and allows the flexibility for rich, detailed and complex description of data to capture both participants' reality as well as the constructs that lie under their realities (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research aims to gather rich and diverse perspectives rather than to work towards fitting individual perspectives into any particular category or theory.

After the interviews, the verbal data was transcribed into words and a thematic analysis was completed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step for data analysis was to become familiar with the transcripts and assign any initially obvious codes to the data.

Identification was given to all data items to make sure all data could be coded. After the initial data was coded, systematization and collation work were done to make sure that all the data were identified and were collated together. Themes were searched by sorting the different codes into potential themes. Themes were reviewed and it was made sure that all data formed a coherent pattern and all themes reflected the meaning of the research. The next step was to create an overall narrative with all of the data and each theme was analyzed in order to officially name the themes. Deeper analysis of social work graduates' thoughts of how their education prepared them for child welfare practice were done and the implications for social work education were made in order to tell the story of the data.

3.6 Strengths And Limitations

This research had both strengths and limitations regarding sampling, data collecting, and data analysis.

Purposive sampling allowed this study to select child welfare social workers who had current and effective first hand experience of social work education and child welfare practice. This sampling method combined with recruitment at several different child welfare departments guaranteed that I got child welfare practice experience from as many different departments as I could. However, these sampling methods made the research population limited to the Dartmouth and the Halifax areas and excluded other populations whose experiences with social work education and child welfare practice may have different results from their different institutional and policy structures.

For data collection, a fifteen person sample size that I collected allowed the research to be adequately rich and descriptive for data analysis as well as being realistic for a student researcher's capacity and resources. Participants in this study answered a short series of open-ended questions in the interview that was good for capturing social work graduates' experiences that were significant to them. Participants spent twenty minutes on average for the interview and that was sufficient for extracting phenomena, reasons and ideas from respondents as to the gaps and congruencies between social work education and child welfare practice while still keeping their comfort levels by keeping the interview short. A drawback of the data that I collected was the sample didn't have sufficient diversity regarding gender, race and culture and it turned out most of my participants were Caucasian female social workers. Due to the small size of the database, the results of this study cannot be reliably applied to other circumstances. While I did not find any specific demographic information on child welfare workers in Nova Scotia, it is noted that the social work profession is female dominated, and that there is limited diversity in the social work field in Nova Scotia (Bernard, MacDonald, & Wien, 2005).

In terms of data analysis, using thematic analysis allowed for a bottoms-up approach to value child welfare workers' first voice knowledge and reduced my assumptions and bias. Audio taping and hard copy transcripts of the individual interviews in this research caused the analysis to be based on the participants' telling of their stories and it allowed for consistent and repeated reviewing during the analysis process. In this thematic analysis, data were reviewed multiple times for coding and analyzing by the principal

investigator and guided by the thesis supervisor to ensure that data were attributed to themes that were mutually exclusive.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

Ethics approval was granted by the Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board prior to commencement of this study (see Appendix E: Letter of Approval). I provided a letter of information and disclosure of intent to every participant at first contact (Appendix B: Consent Form and Signature Page). Informed consent was obtained prior to each participant's participation of this research.

I am currently completing the Masters of Social Work Degree, and have worked in the professional area of human services and am bound by the ethical codes of the social work profession. I have completed both undergraduate and graduate courses in research methods and research ethical codes and I didn't have any conflict of interest with the study participants.

I was mindful for the potential risk for the research participants and offered study participants as much information as possible. I introduced my research and participants' rights as well as the risks involved at the first contact and told them they can decide to stop participating at any point during the study and they can also decide whether they want any of the information that they have contributed up to that point to be removed or if they would allow me to use that information.

Efforts were made to keep the participants' personal information confidential. Any identifying information and interview data was stored in secure cabinets, separately, and where only my supervisor and myself could access the materials. Every respondent remained anonymous in this research and data were reported in the form of personal narratives, so no personal identifying information was used in my research report. Every participant in this study, if interested, can have access to the results of this study. This is in the form of a summary of the findings that is available to those who request it.

Measures were made to ensure the comfort of study participants due to the fact that my study will ask questions about the respondents' challenges and stress in their study or work. Participants were encouraged to ask for a break for as long as they needed, and if the discomfort was too much they were encouraged to discontinue the participation to prevent harm to them. Participants were also recommended to contact the Employee Assistance Program at their office and Dalhousie Social Work Clinic to talk about any discomfort or triggers that came up during the interview. No study participants reported feeling any discomfort because of their participation in the study.

This chapter discussed the research objectives, study design, and research methodologies of my study. This research is a qualitative study designed to give better explanations of how social work graduates experienced their education and practice in the child welfare field from the perspective of those who are in the everyday situation. Participants had met the inclusion criteria of having completed a BSW degree within the past ten years and being current or past child welfare workers who had been in the work within the past ten

years to guarantee that they had effective experience of current social work education and child welfare practice. Data was collected in the form of an in-depth interview by a short series of questions, and examined with thematic analysis in order to encode and analyze the data to form the report. The next chapter will present the research findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4   FINDINGS

This chapter provides the findings from the research interviews with study participants and the themes and sub-themes that reflect participants' challenges in their work and how social work education prepared them for child welfare practice. These study findings are based on first voice accounts of social work graduates' experiences of their social work education and child welfare practice. This chapter will present profiles of the participants, and the participants' demographic backgrounds as well as an overview of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data.

4.1 Participant Profile

Fifteen child welfare social workers participated in my interview, which followed an interview guideline and included a demographics survey. This demographic information included age, gender identity, racial identity, years of social work experience, years of child welfare work experience and any other social or cultural categories that they thought were significant for them. This information is presented in Tables 1 to 2.

Two (2) of the fifteen study participants were between the ages of 20 to 29, eight (8) were between the ages of 30 to 39 and five (5) were between the ages of 40 to 49. Fourteen (14) identified female as their gender identity and one (1) identified as male. In regards to racial background, thirteen (13) of the study participants identified as Caucasians or white, and two (2) identified as African and Caucasian bi-racial. This information is displayed below in Table 1.

Table 1   Study Participants' Age, Gender Identity, and Racial Background

Age	Number of Participants
20-29	2
30-39	8
40-49	5
Gender Identity	**Number of Participants**
Female	14
Male	1
Other	0
Racial Background	**Number of Participants**
Caucasians or White	13
African and Caucasian bi-racial	2

Study participants were asked about their length of social work experience and child welfare experience. For the length of social work experience, seven (7) of the fifteen study participants were between the years of 1 to 5, five (5) were between the years of 6 to 10 and three (3) were more than 15 years. Regarding the participants' child welfare work experience, eight (8) of the fifteen study participants were between the years of 1 to 5, five (5) were between the years of 6 to 10 and two (2) were more than 10 years.

Table 2   Study Participants' Social Work and Child Welfare Experience.

Years of social work experience	Number of Participants
1-5	7
6-10	5
15+	3
Years of child welfare experience	**Number of Participants**
1-5	8
6-10	5
10+	2

Table 3 below presents a brief biography of each research participant. All the names here are not real names, they are artificial names and are placed in alphabetical order.

Table 3   Study Participant Profile

Participant Profile
Ann is a Caucasian female and she has a BSW degree. She got her first social work job in child welfare and has worked 6 years until now. She felt her social work education had not prepared her well for her job and she thought more practical content in social work education would be very helpful. **Betty** is a young worker who has two years social work experience. She got her BSW degree and is working as a child welfare social worker since then. She is Caucasian and thought the theories she got in her social work education helped her to understand oppressions and child welfare situations. **Carol** self identified as a Jewish-White female and she has both BSW and MSW degree. She has worked 19 months in child welfare and has 5 years social work experience in total. She thought her BSW helped her much more than her MSW since her BSW had more practical content and less theory. She didn't believe social work education is essential for child welfare practice other than practical skills. **Danna** is a female of Caucasian/African descent and she has 17 years of social work practice experience. She said that not having adequate cultural and racial competences are the biggest challenge in her child welfare work. She thought social work education is the foundation for child welfare work. Especially she found self-awareness and self-reflection education are very important. **Emily** moved from Germany with her family to Canada in 1989 when she was 3. She self identified as Caucasian and she has worked as a child welfare social worker since she got her BSW 5 years ago. In her interview, she said that child welfare social work is a very busy and stressful work and challenging for her. She felt grateful for her social work education because it gave her critical perspective and many practical skills. **Frank** is an African/ Caucasian bi-racial male and he has 7 years child welfare experience. He got his BSW degree and he enjoyed his social work education program very well. He thought child welfare issues are rooted in social systems and said a cross culture perspective is essential for child welfare practice. **Gloria** is Caucasian and she has 10 years child welfare practice experience since she got her BSW degree. She pointed out that child welfare is a very emotionally draining job

and self-care is extremely important for her. She appreciated her social work education program because it taught her how to do self-care practice in her work.

Helen has worked as a child welfare social worker 9 years after she got her BSW and she is pursuing her MSW now. She self-identified as Caucasian and she said clients' resistances, conflicts and high caseload make her emotionally stressful. She recommended that social work education should focus on clinical skills.

Ivy is Caucasian, Metis and Scottish, and she has 2 years child welfare experience which she got after she worked 3 years in other social work positions after she got her BSW degree. In her interview, she said lack of support and resources are challenging for her. She believed her education helped a lot in preparing her for child welfare work by giving her practical skills and placement experience.

Jane has a BSW degree and is doing her MSW program now. She is Caucasian and she has 2 years child welfare work experience. She thought her child welfare work is very busy and crisis based but is not really doing a lot to help clients.

Kelly is British Caucasian and she has worked as a child welfare social worker after she got her MSW in England 4 years ago. She described her social work program as having a good balance between theory and practice and also focused on child welfare. She said her education was very helpful in enabling her to handle this challenging child welfare work.

Linda is a Jewish- Caucasian female and she has worked as a child welfare social worker since she got her MSW degree 6 years ago. She wished she could get more field experience when she was a social work student to help her prepare for this very busy and challenging child welfare position.

