

ASSESSING THE READINESS OF KENTUCKY YOUTH CARE WORKERS TO PROFESSIONALIZE

Carla G. Kirby

Department of Juvenile Justice, Kentucky

ABSTRACT: This research project focused on assessing whether or not Kentucky child and youth care workers were in a position to move toward professional status. Via focus groups and interviews conducted in 1996, the researcher accessed administrators and child and youth care workers in private residential facilities in Kentucky, national advocates of professionalization, and formal documents and records in order to gain an understanding of child and youth care within Kentucky and North America. Replication focus groups and interviews were conducted again in 2002 for validation and comparison. The scope of this study included an assessment of the readiness for and needs associated with professional affiliation of child and youth care workers in Kentucky, in their attitudes and perceptions about professional affiliation, and future direction of the field. This article is an excerpt from the study and focuses on the researcher's findings and recommendations to the field.

Key words: youthwork, professionalism, certification, professional development, child and youth care work

INTRODUCTION

It is common practice in planning endeavors, whether in business, government, social service, or academia, to require that some form of needs assessment be undertaken as an initial step in the development or modification of any program or service. The assessment for this project was conducted to determine the level of readiness of Kentucky's private child and youth care workers for professional affiliation.

The primary objective of the assessment and subsequent findings reported here was to determine the professional affiliation needs of private child and youth care workers in the state of Kentucky. The researcher broadly defined professional affiliation as the organization of child and youth care workers into a membership association or other organized group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Child and youth care can be distinguished from psychology, psychiatry, social work and nursing by (1) its focus on relationships with clients; (2) its practice in the milieu or social-ecological contexts in which the client is located; (3) its developmental perspective which accounts for total development and development as a life long process; and (4) its focus on social competence rather than illness or pathology (Stuart, 2001). While the inclusion of function and practice helps the field define itself, it

may confuse others on the multi-disciplinary team who have more clearly defined roles and find it difficult to operate within these extended boundaries. Research by Carol Stewart cites the early work of Barnes and Kelman (1974) suggests, "We can have nothing more than a matrix of professionals until we can clearly perceive a professional role that has the capability of integrating a child's total experience... This discipline must also be a specialist one, unique, however, in that it makes the general a specialty" (cited in Stuart, 2001).

Literature in the field also indicates that child and youth care workers are making considerable progress in their efforts to gain professional recognition. This has prompted a search for a greater understanding of the individuals who work in the field, their professional involvements, and the individual and agency characteristics that contribute to the professional's overall effectiveness (Krueger, 1986).

A review of the child and youth care literature also found surveys and studies that examined both demographic information (e.g. age, sex, work experience, professional membership, future plans, etc.) and work-related conditions during the past 30 years (e.g. type of agency, type of children and youth served, salary, fringe benefits, staff-child ratios, work shifts, career opportunities, tasks, etc.) (Krueger, 1981; Limer, 1977; Myer, 1980; Pecora, 1978). Although these are useful in developing a child and youth care worker profile, there are still several relevant areas for which little information is known, including the workers' academic areas of study, the types of in-service training provided by agencies, agency treatment approaches, and whether or not promotional systems for workers are available. These areas are of particular interest as more attention is being focused on pre-service and in-service training, the roles workers play in delivering treatment, and the opportunities and incentives workers have to remain in the field (Porter, 1980).

Throughout the years, the roles of child and youth care workers have evolved from caretaker, to caregiver and finally, to systemic interventionist. Child and youth care workers have become facilitators of youth and the systems that care for them, including their families. Their current role supports the belief that "young people are a part of a human social system and that changes for the young person will involve changes in those systems and/or others within those systems, as well as how the young person interacts with them" (Garfat, 2001).

The child and youth care worker's ancillary role as facilitator of the family "system" also has implications for professional enhancement related to the more formal education and training needed in order to be effective. Today's child and youth care worker needs skills in systems thinking and intervention, family development and dynamics, and self-awareness in the area of family work (Garfat, 2001). This shift has resulted in the need for a more skilled and educated workforce involved in the therapeutic process and its outcomes.

Additionally, practitioner roles now include the need for child and youth care workers to deliver services as supervisors, administrators,

trainers, educators, consultants, writers, researchers and advocates. As education and training requirements for child and youth care workers increase to enable them to competently perform their increased responsibilities, so too, must the practice become a viable and recognized profession within the human services arena (VanderVen, 1986).

However, recognition, and other rewards of professionalization, may bring greater levels of accountability that may in turn affect the practice of child and youth care and the delivery of services. The probability of having to exchange some of the informal relationship-building qualities of the work for more efficient and measurable practices is real. The awareness of such probable outcomes must be addressed at every stage of the field's movement as a profession and avoided to maintain the essence of what sets it apart from other professions.