Mandy is Caucasian, female, and she has both BSW and MSW degrees and has worked at child welfare for 8 years. She is struggling to learn how to establish an effectively professional relationship with clients. She believed client-focused skills and research ability are very important in social work education.

Nancy is a Caucasian female and she has one year of child welfare experience since she got her BSW degree. She believed anti-oppressive practice in child welfare is very important to prevent power abuse and protect the best interest of the clients. She thought her social work education experience helped her get a lot of practical skills for her job but more culturally focused pieces would be very beneficial for students.

Olivia is Caucasian and she has worked as a child welfare social worker 4 years since she got her BSW degree. Her biggest concern is that the government processes are low on efficiency and flexibility with regard to delivering effective services for children and families who need help. For social work education she thought social work student should be a more diverse group themselves and the schools should teach more practical skills.

4.2 Themes And Sub-Themes Identified

Based on research participants' storytelling and understandings of their experiences with social work education and child welfare practice, several themes and sub-themes emerged. Social work graduates' thoughts on how social work education prepared them for child welfare practice were presented in the following five domains:

Challenges in child welfare practice

Necessary skills for child welfare practice

Preparations from social work education

Gaps between social work education and child welfare practice

Recommendations for social work education

Each of these domains is discussed below, with sub-themes and using participants' stories.

4.3 Challenges in Child Welfare Practice

Participants in this study stated that they have enormous challenges in their daily child welfare work. These challenges were grouped under three sub-themes: difficult child welfare job; institutional government workplace; lack of resources and crisis-orientated work.

4.3.1   Difficult Child Welfare Job

Participants have various struggles in their child welfare practice and many of them define child welfare as a "difficult job". Social workers named some typical situations that show why child welfare is a hard job for them. The first one is the resistance from child welfare clients. Unlike many other social work fields where clients voluntarily seek help, child welfare services are mandated with involuntary clients. Consequently, child welfare interventions are typically more intrusive for clients and as a result they may encounter more resistance, which makes this work more difficult. The following research participants addressed how clients' resistance makes it very hard for them to do their job:

> *"It's hard work. You know it's difficult emotionally sometimes, you are constantly in conflict. It's conflictual. I mean I do investigations, so I mean often we are dealing with people who are mad that we are involved. Right and there is a lot of resistance, I think when you are trying to address concerns with clients who are, don't always agree that there are concerns I find that really hard."* -Helen

> *"It's the most intrusive part of the system because we are investigating risk to the children and we have to do [it] through things like take children into care, or ask people to leave their homes, or ask for no contact, so, it's very delicate stuff and people get very mad at you. So, it's stressful in that you are working with really high conflict and crisis situations."* -Jane

> "*In child protection a lot of times you are working with clients who don't want to be working with you so that can cause a lot of different challenges. Sometimes it can be quite difficult to work with somebody who doesn't want anything to do with you and you know some people don't return your calls. "*-Nancy

 In addition to resistances from clients that make child welfare work very hard, complex and conflictive situations also make participants feel quite challenged in their work. When being asked about challenges in her work, Carol expressed that navigating conflict

makes her feel child welfare is very difficult for her. She said: *"Yeah, just navigating conflict, there is just so many challenges. It's an overwhelming job"*. She added "*It has every variety of experience that you could imagine, in this type of work, here we are dealing with difficult people, difficult situations, difficult professionals*". Another point regarding how difficult child welfare work can be, is the societal problems that child welfare issues are rooted in:

> "*You know you are seeing a lot of difficult situations, that children and parents, family members are going through and so that is tough. Especially in the child protection stream, really tough because you are seeing, you know just, the big difficulties, you know like in society, poverty, drugs, alcohol violence and you're seeing the effect it has on children, you're seeing it has an effect on one generation to the next. Because you often notice a perpetuation from one generation to the next. Parent passes on to child and so on and so on, and so to me it always points to societal issue, not just we're dealing with things on a micro level, but we are really dealing with a macro problem. So I find that difficult because we're not really correcting ills of the system, we are kinda putting band aids on things.*"-Frank

In addition to resistances and conflicts that child welfare workers are facing every day in their work, clients' complex culture and race backgrounds also caused social workers to be challenged by the need to provide services in culturally responsive ways. The following comment is from a participant who worked most in foster care and adoption sections. Her biggest concern is whether the child welfare system has adequate cultural and racial competences that can fulfill the needs of clients from different backgrounds:

> "*In terms of the challenges that I have seen through the years, placing children in a family that is reflective of their cultural, racial background has been a challenge because we don't have the resources to even place children in homes that are reflective of their racial cultural heritage.*"-Danna

She concluded that it is very difficult to find a home that is reflective of children's racial and culture background because the child welfare system lacks foster and adoption placements from different marginalized groups and this makes her frustrated. It is a fact that marginalized racial and cultural groups are over represented in child welfare clients because of the long-term systemic societal discriminations toward those groups. Unfortunately, the child welfare system does not have enough workers from those communities and other resources to deliver culturally responsive services for all the groups. This makes child welfare workers feel frustrated when they are not able to achieve their social work goal to help clients.

4.3.2   Institutional Government Workplace

In Nova Scotia, child welfare is a government service, mandated by child protection legislation. The institutional practice guarantees the authority to enforce necessary intervention to protect children in risk. However, the government institution itself makes restrictions and challenges for child welfare social workers in their daily practice. Government as a service provider usually has more resources than any other entity but lack of flexibility and efficiency often causes child welfare workers stress and even puts workers in conflict situations. When she talked about her challenges in work, Olivia shared:

> "*I think the hardest, hardest, it can just be, it's hard working for the government. Sometimes because government processes that you have to work within, to make any sort of changes it takes a lot of time, because there is a lot of different levels of government so sometimes that can be frustrating. You know, work within these*

policies and this legislator that is set, and ah, making any changes would take years sometimes, especially the legislator, caseloads are high, so that's certainly a challenge."

Lack of flexibility, emergency situations and high caseloads makes it hard for workers to manage their daily schedules. Mandy said:

"*Working for the department of community services there is less flexibility for overtime and adjusted time. I think that is definitely a challenge; it's a kinda of rigidity to day time within the department. There is a lot of different things that you have to step through."*

In addition, Frank also felt that when working in government, the policy and code sometimes could be a challenge to him:

It would be government based. You know because as a social work you are bound by the code of ethics, and sometimes I find working in child welfare challenges that code of ethics and you have to find new and inventive ways to make sure your clientele are served in the best way you possibly can. While doing so in a very structural policy ridden system, that is a challenge"

At times, government based workplaces create potential conflict situations for workers, making child welfare workers experience conflict themselves. Danna said*" It conflicts your own personal values around that. Some of the other things working with other programs can be a challenge within the child welfare system ".* Helen stated how she felt about conflict in her work:

"*Sometimes there is conflict between the direction you receive from supervisors and what you think needs to happen, I find that really hard, that's really hard when you have to go out and talk to clients and you know not argue but explain reasons why we are doing something when I don't believe in the reasons."*

When it comes to workers that find it hard to justify what they do in their job, then it does not come naturally to them and it makes them suffer in-depth struggle from their heart. There were some other challenges also mentioned by the study participants, for example Emily talked about the office politics and Nancy talked about the power imbalance between worker and client: *"Another challenge for me, is having a lot of power. You know you have to be aware of that dynamic with clients and just, you know, not abusing it"*.

For people working in sophisticated government sections that depend on the cooperation between different professions, inconsistences are common in their work and can be challenged. Lacking consistency within child welfare could make new workers feel confused:

> *"I find there can be like a lack consistency in practice, so it kind of varies depending on the worker, depending on who the worker's supervisor and stuff like that. There can be a lot of room for inconsistency there aside from the regular policy that we all follow, there is so much room, I find that personal interpretation of stuff, and I think that is probably one of the biggest challenges."*- Betty

Danna shared that within child welfare different programs sometimes could make it difficult to be consistent:

> *"Other programs may not come from the same, perspective or philosophy and sometimes there is not consistent messages that we are delivering out clients. So you know as an adoption worker, I am delivering a message to the foster family that could be different from the children in care worker of the child but it shouldn't be different it should be the same. So sometimes within the agency we*

struggle with giving consistent message around what is in the best interest of the child."

4.3.3 Lack of Resources and Crisis-orientated Work

Child welfare social work is a professional occupation that believes in helping children at risk and helping families overcome their struggles. When child welfare doesn't have enough resources to really help clients, child welfare social workers can feel more frustrated. In this research, the most frequent reflections regarding challenges in work from front line workers are lack of resource and heavy workload.

Ann believed because funding is being cut, child welfare does not have enough services for clients*: "There is not a lot of services available for people. Funding is constantly cut, so we just don't have a lot of. You want to get the services to people that they need but there is not a lot of funding". Referring* to the funding issue, Emily added: *"When it comes around to money and just getting support for the kids and that kind of thing, I find that challenging and knowing that there are financial restraints and that sort of thing".*

Child welfare workers not only struggle with lack of funding, they also find it is hard to find supportive services for children and families. Ivy thought she often was challenged by difficulty of matching the right supportive services within community to fulfill clients' needs and Jane even concluded: "*you can't really do a lot to help the people you are working with*". Kelly made an example to explain why she believed the challenge is essentially the lack of resources in child welfare work:

"You know we have lots of families, we have lots of additional needs and needs that for resources that just aren't there. For example mental health, that's just, there just a major major gap in services there. I also find that when we are working with youth we don't, we don't necessarily have any resources or any, anything available to cater to their needs, especially once they reach 16 and then that age gap between 16 and 18 and then there is no provision for those guys, in the middle. So yea, I think it's just knowing that we, these people have so many needs and they need the additional support and services and we just don't have, we don't have it."

Besides the challenge of lacking funding and services for clients that make workers frustrated, another significant difficult situation for front line child welfare social workers that related to lacking fund is understaffing and heavy workload. Ivy believed it is because they don't have enough workers for so many files so they are understaffed and being over worked. From the feedback of the participants, heavy workload is normal for a child welfare social worker and this especially puts tremendous pressure on new social work graduates. Ann talked about the experience she had when she was a new worker and said the challenge was:" *very very very heavy caseload*". She described this experience:

"It was very heavy. I would work all day. I would do notes at home. It was, my days off, I would sit there with a laptop and do notes. There was really no time away. It was day and night, so and that was a lot of unpaid time."

Other comments regarding this issue are as follows:

"Workload is a challenge, obviously. I am an intake social worker, so it's super super busy, you know deadlines. We work to a lot of deadlines and a lot response times, and quite often, you know the workload can get to the point where it's a struggle to stay on top of case notes. You should see how busy we

are,   its crazy crazy busy, and you know you just let one slip and then it's like a domino affect."-Kelly

"*It's busy work, um.. It can be overwhelming at times. It's a lot of documentation and paperwork, you can be in court a lot you can be on the road and just the general, it's just a very challenging work overall."*-Linda

"*I think the challenges then were, were keeping a balance between the requirements of what you had to get done at work and also not doing too much unpaid overtime, not taking too much of the case responsibilities home with you."*-Mandy

Heavy caseloads making the child welfare social workers overwhelmed is one thing, but being in a crisis-orientated status in the work place is another significant fact that needs to be taken into consideration. One major concern from the research participants is that the current system lacks critical methods to provide really effective services to children and families and blocks workers' ability to use their skills to help clients. For example, one person shared:

"*Workload is an issue, that's a challenge. Because we have high workloads here and so it's difficult with the workload issues because you get bogged down with paper work. So a lot of your skills in terms of you doing your one on one, using your one on one skills with people you have to also have to make time for the paper work right? So the paper work piece can take away from your ability, or your time to put into doing the social, or using the social work skills that you need when working with families. "*-Danna

"*Having to do the paper work, and in social work there is a lot of paper work that needs to be done. Under pressure I can do that paperwork fairly quickly, you know I'd rather do that one on one human contact kind of a thing."*-Emily

Jane described the situation that she is always in crisis and does not have time to do what she needs to do: "*it's very busy and crisis based and there is never enough time to do the*

work that you have to do, so you are always behind so that is a challenge". Paper work and caseload take over child welfare workers' time and prevents them from using their professional skills to focus on the client's need. The crisis orientated work situation blocks a social worker from using critical analysis and necessary prevention work thus leaving the case still open and therefore increasing the caseload.

4.3.4   Emotional Stress and Burnout

When child welfare is full of difficult situations, heavy workloads and the frustration because workers feel they can't help clients, emotional stress and burnout of front line child welfare social workers are not difficult to understand. Exposure to tremendous traumatizing stories from clients put child welfare social workers at the risk of emotional draining. Olivia concluded her emotional stress from clients' trauma that she meets in her work as: "*You know, you're certainly exposed to things that are, you know hard to hear, like abuse, neglect of children, and you see things that are hard and traumatized for me"*. Nancy made a clearer point about how her work affects her emotional status: *" Just seeing how things done by parents can have a really negative affect on the children that can be really hard to see sometimes, when the kids have experienced trauma and just seeing how that plays out"*. Ivy named some situations that can affect her a lot in her work: *"Some file topics are very hard, such as like sexual assaults files, or domestic violence, or, if the child were to pass away in the care of the department"*. The trauma from client and the consequently emotional stress of child welfare social work make self-

care to be one of the most important subjects for them. When she shared her mind about the challenges of her job, Gloria put the self-care challenge as the top one:

> "*I think one of the big challenges, I think when you are working in this particular area, relates to, self-care. And learning to manage stress and learning to deal with difficult situations and certainly very at times, emotional situations umm. When you are dealing with children and umm, dealing with families it can be, it can be very draining, mentally and emotionally, it can, you know, it can be difficult.*"

For some workers, emotional burnout is not only caused by the witnessing of clients' suffering in their job and limited to their work sphere. Emotional stress could even further affect them. Frank expressed that what he sees in his every day work makes him think of his own children: "*I find that difficult. Having my own children, I find that difficult working in child welfare, you know because I feel for every child*". Child welfare workers are often emotionally touched and affected by clients' struggles in their work. However, in addition to the emotional stress, child welfare social workers also have safety issues to be concerned. Jane shared that when she was new to her job, she was worried about her safety: "*it can be a little bit scary, the clients can be a little bit scary, a little bit violent and dangerous at times*".

Child welfare is a difficult field for social workers because it is a mandated legislated service related to abuse and neglect of children. There are not enough prevention services, and with social issues and conditions, such as poverty, unemployment, addictions, trauma histories, racism, homophobia and sexism are often not addressed by child welfare workers because they have little time and space in their caseloads to do so.

Consequently, they are frustrated by these crisis-orientated work situations and have the added risk of burning out. Study participants stated that they need skills to help them cope with such challenges in their work.

4.4 Necessary Skills for Child Welfare Practice

Child welfare is a profession that requires highly qualified workers to cope with tense situations in their work. In this research, the participants identified skills that are essential for social worker to "survive" and deliver good services for clients. These necessary skills were grouped under three sub-themes: basic clinical skills; critical perspective and anti-oppressive practice; self-care and administration skills.

4.4.1   Basic Clinical Social Work Skills

Child welfare social work doesn't focus on the mental health field, but like clinical social workers, people who work in child welfare could meet some challenges and needs that require them to develop basic clinical skills. The participants in the study named some basic skills they are using in their work.

Betty believed how to communicate with clients is very important, for example how to talk, listen and interview clients are the basic skills for child welfare social worker. Carol believes that talking with clients is challenging her but it is the thing that needs to be done correctly: "*just learning to talk to people is probably one of the most challenging*

things in being a child welfare worker, but you need just getting it right, understanding".

The following comments are from participants regarding the communication skills:

> *" Listening skills is a huge thing that we learned in this business because you really have to listen to what your clients are telling you and ask the questions that need to be asked to know where they are coming from in terms of their own experiences, and why perhaps they may do certain things."*-Danna

> *"Just the basics of how to interact with people and how to support them and motivational interviewing and all that stuff. I find that really important when working with clients now."*-Nancy

In addition to excellent communication skills, which are vital for a qualified child welfare social worker, assessment, analyzing and problem solving abilities are also used in every day of child welfare front line practice. Carol said the abilities of situation assessment and making the right decision is a big part of her work:

> *"Understanding what is important to keep kids safe versus just them telling you their whole life story. Like particular parents who are going through stressful times, you need to kind of be able to weigh like. You need to be able to understand what is going to keep kids safe, and see if parents are going to be able to do that or if they are willing to do that."*

Danna addressed how important the abilities of analysis and assessment are:

> *"Understand the full picture of where the client is coming from, that also helps you to understand kind of why they are the parent that they may be at this point in time and what supports that they need. So understanding the story of the client by asking the question that you need to ask is going to help when you are kind of developing your case plan for that particular family."*

In front of various situations of different families and children, child welfare social workers need the capabilities to conduct the assessment, analysis and decision making to help families solve their problems and protect their children. For this reason, clinical skills are needed in front line child welfare work and could be the basic qualifications of the worker. Having the abilities to do their job effectively is one thing and keeping in mind to do the right thing based on the best interest of children is another vital point for child welfare social workers. In her book, Fook Jan (2002) indicated that social workers need to understand the oppression and power relationships to practice critical social work and avoid social work profession becomes a form of control for clients. She also addressed that it is important for social workers to identify assumptions that contain oppression and disempowerment from dominant groups. Having the power of government authority means that in order to avoid abusing one's power critical thinking from the client's perspective is very important.

4.4.2   Critical Perspective and Anti-oppressive Practice

Jane has two years of child welfare social work experience and she talked a lot about how anti-oppressive theory along with critical perspective helped her try her best to avoid her biases and work for the best interest of clients*: "the critical perspective I have going into see the clients. So I get that, you know, I think that it makes me less judgmental and more aware of my own bias.* She further gave an example about how critical thinking taught her how to interact and understand clients:

> *"It also really helps because I know the structural barriers that my clients are against. For the most part they are people living poverty, they have mental health issues, they have addictions issues, I get that it's really tough and a lot times they are in a cycle. I am never going to go into a house and think and why don't you just, you know, do something to change. I know that it's a big struggle and it's an up hill battle for them and there are not a lot of services out there and it's the way they were raised, and sometimes they don't know different and so I think that it really really really helped, well critical thinking and reflecting."*

She added*:*

> *"You trying to work with my clients the best I can be is kind to them but also having to be tough but knowing that it's not just a personal choice that got them in this situation that it's also the life that they've been living."*

Jane raised a very good example to demonstrate how critical thinking helped a child welfare worker to overcome their privileged position by listening to clients' voice with respect and non-judgment.

Cultural and racial competences are required for child welfare social work in this multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country. Gordon Pon (2009) noted that the concept of cultural competency should not leave out the power relationships and critique the systemic nature of oppressions. Pon also argues that a depoliticized view of culture could put the concept of cultural competency in danger of "othering" non-whites and turn this concept into new racism. Bernard and Moriah (2007) stated "the definition of cultural competence must be expanded to include exploration of issues of oppression, power, and privilege and how these contribute to the helping relationship when culturally relevant and competent services are being delivered"(p.81). They suggest that awareness of systemic inequities, power, and privilege are essential to help social workers to practice cultural competence from an anti-oppressive perspective. Furthermore, Bernard and Moriah assert that

empowerment and advocacy are essential for anti-oppressive social work, on both individual and institutional levels. Clearly, this perspective is essential for child welfare social work with diverse populations, where issues of power are particularly poignant.

As Danna also said, adoption and foster care departments look for families that can reflect children's racial and cultural backgrounds are major considerations. Child welfare workers need to understand this concern and have the competences to address this point. Frank also believed cross cultural perspectives are very important when child welfare workers are working with the native population, newcomers or the African community.