METHODS

The researcher focused the assessment on private residential child and youth care workers because the objective was to develop a strong core group from the private sector who have the autonomy to address the various issues of professionalization without the hindrance of the broader public worker group whose work environments differ (e.g. working conditions, merit and non-merit pay structure, hiring standards, governmental policies and procedures). At the time the study began in 1996, the organizational changes occurring with the development of a new state agency to oversee public residential facilities also assisted the researcher in making the decision to exclude public child and youth care workers from the project.

It was anticipated that the study would result in the development of specific recommendations for the development of a professional association. These recommendations could assist association leadership in developing its organizational plan. Data from this study could also be used by the organizing body to identify how the professional needs of child and youth care workers are being met and what workers believe they need in order to become members of a credentialed human services profession.

This research project was designed to identify information about what child and youth care workers and administrators would require from a professional association in order to support it. Since perceptions and attitudes about professionalization were the central exploratory aims of the project, the researcher collected data utilizing focus groups and interviews rather than performing a traditional quantitative study. This data collection method was determined most suitable for obtaining information about the present state of the profession and the future needs of child and youth care because it allowed the researcher, through guided discussion and group interaction, to obtain information about the participants experiences and insight about the current practice of child and youth care.

Between January and May 1996, eight focus groups were conducted to obtain information about the attitudes and perceptions of administrators and child and youth care workers of private, non-profit residential care facilities in Kentucky about their professional affiliation needs. A total of 24 administrators from 18 agencies participated in three focus groups, and 38 youth workers from 22 agencies participated in five focus groups. Those who participated represented residential child caring agencies, psychiatric treatment facilities, and emergency shelters.

In April and May 2002, four replication focus groups (one for administrators and three for child and youth care workers) were conducted to ascertain whether significant changes in attitudes and perceptions regarding the professional affiliation needs of child and youth care workers in Kentucky had changed since 1996. Twenty-three administrators and program directors from 20 agencies participated in the one focus group for administrators, and a total of 17 child and youth care workers from eight agencies participated in the other three focus groups for child and youth care workers.

The analysis of the information obtained from the three administrator and five child and youth care worker focus groups conducted in 1996, was merged into nine themes focusing on various aspects of the professional affiliation needs of youth workers in Kentucky. The replication focus groups conducted in 2002 supported these findings and demonstrated that no significant changes in attitudes and perceptions had occurred since 1996. These themes represent common views and opinions, and as such, provide a concise representation of the findings.

FINDINGS

Administrators

The focus group questions to participants in the Administrator Focus Groups and Replication Focus Groups were developed to elicit feedback about the level of support that administrators would be able to provide in the development of a professional association, as well as perceived opportunities and apprehensions about child and youth care workers developing an association. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. As an administrator of a child caring agency, how might a professional association for youth workers benefit your agency?
2. What incentives do you feel an association could provide that would help youth workers decide to make their work a career?
3. In what ways could an association help professionalize youth work?
4. What do you need, as an administrator, in order to support the development of an association?
5. What are some of your fears about the development of an association?
6. In what ways would you encourage your staff to join an association?

In the analysis of responses, five central themes emerged which are summarized below:

Theme 1: Standardization of Competencies, Skills and Knowledge

A majority of administrators in both the 1996 and 2002 focus groups believed an association could be a catalyst for the development of minimum competencies, skills and knowledge for child and youth care workers in Kentucky. The participants felt that accepted standards of practice would enhance the quality of life for youth residing in out-of-home placements.

Another incentive which administrators in the 1996 focus group participants believed would result in standardized competencies and skill levels would be for recognition by licensing and accreditation bodies of child and youth care as a profession. They would like these bodies to accept and recognize the important role child and youth care workers play in a child or youth's treatment, and to whom the agencies give authority for the care of children.

The 2002 focus group concurred with the importance of minimum competencies and standards of practice. This group was especially interested in discussing the development of a professional certification process to improve the quality of services offered in a residential environment. One administrator believed certification would, "strengthen stability within an agency, including the decrease of incidents due to lack of adequately trained staff." Others believed certification would enable them to develop a career path and incentive package for youth workers.

Theme 2: Staff Recruitment and Retention

Administrators from the 1996 and 2002 focus groups believed that a professional association could play an important role in educating individuals about the field so future applicants would have more general knowledge about the work, as well as the skills and knowledge necessary for the job. They reported staff often arrive with good intentions, but with little or no understanding of the job and find working with some of the youth too challenging. They said another challenge is that workers with excellent skills experience burnout because of the overtime they are required to work because of routine staff shortage.