4.4.3   Self -care and Administration Skills

As discussed above, child welfare work is full of tension and challenged by heavy workloads. This means that child welfare social workers are at the risk of burn out and need high levels of self-care ability to keep up fitness and productivity. Many participants in the research discussed how important self-care is.

Carol discussed the necessity of self-care when she talked about the challenges in her work:" *You have to be able to navigate challenges and overcome it, and yeah, become stronger for it. But also recognize when you're taking on too much and you need to take self-care time, that's sort of the main [thing]"*. Gloria has long-term experience in child welfare and she pays a lot of attention to self- care and says this is not just about work, this is more about life and survival:

> *"I think that in order to be able to do this job, to do it well, and to, you know , to just be able to survive in doing this job, you certainly you have to learn good self care, yeah, you have to be able to learn to deal with stress, you have to learn good coping strategies."*

She further explained why self-care is a big part of her work and life:

> *"I think another important thing is, it can sometimes affect your whole outlook on different things. In terms of life experiences and negative, you know, negative things that we see in this work. In terms of, you know just different examples of children and abuse and neglect and abandonment, so I think sometimes can take its toll on you in terms of your perception of the world and of life and of people. So it's important that you are always able to kind of realize you know that there has to be, even though we deal with some very negative things, that you are always able to keep a positive outlook in life."*

It is inevitable to bring some level of work pieces back home. Therefore to prevent one's personal life from being affected by hard stuff at work is significant for child welfare social workers in order to keep healthy and energetic in their work. Mandy added: "*Keeping a balance between the requirements of what you had to get done at work and also not doing too much overtime, not taking too much of the case responsibilities home with you*".

Other skills reported by the research participants are office administration skills for example documentation and multi-task skills. The child welfare system is based on case note recording and assessment reports so that excellent documentation ability is necessary for an eligible worker. Ann described when she was a new worker she felt the paper work was "impossible":

"The case load is not manageable in a nine to five way, not if you want to do a good job with it, especially where you are in long term and you have to do a lot of the court documentation, the plans of care, it's just not possible."

Since child welfare is full of emergency situations and every worker has a dozen caseloads at any time, getting used to being interrupted and having multi-task capacities are also necessary for child welfare social workers. Nancy believed multi-tasking skills help her cope with the busy work: "*I think also I am being really busy, I'm working a lot. Because I'm good at multitasking now, this helped me prepare for this*".

When facing these various challenges in their work, having the above essential skills is important for child welfare social workers when they are pursuing the qualifications to take on responsibility for children and families that need help. Social work education works as the basic qualification for every child welfare social work candidate and takes on the duty to educate social work students by giving them the necessary skills for practice. The next part will discuss how social work education prepares social work students for child welfare practice.

4.5 Preparation from Social Work Education

Getting a social work degree is the precondition for people who want to become a child welfare social worker. This is because social work education provides some basic knowledge and skills for child welfare. The participants in the research discussed a lot about whether social work education prepared them for their child welfare practice and all of them concluded that their social work education helped them to be prepared for

their job to some degree. These preparations were grouped under four sub-themes: social work foundation; necessary child welfare skills; self-care; placement.

4.5.1   Social Work Foundations

Child welfare is an especially stressful field in the social work profession and it requires the worker to have strong social work foundations to provide qualified services and face the daily challenges. Many participants in the study pointed out it was their social work education that helped them obtain the basic qualifications for child welfare work. The first one is their belief in their social work career. Gloria talked about how she gets inspiration for her child welfare career:

> *"I think certainly my education helped me realize when you work in child welfare, it has to be something that you develop a passion for. In terms of that I think first of all, that you do believe in what you are doing and that you do believe that it is, for the betterment of children and for families. For me, it's always been important, that I feel what I am doing is important and that I believe in what I do."*

In addition to the passion for and belief in what they are doing, child welfare social workers' worldview and ideology are also large parts of the foundation for their work. For many of the participants, the anti-oppressive theory and the critical perspective that they learnt from school are beneficial for them in their daily work. Betty believed the anti-oppressive theory "*was the biggest part of the school that helps prepare for child welfare*", she said:

"The theory of social work is pretty good of getting that understanding of oppression, and all that it is good to have in the back of your mind when you are dealing with clients. A lot of your clients are you know from, those parts of society of that aren't treated well most often, so I feel like that is the most helpful thing to help prepare because you, you have that kind of drilled into your brain when you are interacting with people. You can kind of look at things a little bit more clearly, *you know, kind of understanding where some of their behavior attitudes* and some *stuff come from, given their history."*

Danna said the anti-oppressive theory that she learnt from her social work education taught her how to be aware of her own biases and gave her the foundation of what she is doing now:

"The anti-oppressive class was very useful, I guess because that would talk about the isms, like being aware of your own biases and foundations in social work again would talk about theories, and a lot of the discussions in class that just come up, people's life experiences. They are all things that through discussion allow you to learn and kinda perhaps take some of things that you learn forward in your practice, right? "

Other aspects of social work education that the participants mentioned that help them in their work are the theories that they learnt. Frank thought theories are important because theories are based on research and clinical experience and can be used for many practice situations in his work:

"You know I wouldn't be the worker I am today, unless I really embraced what I was learning there, because I enjoyed the theory, but I also knew that theory was there for a reason. It just doesn't come out of thin air, it was based upon research and clinical practice and things like that, that would be my main thing is to be open to everything.

Jane said*:" the critical theory is great and it would be really great to focus on that in the first year".* She thought that the theory helped her to be less judgmental and more aware

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of her own bias when she sees the clients. Beside theory, Mandy thinks that her research ability that she learnt from social work education also helped her a lot:

> "*For me, the importance of research in practical in the social work program is what I learn. Because without that you can't develop best practices, you know like without research to back up whether a program is working or whether interventions are working.* "

4.5.2 Necessary Child Welfare Skills

Social work education provides students the ideology and academic abilities that are foundations that child welfare workers can use to guide their daily practice. Meanwhile, social work schools teach skills that are essential for child welfare social workers to better do their job.

How to communicate and interact with clients is very important for child welfare workers and students in social work education get a lot of development of these skills. Carol thought her BSW very useful because: *"we learned how to like talk to people and engaged listening, and just motivational interviewing. I guess just on being able to work with people"*. Ivy also addressed how her social work courses helped her regarding interacting with clients*:*

> "*A lot of the courses that I took helped to focus on better communication practice and different clients and different ethnic backgrounds so that made it better for when you interact with clients, to show more empathy and diversity I guess, how you talk to them and approach subjects I guess.*"

Social work education contains courses that teach students clinical content such as counseling and therapy skills. The participants suggested these courses benefit and prepare the participants for their child welfare work. Danna said that what she learnt from counseling class taught her how to change strategy for different clients:

> " I took a course called counseling and social work that gave you a lot of skills in dealing with clients from different theories so like strengths perspective, those kind of things so you could choose kind of what type of practice you want. I guess work with your clients on, and sometimes that is goanna, the theory that you use is going to vary depending on the client, right."

Emily spoke about how she took a counseling class that students could practice counseling skills for different scenarios in and get taped. A counselor in the community reviewed their tapes and gave every student feedback. She added: *"So you practice all of those different skills, throughout, so that was actually one of my favorite courses"*.

Gloria took a therapy course in her BSW program and she thought the therapy skill she got from there helped her a lot when she dealt with families in her work. She said:

> I think the courses that have been most beneficial for me are actually the courses on therapy and counseling and different theories of counseling, and a lot of them I've, I've been able to implement them into my work in child welfare. Just being able to use them in a way that you are able to help families, even just different things like in terms of cognitive therapy and person-centered focus, solution focused therapy. All of those I found have been able, I have been able to implement them in child welfare practice, a lot of times, in this job."

Social work education is developing with the growing diversity of this society and provides social work students with a good chance to learn their initial cultural and racial

competences. Frank stated that:*" I was really interested in cross cultural issues, and native issues especially, and things like that and that program really allowed me to look at that."* He said his exposure in cross-cultural practice in school gave him credence for his child welfare work. Ivy shared that the courses she had taken helped her better interact with clients from a different ethnic background:

> *"A lot of the courses that I took helped me to focus on better communication practice and different clients and different ethnic backgrounds so that made it better for when you interact with clients, to show more empathy and diversity, I guess, how you talk to them and approach subjects."*

Child welfare social work requests a lot of documentation, which leads to a very heavy workload. Participants in this research recalled that what they did in their school helped them a lot to develop the skills to cope with large amounts of paper work. For example Nancy believed the classes and assignments that she got from her social work education prepared her a lot for her work: "*I think writing a lot of papers and stuff like that really helped prepared me for this because you do a lot of case reporting and stuff".* She said because she has taken a lot of classes and did a lot of work in her BSW program, those made her good at multitasking and prepared her for the child welfare work.

4.5.3   Self-care

Facing heavy workloads and the risk of burn out, another very important aspect that social work education helped student prepare for child welfare is self-care. Self-care knowledge helps social work students to understand what they can expect from their

choice of the child welfare profession and the strategy they could use to keep their own

fitness. Comments regarding this point are as follows:

> *They talked a lot about self-care that's definitely helpful, to at least know that that's important. I mean I don't always practice, talking about burn out too, that was one thing that they covered a lot in my education, and I think this job in particular the burn out rate is pretty high just because how difficult the work is."*-Nancy

> *"They did talk a lot about self care, so I felt like I knew how to kinda take care of myself through. You know, through jumping into child welfare, and the challenges that it brings, I would say that certainly helped."*-Olivia

> *"I think one of the most important things I got from my education is how you know practice good self care and being able to recognize when you are struggling and you are experiencing stress and how to cope with that, and how you are dealing with that on an everyday basis."*-Gloria

4.5.4   Child Welfare Course and Child Welfare Placement

For the participants in this research, the most beneficial parts of social work education for

child welfare are the child welfare courses and placement. Participants in the research

said child welfare courses directly helped them to prepare for child welfare work. Betty

described how child welfare courses helped her:

> *"Actually the child welfare class that I took was super helpful because that gave us all of the actually like, learning about the children and family services act, and all that practical stuff that you follow and some of the policies and stuff, or philosophy of child welfare work or stuff, that was very helpful, that class prepared me the most out of any other, for actually child welfare practice, for sure."*

Danna said the child welfare course she took helped her to be aware of child welfare before she did it. She stated:

> *"I took the child welfare course so it really gave me some perspective in terms of , kind of the common themes that you see and kind of what some of the policies are, kind of the programs that they have through child welfare, so that I was able to be aware of that before going into it."*

Mandy expressed that it was the child welfare course she took and the professor of the class who is an excellent researcher with first hand child welfare experience that set her path to a child welfare career.

Placement education plays an incredibly important role in social work education because it can bridge students with field skills and knowledge of social work and help student prepare for social work practice reality. The value of field placements is huge for students, and it was very helpful for the participants in this study. The following comments are from the participants in this research and address how their child welfare placement helped them prepare for their child welfare practice:

> *"The practicum was certainly the best part of the preparation and then the actual shadowing of child protection workers and doing some of the case work myself, prior to actually starting working was invaluable."*-Mandy

> *"My placement, I did with the long term team, I mean that really set the foundation for me because I was immersed in child protection for the whole six months and immersed with the intake team too, so that gave me the grounding."*-Kelly

"I mean the placements is really important and I think you do gain a lot of skills in that, in getting me comfortable working with clients."-Helen

"I would say definitely the field placements helped. And you know those hands on courses where we actually get to practice those skills, the social work skills, they would have helped prepare me for child welfare practice."-Emily

Social work education offers various courses to help students develop their foundation skills and knowledge for child welfare practice. Child welfare workers benefit from their education experience. However, faced with the challenges in child welfare work, the participants in this research pointed out many gaps between social work education and child welfare education.

4.6 Gaps between Social Work Education and Child Welfare Practice

For most of the participants in this research, they believed that their social work education did not get them adequate preparation for their child welfare job because there were some gaps between their education and the child welfare practice. These gaps were grouped under three sub-themes: negative attitudes towards child welfare, few practical skills and too much theory, no student input.

4.6.1   Negative Attitude towards Child Welfare

Some participants in this research expressed that they felt their social work education programs presented negative attitudes towards child welfare and thus they have limited or no choice to get education on child welfare. Jane thought her social work education

program excluded child welfare: *"In fact, I kind of left there that the program was negative towards child protection".* And Coral also stated there were biases toward child welfare: *"So I think it's probably just having a bias in child welfare, I think child welfare could be used as an example for a lot of your educational experience."* She also stated that her program didn't have a professor who had child welfare experience:

> *"I would like to have more, I guess, experienced professors and tell me about their experiences, instead of just the random group work and the theories that we use to solve problems, and like that stuff is bullshit, it's useless, it doesn't pertain to what we do on a daily basis."*

The participants in this research pointed out that child welfare is a very important service in this society; therefore, child welfare should be valued in the social work profession and receive attention in social work education. On the other hand, it is a fact that child welfare provides many positions for social work graduates and many students also have interest in working in child welfare to get their initial social work professional experience. Many graduates choose child welfare as their careers. Social work school at least should not exclude child welfare and make sure students who have an interest in child welfare can get basic preparation.

4.6.2   Few Practical Skills and Too Much Theory

Some participants in this research had a child welfare course in their social work school, but many of them said their program had focused too much on theory and not enough on practice skills. Ann expressed the only thing that helped her is the child welfare

placement and the rest of her education did not help her: "*It doesn't have a lot of practical. They are very theoretical based, so the actually academic weren't very helpful, it was the hands on work that was helpful*".

The comments regarding this point are as follows:

> "*We sit in a classroom all day and get lectured, but you are not doing anything you are just sitting there, like the only way to do learn about that stuff in reality is to actually get out there and be a part of the community.*"-Carol

> "*It's not a lot of focus on clinical skills in reality, I think it would have been more helpful to have some more skill based classes.*"-Helen

> "*I have a critical perspective and I didn't need to go over again and again and again, so I wanted more practical, something more practice.*"-Jane

Besides too much theory, participants also pointed out too much self-care focus bothered them. Mandy said social work education spent too much time on self-care:

> "*Program have shifted so far towards self care for students and for workers that it's really difficult because majority time spent in class has been spent discussing principles of self care and how difficult workers find to do certain things.*"

She added: "*That ought to be spent on learning what you need to be helping your own clients and those skills that you are going to need to help your actual clients*". Carol also said she got fed up by self care: "*I am sick of hearing about self care, like yeah, I think you need to be able to take care of yourself anyways, in this job, I don't think we need to talk about it all the time*".

Some participants in this research thought they did not get enough placements in their education and lacked adequate field learning experience. Olivia thought two placements would be more helpful:

> *"I would suggest keeping the two placements…because I think it's helpful for students to get two different experiences because there are so many things you can do with social work, you know how do you really know here you fit if you are only given one opportunity to really get into the workforce and see what's going on, so I was grateful for two."*

Nancy believed her two placements experiences helped her more than just one placement: "*I really enjoyed doing the two placements because it gives the opportunity to see two different areas of work*".

Practical skills and knowledge are what the social work graduates most long for when they encounter challenges in their child welfare practice. Many participants in this research pointed out that their social work education lacked the balance between theory and practice and made them feel far away from being prepared well for challenges in their job.

4.6.3   No Student Input

The last major gap that was reflected by the participants in this research is that they didn't get involved in the development of their social work education programs. Students' feedback and input are valuable for improvement of education programs by understanding students' needs and how their programs fulfill their needs. Students' involvement in the development of their education program could set a bridge between

student and faculty and provide practical advice for the education program. Most of the participants in this research concluded that they felt that they did not really get involved in the development of their social work education program.

Some of the participants said the way they participated was to complete the feedback form and they had no further way to get involved. For example, Linda responded:

> *"No, I haven't had a chance to be involved. It would be interesting to be involved in that, if there is any sort of. I mean I usually give feedback after the programs. So I mean I filled out the form, I mean if there is any further feedback, or types of feedback to give them that would be interesting."*

Jane said there was the way to get involved but she did not have the time to be a part:

> *"Not really, I mean there was a student group, which I think did, you know sort of lobby for changes in some of the classes, I wasn't involved in that I just didn't have the time, I wasn't, but I think it does exist."*

The following are comments from other participants regarding this point:

> *"No, no I never had the opportunity to be involved."*-Gloria

> *"There was like a lot of circles and groups and talking about classroom expectations and what we wanted to get out of how we did things, but in terms of the actual education like the content, I don't remember having that there."*-Helen

> *"We were busy doing our papers, and doing our group projects so there wasn't a lot of time, to get really involved in the development in the social work program."*-Carol

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The participants in this research reflected that the ways they could get involved in the development of their social work education were very limited and the forms were actually not effective. As a professional education program at universities, social work programs are usually very busy and challenging for many students. If the schools do not create effective and efficient ways to get students involved and listen to students' needs, the social work education programs can easily make students frustrated or even disappointed because their education programs cannot fulfill their practical needs.

Participants in this research identified gaps between social work education and child welfare practice from their experience. Based on their knowledge from child welfare practice, they had proposed advice for social work education program to bridge the gaps.

4.7 Recommendations for Social Work Education

Participants in this research proposed many recommendations for child welfare education programs based on their experience of their social work education and child welfare practice. These recommendations were grouped under five sub-themes: balance between theory and practical content; more placements; more cultural competence; embrace child welfare; student involvement.

4.7.1   Balance between Theory and Practical Content

"I found my program really quite balanced between you know being in class and which is extremely important which is as important as being out in the field. So I mean I found my program really quite balanced in that respect". This statement was why Kelly thought her social work education was a "perfect program" for her. Many participants in this research reflected that their program paid too much attention to theory and ignored the basic practical social work skills. They recommended that the balance between theory and practical content are necessary. Ann hoped that social work education programs could pay more attention to skills required by social work practice:

> *"I think there needs to be a more practical component in it. I think it needs to apply more to the actual jobs that are out there, to give people more specific training and skills, like to develop the skills that you need to actually do these jobs. The program, especially the one that I was in, it was so theoretical, it really had no practical application for working in the real world."*

Danna said*: "I would say to that, more emphasis on the skills needed in working with clients. So through work experience and again emphasis on the skill that you need in working with clients".* Betty also made a similar point about how she wished social work education would change:

> *"It would be more like practical experience, so I think that you know spending some time on theory and stuff like that is helpful, but not the whole time, like, spend some other time, doing actual practical application, like practicing interviewing or seeing interviews or actually going into different areas of social work programs. "*

Some other advice for social work education was do not put so much time on self-care. Mandy believed self-care is important but is not the center of the program. She thought it

is: "*losing a lot of class time that could to be spent on learning what you need to be helping your own clients and those skills that you are going to need to help your actual clients*".

The participants in this research recognized the importance of the theory foundation in their education and how the theory helped them in their social work practice. However, many participants in this research believed if their social work education programs could provide more practical skills based on realistic practice needs they could get more preparation for their child welfare practice. If education programs used most of the class time to repeat certain content again and again but ignore practical skills, students will not get prepared well for practice and be dissatisfied with their education programs.

4.7.2   More Placements

Field placement in social work education is a very rewarding experience for social work students because placement connects students with practice skills that can prepare them for their social work career. The participants in this research reported that field placement was the most helpful part for them to prepare for their child welfare job and they wished they could have more placements opportunity in their education. Some participants recommended that social work school should provide more placements for students so that students can experience different fields of social work to help them widen their professional eyes and make the right career decisions. More placements could also

provide more practical abilities to students that can be useful in real work. Recommendations for more placements are as follows:

"So getting a chance to do placements in different areas like, you know in, working with different communities, and stuff like that. I think would be, I would like to see that change. And being able to choose where you would like to go to, that would be good having some choice in that too as well."-Betty

"The work placement is a huge thing that I see, that would be beneficial in combining with two, so what you've learned and how you are going to use that."-Danna

"I would also suggest keeping the two placements. I think it's helpful for students to get two different experiences because there are so many things you can do with social work."- Olivia

4.7.3 More Cultural Competence

Some participants' recommendations were about cultural competence that they believe is very important in their child welfare practice. Nancy believed social work education programs should focus on cross-culture perspectives because child welfare practice needs to deal with clients from various cultural backgrounds. She said: "*I think that would be helpful, like I said before, the cultural piece it would be more important to focus on that, those would be definitely.*" Olivia thought social work students should come from various backgrounds, because it could help students learn cultural competences from each other. Increasing the presence of cultural variety in social work, students could increase cultural variety within the social work profession so that social work services can increase cultural and racial competences. Olivia recommended social work education programs could work on recruitment to make sure the social work students be more diverse.