Overall, the administrators in the 1996 focus groups believed that if workers were able to affiliate themselves with a professional association, turnover would be greatly reduced because the quality of workers may be enhanced through the organized efforts of an association through the development of professional competencies and standards. They were optimistic that an association's activities, including training and credentialing, would enhance child and youth care workers' sense of personal and professional efficacy. A focus group participant said he believed, "An association would meet workers' basic needs: a sense of power, belonging and achievement. Face it, if you're not feeling good about yourself, how

can you make the kids feel good about themselves?" Administrators from the 2002 focus group also believed professional affiliation would give child and youth care workers a greater sense of autonomy. They agreed such autonomy would occur once an agency acknowledges the skills and competencies possessed by child and youth care workers by giving them increased responsibilities within the treatment team and the decision making processes, thereby strengthening team work between clinical and direct care staff.

Theme 3: Remuneration

A discussion about salary and compensatory increases occurred in all the focus groups with administrators. Many expressed concern about how agencies would be able to afford the additional costs incurred to compensate professionals within current budgetary limitations.

They agreed that staff turnover is extremely costly when the amount of time and money spent on training and orientation for new staff is considered. There are also expenses related to hiring and overtime for other workers to cover understaffed shifts. The majority of administrators in the 2002 replication focus group were hopeful that turnover costs would be greatly reduced if workers were better satisfied in their jobs and stayed longer at their agencies. There was agreement that an upfront investment in qualified child and youth care staff would outweigh any issues that would suggest not pursuing professional affiliation. As one administrator in the 2002 replication focus group optimistically summarized, "The children's benefit would be the bottom line."

Theme 4: Resource Sharing

In all the focus groups, administrators discussed the challenges of rising training costs, including travel and shift coverage while away. Participants in the 2002 focus group agreed they would support the opportunity to share training resources, which a professional association could facilitate. They believed that the sharing of training resources would be a major benefit to professional affiliation as agencies are continually redesigning and updating their training programs and processes to meet the changing demands of residential care, especially more advanced levels of training to enhance basic skill areas.

Theme 5: Loss of Power

The final issue that emerged from discussions with administrators and which is also the one child and youth care workers will have the most difficulty addressing when developing a professional association is the perceived loss of power. It was perceived by administrators who participated in the 1996 focus groups that if a professional association were developed, their administrative authority and ability to determine the direction and therapeutic philosophies under which their agencies provide treatment and other residential services would be compromised.

Several participants suggested that in most instances administrators think they know what is best for their staffs. However, there was agreement by the 1996 and 2002 participants that if and when another profession is accepted into the ranks of social workers and therapists, they must be willing to relinquish control and let them, as professionals, take on a larger role in decision making.

CHILD AND YOUTH CARE WORKER FOCUS GROUPS

The focus group questions to participants in the child and youth care worker focus groups were developed to elicit feedback about the professional affiliation needs of child and youth care workers in Kentucky's private non-profit residential facilities. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. What first attracted you to the field of youth care?
2. Are you considering making youth work your career? Why? Why not?
3. What incentives would help you decide to make youth care your career?
4. In what ways is youth care, as it is currently practiced, a profession?
5. How can a professional association help you work better with youth?
6. How can a professional association help you work better with peers?
7. How can a professional association help you work better with administration?
8. How can a professional association help you work better with your community?
9. What could an association give you as a profession to help you?
10. Final thoughts or comments?

In the analysis of responses, four central themes emerged which are summarized below:

Theme 1: Recognition

In all child and youth care worker focus groups the issue of recognition emerged as a central theme. According to the 1996 focus group participants, they often felt disconnected, disenfranchised, and even isolated from administration. They would like more acknowledgement and respect for the important work they do with youth in care. A majority mentioned the need for better communication with administration as opposed to the top-down approach that is typically used. They believed this would help build relationships and establish greater trust. They said

they wanted to be welcomed as a part of the treatment team and encouraged to share their ideas in a supportive environment. Several participants recommended that administrators spend more time with the workers and the youth so they could interact with them more positively.

Many participants felt undervalued when not invited to share in the decisions that affect a youth's treatment or future placements. They indicated that child and youth care workers possess little credibility or status in the decision making process despite the fact that they are involved in the daily lives of youth in care. Several participants from the 1996 and 2002 focus groups said they have even been referred to as babysitters by the youth and that acceptance as professionals by administration would help enhance their image in the eyes of the youth as they begin to witness positive interactions through joint decision making. They believed professional affiliation would give them greater self-respect for their work as they begin to see themselves as a part of a profession. They believed if youth began to witness more positive interactions between youth workers and administrators, they would value the involvement of child and youth care workers in their lives to a greater degree. A youth worker in one of the 2002 replication focus groups said,

It would be nice to see an administrator on the floor with us and the kids, so they can see what we really do. Everybody can't do youth work. It takes a multi-talented, flexible, and unique individual to be able to do a good job. We aren't just babysitters.