4.7.4 Embrace Child Welfare

As mentioned above, some participants in this research pointed out that some social work education programs are negative toward child welfare and accordingly child welfare content is limited or even excluded in social work programs. The participants in this research called for social work education to embrace child welfare because child welfare is a very important service to help children and families. Carol stated that:

> *"A lot of social workers, they never want to do child welfare. I don't think everybody should do it, because there are a lot of situations that will traumatize you and really change your life, but I think it's important. I really do think it's important work, I think they could probably prepare you better for this type of work in school, because a lot of people go, their first jobs are in child welfare."*

Gloria said why she believed child welfare is very important and schools should pay attention to it: "*you know we are working for children and we are working to protect children and for their betterment and because they have the right to live free from abuse and neglect*".

4.7.5 Student Involvement

Students' needs and feedback are invaluable for the development of social work education since the big part of the social work education's goal is preparing students for their future social work practice. The participants in this research reflected they didn't have the chances to get involved in the development of their education program and they expressed that they wished they could have been involved:

"I have never been asked any questions about my thoughts on the programs or where it should go. I would want to be involved. I would if they asked."-Ann

Some participants said they got chances to do feedback surveys but they didn't get further discussion about their feedback. For example Kelly stated: "*obviously we have the opportunity to provide feedback, whether or not that is taken into consideration, I wasn't there long enough to be able to see if there was any changes.*" Schools usually do feedback surveys for students or they develop student groups to get students' ideas about their program, however there aren't further dialogues between students and schools. This is the reason why students didn't feel they were involved in the development of their education program and didn't have their voice and needs heard. If social work schools pay more attention to students' needs and revise their programs by what are students' real needs, their education program could be more practical from the students' perspective.

This chapter presented the findings from the research interviews of the participants. The findings provided many thoughts of how social work education prepares students for child welfare practice. The next chapter will present a more in-depth analysis of the findings and the implications of these findings for social work education.

CHAPTER 5   DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter provides the analysis of the study findings by explaining the relationships among the themes and sub-themes identified. The analysis will discuss implications of social work graduates' experience of their education and child welfare practice for social work education.

The findings of this research support the research literature review that child welfare social workers face lots of challenges (Gilroy, 2000; Bellefeuille & Schmidt, 2006; Bellefeuille & Schmidt, 2006;Samantrai, 1992) and provides some new findings. The research results got both positive and negative feedback from students concerning how their social work education prepared them for child welfare work.

The findings that demonstrate how social work graduates think their education prepared them for child welfare practice are presented by the following themes:

Ubiquitous challenges in child welfare

Child welfare workers need significant supports

Social work education is the foundation for child welfare

More practical child welfare information in social work education is needed

5.1 Ubiquitous Challenges in Child Welfare

Child welfare services are intended to protect children from abuse or/and neglect while making every effort to keep the family intact. Abuse or neglect cases are some of the

most difficult situations that the social work profession can face and are the most traumatizing for workers. Child welfare is coping with overwhelming soaring caseloads with inadequate resources, and the complex needs of clients cause child welfare workers' emotional stress to be raised (Bellefeuille, Schmidt, 2006; Samantrai, 1992). Participants in this research all reflected that they had been emotionally affected by some child protection cases that they were involved in. This emotional affection is more prominent for new workers because new staffs are lacking experience. In addition to abuse and neglect cases, the resistance from clients is the most stressful area among various social work fields because child welfare services are mostly not voluntarily requested by clients but are an intervention into family based on child protection legislation, obligation and authority. In many cases, clients would resist investigation or direction from the child welfare agency. All of the research participants in this research have experienced client's resistance and some extreme examples are: clients don't answer the phone, clients don't open the door, clients miss their appointments, clients' acute reactions and sometimes threats. According to the participants in this research, all the resistances from clients consume child welfare workers' energy and emotion.

Participants in this study identified child welfare involvements as the most complex work in the social work profession. Child welfare is designed to protect children from risk of abuse and neglect while working with the family that is often in the worst of situations. Working with a family in difficult situations is much more complex than just being involved with an individual client. The participants in this research expressed that they had to navigate in complex situations with different family members, related individuals

and institutions. What makes participants in this research more frustrated is that child welfare is not only work with neglect and abuse but also work with family or individual issues that are rooted in societal problems. For example: violence, mental health issues, addiction, youth issue and criminal violations. Some participants in this research pointed out they understand child welfare issues are part of the societally structural problems. The understanding of the fact that the community is a system and its impact on family functioning (Freeman, 1996) helped child welfare workers use a critical perspective to view their daily work. Some participants expressed the feeling of being unable to help clients and were frustrated by the structural problems. The feelings of difficulty in coping with child welfare cases or being unable to help clients are prevalent among participants.

In Nova Scotia, child welfare is under the Children and Family Service Act and conducted by the Department of Community Service. The Government institution grants social workers the necessary resources and authority to intervene in the family and to protect children from the risk of abuse and neglect. Meanwhile institutional workplaces can often bring challenges for many workers. The government organizational barriers for child welfare workers can be summarized as bureaucracy, inadequate resources, and insufficient time to fulfill the policy requirements for the caseloads assigned to them (Barbee et al. 2009). Many participants in this research pointed out that their personal values and opinions are sometimes in conflict with child welfare agency codes and directions. Bureaucracy and political implications are inevitable since child welfare is government service and may contradict with anti-oppressive and critical perspective education. Child welfare services are often lacking resources to help the clients. Inadequate resources are one of the biggest challenges that were identified by the

participants in this research. This fact not only makes it harder for the workers to do their job, but also caused intense frustration because workers can't adequately help their clients. Understaffing situations caused the participants in this research to be overwhelmed by caseloads and paperwork, and they described their work as being crisis-oriented and driven by the crisis and deadlines. Super busy work caused child welfare social workers to have no time or energy to make sure what they did was to really solve their client's problem and to seek the best interests of the children.

Similar themes are in the literature (LaRose 2009; Gilroy 2000). "Heavy caseloads and high case acuity" (LaRose, 2009, p.237) are common in the child welfare workplaces. Furthermore, LaRose asserts that social workers are expected to work overtime to meet the caseload demands. Child welfare social workers do not experience these heavy workloads and crisis oriented work situations as positive outcomes and this could bring them the feelings of being devalued, deskilled and disrespected. One suggestion for child welfare workforces is that they should articulate workload language with employer and take actions, such as negotiation and strikes to protect their own rights and guarantee the service's quality for clients (La Rose, 2009).

Difficult and complex situations, structural issues in society, family and children issues, traumatizing experiences, institutional workplaces, lacking resources, the feeling of being unable to help clients and the very heavy workloads, all of these make child welfare to be a very difficult and challenging job no matter how experienced or how qualified the worker is.

From the findings of this research, it is safe to conclude that child welfare is a work that has ubiquitous challenges for every worker and needs workers who are highly qualified and well prepared.

5.2   Child Welfare Workers Need Significant Supports

During the research interviews, the researcher of this study noticed that child welfare social workers' main challenges in their work may be affected by the participants' personal background, especially the length of their child welfare experience. There are some findings about how the child welfare social workers' background links them to the challenges they identified.

Table 4 below was created to explore the relationship between the participants' work experience and the challenges they face in their work.

Table 4   Participants' Child Welfare Work Experience and Their Challenges in Child Welfare Practice

Name	Years of Child welfare experience	Challenges
Nancy	1	Difficult Clients, Not abuse power, Heavy work load, Self-care

Carol	1.6	Difficult situations and clients, Self-care
Betty	2	How to maintain confidentiality, Inconsistency within child welfare
Jane	2	Heavy workload, Difficult clients and situations, Feelings of being unable to help clients
Kelly	4	Heavy workload, Lack of resource, Feelings of being unable to help clients
Olivia	4	Government institution: low efficiency and low flexibility, Heavy workload, Self-care
Ivy	5	Heavy work load, Lack of resource, Feeling of being unable to help clients, Self-care
Emily	5	Difficult situations, Heavy workload, Lack of resource, Self-care, Office politics
Linda	6	Heavy work load, Difficult situations, Self-care
Ann	6	Heavy work load, Lack of resource, Self-care
Mandy	8	Low flexibility, Heavy workload, Self-care, Lack positive feedback from client
Helen	9	Difficult situations and clients, Heavy workload, Conflict between personal value and institutional code
Frank	10.5	Conflict between personal value and institutional code, Self-care
Gloria	10	Self-care, Difficult situations and clients

Danna	17	Cultural and racial competence, Conflict between personal value and institutional code, Heavy workload, Feeling of being unable to help clients, Self-care

The first finding is that all workers need supports. There are common challenges for most of the participants of this study, for example heavy workloads, difficult and complex situations, lack of resources, feeling of being unable to help clients and self-care challenges caused by client's trauma. All of those are the results of the nature of the child welfare job and are common for workers. In this research, not any one of the participants has been without serious challenges in their child welfare work and this proves that child welfare social workers do need supports to help them cope with tremendous challenges in their work.

The second finding is the three participants who have the longest child welfare social work experience in this research identified that they had challenges regarding the conflict between personal values and institutional codes. This could lead to a conclusion that workers who have had longer work experience did more reflecting on the child welfare system. Contrarily new workers are mainly struggling with immediate challenges such as workload and stress. This finding could suggest that the child welfare system has room for further reflection and modifying based on front-line workers' feedback. One suggestion is transforming the bureaucratic model to a more professional model that focuses on clinical aspects of clients and cases (Barbee et al., 2009). For new workers,

supports are needed for skills that could address their immediate challenges in their child welfare practice.

The third finding is that worker's racial identity could affect their view of their work. Thirteen research participants are Caucasian and two participants are African -Caucasian biracial. It was found that the two African -Caucasian biracial participants had many more concerns about racial and cultural competences in this research. Danna named racial and cultural competences as the major challenges in her work. Frank did not identify cultural and racial competence as a challenge in his work, but he said he paid lots of attention to cross cultural, inclusive and diversity issues in his social work study and child welfare practice. This finding indicates that a worker's identity could be related to a worker's challenges and needs in their work. It would be safe to conclude that workers who belong to minority groups often have responsibilities to advocate for their community, and unique supports are needed (Cross, Angelique, Gogliotti, & Pung, 2013). Social work education could help students prepare their unique needs for their future child welfare job by helping students that belong to minority groups identify their challenges and address their unique needs during the education stage.

Findings from this research identify that child welfare workers need tremendous support no matter who they are and how long they have been working as child welfare workers, because of the ubiquitous challenges in their work. Meanwhile child welfare needs reflection on the system and social work education should concern itself with the specialized needs of students who are in minority groups. A social work degree is the

precondition for a child welfare job and this research finds that social work education plays a vital role in helping the social work students to prepare for the challenges they will face in child welfare practice.

5.3 Social Work Education is The Foundation for Child Welfare

A bachelor of social work degree is the basic requirement for any child welfare social worker candidate in Nova Scotia at present. This is different in other Canadian provinces, because there are no national standards. From the findings of this research, it can be concluded that social work education provides the foundational qualification for a person who wants to be a child welfare social worker.

Child welfare provides services that prevent children from risk that could devastate their well-being, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect so that child welfare is a very important job that needs qualified workers to take the responsibility. The participants in this research show that their social work education helped prepare and sustain them for the challenges in their work in two important aspects.

The first one is social work education helped the participants developed the ideology for their child welfare work. Child welfare work is very busy, difficult, traumatizing and can even be negatively perceived by clients and other professions. These workers need to believe in what they are doing and have an appropriate attitude toward what they are facing in their job. Findings from the participants in this study show that their education

helped them develop faith in the child welfare service and gave them the necessary inspiration needed to cope with the challenges. Social work education exposes students to an environment that focuses on the most vulnerable groups and inequality in this society to cultivate students' sympathy and the sense of obligation for people who need help. Participants in this research also presented that it was what they learnt in social work education that helped them cope with clients' resistance. When facing clients' resistance, some participants use anti-oppressive and critical perspectives that social work education had taught them to cope with difficult clients instead of blaming or judging clients. Anti-oppressive and critical perspectives helped workers understand a client's difficulties had reasons behind it so that they could avoid their own biases towards some difficult clients. Instead of anger and judgment, using the respectful and inclusive attitudes toward clients not only helped workers keep good self-care but also strengthened their faith in child welfare, and this helped the child welfare social workers retain their job.

The second aspect is that students can learn skills that can help them cope with challenges in their future work. The participants of this research named many skills that they learnt from their social work education that were very helpful to them. Child welfare is not focused on clinical work but clinical skills are beneficial for the child welfare work. For example: the communication, counseling and therapy skills that can help social workers navigate difficult situations and difficult clients. Child welfare is a government job and based on assessment and documentation, so it needs excellent documentation abilities. Formal academic training during the social work education program can help students develop the skills of documentation, multi-tasking and teamwork skills. Child

welfare social workers are at high risk of burn out because of the busy, difficult and traumatizing work conditions, thus they need to be highly capable in self-care in order to stay fit and productive. The self-care knowledge they got from social work education make sure that the child welfare social worker gets some degree of preparation for their challenging work.

These research findings highlight the important role of social work education in the practice of child welfare and once again assert that qualified child welfare personnel are the foundation of the child welfare service and that only quality social work education can guarantee a qualified worker (Steib & Blome, 2004). Social work education is the essential foundation for the child welfare job and it helps students to prepare for the challenges in their future child welfare work. Participants in this study all identified that they were helped by their education. However, most of them expressed that they wish that their social work education had been more practical for challenges in real practice.

5.4 More Practical Child Welfare Information in Social Work Education Is Needed

Most participants in this research gave the recommendations that social work education could be more practical to help students face the challenges in reality. Participants recognized social work education is the foundation for child welfare work but they believed there is room for social work education to provide more clinical skills. Too much and repeated theory and too much emphasis on self-care were identified by the participants as the aspects that they believed needed to be changed. What the participants

long for is more realistic pieces, for example that more professors had field experience, more field placements, more clinical skills classes and more community involvement.

All of the above advice indicates that social work schools should consider the balance between theory and clinical skills, and the balance between academic content and practice skills. The foundational contradictions between social work education and child welfare practice are the critical research perspectives of social work academics and the reality of fulfilling clients' needs with limited resources in actual practice (Danna, 2013). Social work practice communities have the practice experience that can work as a good complement for social work schools that have limitations in developing education programs based on realistic practice. Therefore developing a cooperative relationship with the child welfare practice community is a way to remain open and sensitive to hearing the others' specific concerns (Richards et al, 2000).

5.5 Implications for Social Work Education

The participants in this research indicated that their involvements in the development of their social work education program were very limited. There were ways to send feedback to schools such as survey and student groups. However most of them lead to no further discussion. Most of the participants in this research concluded that they have no involvement in the development of their social work program and believed that this is part of the reason why social work education programs failed to fulfill students' needs and prepare them for child welfare practice.

Social work is mainly working to educate students to become qualified candidates for a wide range of social work practice. If social work schools could take more advice from their students, they could better fulfill the students' realistic needs. Students who are currently doing their social work education program have first hand experience and lively feelings for their program and this is valuable for teaching. It would be beneficial if social work schools have real indepth discussions with their students instead of surface forms of gathering feedback. It also could be beneficial for social work schools to gather feedback from graduates since social work alumni have practice experience that could be the best references to help revise their social work education programs.

What the participants in this research wished was that schools could put students' needs as paramount and hear their voices to start dialogues and take action. Participants also expressed their willingness to help social work schools get necessary community resources to support social work education. The cooperation between social work education and child welfare practice that is based on the involvements of both current students or graduates would be beneficial for both social work educators and employers to overcome the dilemma of lacking resources. It would also be beneficial to provide better social work education and child welfare service.

This chapter analyzed the findings of the study and explored the implications for social work education. The next chapter will summarize the research topics and close this thesis.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

This final chapter presents the conclusion of the thesis by binding together the research literature, the study findings, and the analysis of those findings. It will review the study's objectives, methodology, strengths and limitations and a discussion of areas for further exploration will end this chapter.

6.1 Summary

Lacking resources, understaffing and stressful work conditions are the major challenges for front line child welfare social workers and contribute to persistent and high rates of burn out and staff turnover (Gilroy, 2000; Bellefeuille & Schmidt, 2006; Barbee, Antle, Sullivan, Huebner, Fox, & Hall, 2009). Research around this topic presents the challenges from the perspective of the front line child welfare social worker and social work students and reviews how social work schools use community resources and cooperate with child welfare practice communities to address these problems. Studies proved that the cooperation between social work schools and child welfare practice communities are an effective way that social work schools could help social work students prepare for their future work (Steib & Blome, 2003; Young ,1994; Wilson & Smith, 2011; Dana, 2013; Nguyen, 2013; Rheaume, Collins& Amodeo, 2011). This leads to the more specific questions about how social work schools should work to support graduates to prepare them to become new child welfare workers. Before answering this question, it is necessary to understand the challenges and needs of social worker graduates who work in child welfare practice.

The objectives of this research were designed to understand how social work education prepares social work graduates for child welfare practice and to better understand the implications of the development of social work education. This research is designed to explore what congruency and gaps exist between social work education and child welfare practice based on the voice of social work graduates who work in child welfare.

This thesis used a qualitative research design with individual interviews to study the subject matter and collect data to grasp participants' various understandings and experience in social work education and in child welfare practice. Thematic analysis was used as the method to analyze the data.

How social work education prepares students for the skills and qualifications that are required by child welfare job should be based on the challenges and needs of child welfare practice. The themes and sub-themes identified in this research to gather social work graduates' opinions about how their education helped them for their social work job include: challenges in child welfare practice; necessary skills for child welfare practice; preparations from social work education; gaps between social work education and child welfare practice; and recommendations for social work education.

Child welfare social workers face many challenges in their work and understanding these challenges is the first step to exploring the needs of child welfare social workers and the corresponding recommendations for social work education. Difficult and complex situations, institutional government workplace and lack of resources make child welfare

work crisis-oriented and full of challenges. Clinical skills, a critical perspective and anti-oppressive practice, self-care and administration skills are all needed for workers to cope with the challenges. Social work education does help students prepare for child welfare practice by working as the foundational base and by teaching students the necessary child welfare skills, self-care knowledge and provides placement learning experience. However gaps exist between social work education and child welfare practice such as the negativity towards child welfare, few practical skills and little student input into education program. The participants in this research recommended that social work education could help them prepare better by doing a balance between theory and practical content, provide more placements, focus more on culture competence and include student involvement.

The findings from the participants of this research indicated that challenges are ubiquitous for child welfare workers no matter what the differences of individual workers are. It leads to the conclusion that child welfare workers need many supports. Social work education as the foundational qualification for the child welfare worker helps workers a lot but more practical pieces in social work education are needed to provide social work students with better preparation. Social work schools could prepare their students better for child welfare work by including students' needs and hearing their voice in the development of their program. Of particular concern is the need to help social work students learn how to navigate the system in a way that challenges the push to neoliberal positioning, while simultaneously addressing the systemic issues that underpin many of the child welfare concerns that come to their attention.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations

In addition to the strengths and limitations related to its methodology that were noted in Chapter Three, there are other more general strengths and limitations of this study. Strengths include the fact that the study subjects are social work graduates who work as child welfare workers, and who reflect on how their education prepared them for child welfare practice. How education prepared students for their future job is also about how employers view the new workers' qualifications, but the views from social work agencies are missed in this research. Child welfare practice is just a part of the social work profession, thus the findings and recommendations about social work education from this research do not necessarily represent the perspectives of other fields of social work.