Overall, participants in the 2002 replication focus groups believed professional affiliation would help reduce the current chasm that exists between child and youth care workers and administration. They discussed how youth notice the dynamics of the adult relationships within a facility, and that conflict between staff, perceived or real, affects their abilities to develop better relationships with youths. They said youth often comment on the conflict and create situations to increase it. They were hopeful a professional association could play a major role in bringing child and youth care workers and administrators together to share their ideas so they can provide better services. They also believed the administrators acceptance of them as professionals would be the first step toward public acceptance and enhance the validity of their ideas and experiences and would help unify treatment teams through enhancing the sense of a shared culture that is currently lacking.

Theme 2: Accountability

Issues related to child and youth care worker accountability was another important theme to emerge from the focus groups. Overall, workers believed certain activities and policies related to how youth work is carried out in agencies were not in the best interest of the youth. The 1996 focus group participants believed they should be held accountable for their own knowledge, practice, behavior and skills. They didn't

believe they were being acknowledged as being responsible enough to be given a more prominent role in the practice of child and youth care in their agencies. This is related to what was previously discussed about child and youth care workers wanting to be more involved in decision making which would enhance status and credibility with their peers, as well as the youth with whom they work.

Youth workers in the 2002 focus group discussed accountability related to current licensing and accreditation standards and how they believe regulatory bodies have changed the practice of child and youth care. They were hopeful that an association would advocate for the unique professional services child and youth care workers provide so they would have input into the development of licensing practices and standards. They said they would like to become a part of something that would move the field forward and as one participant stated, "...not to continue to keep us at the bottom receiving direction, but being a part of planning for what's best for the youth."

Theme 3: Professional Efficacy

In trying to define the emerging themes that arose during discussions about the need for an accepted value system, one participant said that in order for the field to become a profession, child and youth care workers must possess and demonstrate professional efficacy about their work and its importance. The idea that child and youth care workers need to develop a common voice in order to become a profession was a recurring theme in the 1996 and 2002 focus groups. Professional efficacy is an appropriate term within the context of professionalization and the question as to whether or not the field of child and youth care is ready and capable of moving forward in defining itself as a profession.

The 1996 focus group participants believed there was a need for child and youth care workers to establish a clear vision. They believed their work as a profession was fragmented since roles and philosophies were dictated by agency policy and culture within the confines of licensing and accreditation standards. They believed that professional affiliation would give them a way to relate organizationally with a common goal and purpose as professionals. As one participant stated, "It would be the vehicle to provide the whole with a voice."

Participants in the 2002 focus groups also believed professional affiliation would enhance and validate their experiences and ideas. They indicated it would be particularly beneficial in giving them a broader context of the work they do. They said they seldom were provided opportunities to meet with other child and youth care workers, and that an association would help provide a shared culture and could be the vehicle to provide them a voice. Participants were confident that professional affiliation would provide a valuable sense of identity and unity with a group external to their agencies. One youth worker said he believed professional affiliation would help "transmit the culture of the residential environment," not just that of one organization.

Theme 4: Certification/Credentials

Another central theme that emerged about professional affiliation was the need for certification as a professional. To some degree all the youth care worker focus group participants believed the practice of child and youth care would never become a profession until there is standardization of the work. This included discussion about the need for the development of minimum competencies, a formal educational requirement, development of a career ladder, and the support of agencies to help child and youth care staff achieve professional certification. The consensus was that professional affiliation would not be successful unless professional certification was one of its primary missions.

Around this theme there was no significant differences between child and youth care workers who participated in the 1996 focus groups and those who participated in the 2002 replication groups. The majority believed, like administrators, that certification would help professionalize the field by creating a system of accountability associated with a common knowledge base, minimum competencies, skills and education. They also believed certification would lead the field closer to autonomy by providing the appropriate credentials to demonstrate to administrators, colleagues and youth that they are professionals. By being certified, they were hopeful it would demonstrate their commitment to their work, as well as being able to demonstrate their competence and skills to help them assume a larger role in making decisions about what is best for youth in care.