This research used interviews as a way to obtain data for child welfare workers' personal experiences, and the findings are based on listening to stories from front line workers. The conclusions have credibility and could make a significant contribution in making social work education and child welfare practice stronger.

6.3 Areas for Further Exploration

Several aspects of the gaps between social work education and child welfare practice are discussed in this study. Further exploration is needed to discuss how to bridge the gaps, especially the barriers that prevent social work schools from making helpful changes. This research suggests that social work schools should effectively include more of their

students in the development of the programs in order to fulfill student's education goals and needs based on realistic practice. How to include current students and graduates and how to keep the balance between opinions from students and academics' ideas and experts are all valuable topics for further research. Besides the challenges of frontline workers, further research about the challenges faced by social work schools also could be beneficial for social work education and practice. Another related research topic is how social work practice agencies view the child welfare challenges and the actions that child welfare agencies could take to improve the situation.

6.4 Final Reflections

Finishing this research inspires me to believe that learning social work could be an everyday practice. Every situation and every person that I could meet in social work practice would be valuable for me to gain greater insight of the knowledge that is new to me. This research experience has widened my vision and challenged my own assumptions about child welfare practice, and has reminded me that I still have a lot to learn. Hearing the stories of front line child welfare workers was a rewarding and reflective experience for my own social work journey. Completing this study helped educate me as a researcher to understand how difficult and how significant child welfare is.

The purpose of this research was to explore how social work education prepared students for child welfare practice from the experiences of frontline child welfare workers. The

findings of this research based on previous research also offered new knowledge in the development of social work education based on the reflections from child welfare workers. The study findings indicate how complex and challenging the child welfare job is and the high level requirement of supports that workers need. The analysis also finds that there is room for improvement in social work education to better help students prepare for the challenges based on students' realistic needs.

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RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WELCOMED

I am currently recruiting child welfare workers to participate in a study to learn about their social work education and preparation for child welfare practice.

Participants interested in sharing their experiences must meet the following criteria:

● BSW graduates within 10 years (2005-2015) will be recruited to guarantee participants have timely social work education experience.

● Current or past front line child welfare workers who graduate within 10 years (2005-2015) will be recruited to guarantee participants have timely child welfare work experience.

● can communicate in English

● are willing and able to give informed consent to participate in the study

● are prepared to speak in a 60-minute one-on-one interview about their social work education and child welfare practice.

Participants will receive a $10 Tim Horton's gift card for their participation. For more information or if you are interested in participating, please contact:

Andy Tang, MSW candidate & principal investigator
School of Social Work, Dalhousie University
Phone: #902-329-9185   **Email: Andy.Tang@dal.ca**

APPENDIX B Consent Form and Signature Page

Project Title: *Assessing preparation of social work students for child welfare practice within HRM and surrounding areas.*
 Researcher:
Zhe (Andy) Tang, MSW Candidate / Dalhousie University / Email: Andy.Tang@dal.ca / Phone:902-329-9185
Research Supervisor:
Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard, Professor/School of Social Work /Dalhousie University /Email: Wanda.Bernard@Dal.Ca / Phone: 902-494-1190

Introduction:
I invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by Zhe (Andy) Tang who is a student in the Masters of Social Work Program at Dalhousie University. Taking part in the research is up to you; it is entirely your choice. Even if you do take part, you may leave the study at any time for any reason. The information below tells you about what is involved in the research, what you will be asked to do and about any benefit, risk, inconvenience or discomfort that you might experience.
Please ask as many questions as you like. If you have any questions later, please contact the researcher.
Purpose and outline of the research study:
This study looks at the issues related to preparing social work students and graduates for the practice of child welfare. Through the use of private, and personal interviews I am hoping to connect with a variety child welfare participants who have social work education. By asking questions pertaining to social work education and child welfare practice, my specific aim is to understand what congruencies and gaps exist between social work education and child welfare practice? I hope to identify potential ways that can bridge the gaps and better fulfill the needs for social work students preparing to work in child welfare.
Who can take part in the research study?
You may participate in the study if you are, or have ever been a student of social work or social workers working in child welfare practice within the past 10 years also having taken social work education within 10 years. No other criteria are required for the purposes of this study.
How many people are taking part in the study?
We hope to collect data from 10-15 people in this study.

What you will be asked to do:
You will be asked to complete an interview by the researcher. I expect that the entire duration of this exercise should take no longer than 1 hour. Following this, your involvement in the research study will be completed.

Possible benefits, risks and discomforts:
Your participation will be a valuable help for me in learning about ways to connect social work education to child welfare practice. Participating in this study may not directly benefit you personally, but I might learn things that will benefit social work education and the child welfare profession.

While I do not anticipate any risks in this study, I understand that it is possible for any interview question in a research study to result in uncomfortable emotions, memories or reactions. If any personal discomfort arises over the course of your participation in this study, you are encouraged to ask for a break for as long as you need, and if the discomfort is too much you are encouraged to discontinue your participation to prevent harm to yourself.

How your information will be protected:
Information that you provide to us will be kept private. In most cases, only the researchers will have access to this information. In some other cases, other authorized officials at the University such as the Research Ethics Board or the Scholarly Integrity Officer may have access as well. We will describe and share our findings in a final paper which will be made available to the inquiring public, but we will not be sharing any identifiable information at any point whatsoever. For the purposes of this research study, your personal information will keep confidential. There is no reason for your personal identity to be associated with the information you provide. Any identifying information will be keep confidential during and after the completion of this study. Records will be kept in a locked cabinet and destroyed after August 2016. Contact information and interview data will be kept separately.

If you decide to stop participating:
You are free to leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating at any point during the study, you can also decide whether you want any of the information that you have contributed up to that point to be removed or if you will allow us to use that information. You can also decide for up to three weeks if you want us to remove your data. After that time, it will become impossible for me to remove it because it will already be analyzed.

How to obtain results:
We will provide you with a short description of results when the study is finished. No individual results will be provided. You can obtain these results by contacting the lead researchers at the email addresses provided after the date of August 1, 2016.

Questions:

We are happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about your participation in this research study. Please contact Zhe Tang at 902-329-9185 / email Andy.Tang@dal.ca with questions, comments, or concerns about the research study.

If you any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact the Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email: ethics@dal.ca.

If you need to talk to someone about any discomfort or triggers that came up during the interview, Employee Assistance Program at your office and Dalhousie Social Work Clinic are recommended.

Signature Page

Project Title: *Assessing preparation of social work students for child welfare practice within HRM and surrounding areas.*

Researcher:

Zhe(Andy) Tang, MSW Candidate / Dalhousie University / Email: Andy.Tang@dal.ca

"I have read the explanation about this study, and am confirming my understanding by signing at the bottom of this form. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions (if any) have been answered. I agree to take part in this study. I realize that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to leave the study at any time."

For the purposes of this research study, I agree to the following:

To provide my email address and phone number to the researcher in order to make an appointment for the research interview.

YES___   NO___

Allow for the quoting of any words, phrases or full sentences that I include on my interview.

 YES ___   NO___

Name _____

Date _____

I sincerely thank you for choosing to participate in this research. Your information is highly valuable.

APPENDIX C Interview Guide

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I. Interview guidelines
- Are there any topics that may be sensitive or triggers to you that I should be aware of?
- How would you like to signal that you need a break or want to stop the interview?

II. Participant 's background
- What is your social work education background?
- Please describe your social work program for me, for example the philosophy and courses of your program.
- How long you have been working in child welfare?

III. Challenges for child welfare work and relationship to social work education.
- What are the challenges you face as a child welfare worker?
-What parts of your social work education program helped you to prepare for child welfare practice.
- What would you hope to get in your social work program if you were doing your program again.

IV. Congruency between social work education and child welfare work.
-Are there points of congruency between your social work education and child welfare work?

V. Ending the interview
- Do you ever have chance to be involved in the development of your social work education program?
- How would you like to see social work education change? Or do you have any advise for social work education programs?
- If you need to talk to someone about any discomfort or triggers that came up during this interview, is there someone you can talk to? Employee Assistance Program at your office and Dalhousie Social Work Clinic are recommended.

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Inspiring Minds

Assessing preparation of social work students for child welfare practice within HRM and surrounding areas
Demographics Survey

Please consider the following when completing this survey:
● This information will help us to describe the participants in the study.
● Please answer the questions honestly and to the best of your ability. Please skip a question and move on to the next one if you are not comfortable answering it.
● Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous.

Please mark an 'X' in the box next to the response that applies to you. If a written response is required, please write your answer in the line provided.

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your gender identity?
    □ Female
    □ Male
    □ Other: _____

3. What is your racial/ethnic background? _____

4. How many years social work experience do you have? _____

5. How many years child welfare experience do you have? _____

6. Please list any other social or cultural categories that you feel are significant to your own identity that have not been mentioned above.

_____

_____

DALHOUSIE
UNIVERSITY
Research Services

Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board
Letter of Approval   March 18, 2016
   Mr Zhe (Andy) Tang
Health Professions\Social Work

Dear Zhe (Andy),

REB #:   2016-3819 **Project Title:**   Assessing preparation of social
work students for child welfare practice within HRM and surrounding areas

Effective Date: March 18, 2016 **Expiry Date:**   March 18, 2017
   The Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board has reviewed your
application for research involving humans and found the proposed research to be in
accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on *Ethical Conduct for Research
Involving Humans.* This approval will be in effect for 12 months as indicated above. This
approval is subject to the conditions listed below which constitute your on-going
responsibilities with respect to the ethical conduct of this research.
   Sincerely,

Dr. Karen Beazley, Chair