Another commonality that emerged in the 1996 and 2002 focus groups was the relationship between certification, professionalization, recognition as a profession, and how all of these factors would eventually lead to increased compensation. All seemed to believe that as their value as important team members increased, so would compensation. They were also hopeful that once more competent staffs were realized, child and youth care workers would be more content to stay in their positions longer. The obvious cost effectiveness of staff retention could eventually be passed on to certified professional child and youth care workers. A youth worker in one of the 2002 replication focus groups said, "Certification and better pay would make the job more than just a stopping point until something better comes along."

SUMMARY

The findings of the 1996 and 2002 administrator focus groups were consistent with a 1993 CWLA study conducted by Earl Stuck. Overall, administrators were supportive of the field becoming a profession, but were fearful of the resulting loss of power should the field develop into a self-regulating profession (Stuck, 1993). There was a degree of difference about this between the administrators who participated in the 1996 focus groups and those who participated in the 2002 replication focus group. The 2002 group's primary fear was that professional affiliation would

create increased competition for skilled and qualified child and youth care workers, and the subsequent reduction in workers once minimum standards and competencies were developed and required. This difference may be due to the fact that Kentucky is currently developing a certification process and these fears are becoming much more tangible as this process continues. Perhaps administrators are beginning to think about some of the changes that could occur now that development of a professional credentialing system is imminent.

Interestingly, the child and youth care worker focus group participants viewed the outcomes of professional affiliation as being increased quality of care for children and youth, more autonomy of practice, and greater recognition as a member of the multi-disciplinary treatment team within an agency. If professionalization resulted in a more educated and skilled workforce, acknowledged as valuable members of the treatment teams, and involved in the decision making processes, turnover would hopefully be reduced and those cost savings could be reinvested in the workforce. Historically, if one reviews other groups within the human services sector who have professionalized (e.g. social workers, marriage and family therapists), they have done so for the recognition that their education, training, and experience, make them qualified and accountable for the provision of quality services to their clients.

The findings show that administrators would welcome empowered and better trained child and youth care staff, but they were unclear as to how they would meet the added costs of paying for another skilled workforce within their agencies. However, child and youth care workers who participated in the study did not see increased salaries as the main incentive to professionalize, but believed being involved in the decision making processes within their agencies, and being recognized as valuable contributors to the treatment process, as the priority outcomes of professional affiliation. Lack of commitment to the field was seen as the major contributing factor to staff turnover. The social forces working against a commitment to child and youth care include lack of social recognition and inadequate compensation (Fox, 1989). This study validated this idea since recognition and respect were of primary concern to child and youth care worker participants in this study, while salary was secondary. Conversely, administrators were more concerned with increased remuneration costs and maintaining decision-making authority within their agencies.

Another significant finding of this study was the wide variation between child and youth care worker qualifications, education, and skill levels that exist from agency to agency within Kentucky. Some agencies require their workers to have a bachelor's degree, while the majority require only a high school equivalency diploma. Some agencies have highly structured training programs and require 60 hours of training per year, while others require staff to be trained only in the minimum required by licensing and regulatory agencies (40 hours per year for full time child care staff, and 24 hours per year for part time staff in

Kentucky). The 1993 CWLA study by Earl Stuck suggests such variation contributes to a "pessimistic outlook for professional recognition" (Stuck, 1993). The North American Certification Project is attempting to address this by recommending that certified workers have at least a bachelor's degree, along with three years minimum experience. Such attempts at "raising the bar" will help move the field toward professional recognition, but will still leave out the uneducated, but skilled and experienced child and youth care worker who is either unable or unwilling to pursue a degree. The fear of increased competition for skilled and qualified workers, as articulated by administrators, could become a reality.

The researcher began this study with the idea that professionalization of the child and youth care field would be enthusiastically supported by child and youth care workers, and to a degree, administrators. However, the findings suggest lukewarm support by administrators because of the fears previously discussed, as well as an overall sense of apathy by child and youth care workers about professionalization and its benefits. Alienation and lack of recognition appear to be the primary reasons child and youth care workers do not see themselves as professionals and therefore, appear somewhat impassive about the topic. Such feelings can create indifference, high turnover, burnout, and sense of powerlessness within their organizations, which is transposed onto the field as a whole. If one does not feel empowered within his or her own agency, then one can understand the difficulty in becoming enthusiastic about something with which one can not identify and is perceived as only an unattainable dream because of the current climate. Of course, not all of the child and youth care workers who participated in the focus groups were uninterested or indifferent, but from their comments and concerns and an analysis of the themes that emerged, it is apparent there are not many satisfied individuals in the field. However, the dissatisfaction discussed during the focus groups was related to administration and not to the work itself.

The findings of this study demonstrate how much education Kentucky child and youth care workers need about professionalization, before they are ready to embrace the concept. The first and most difficult hurdle is to address the perceived disconnect between administration and child and youth care workers.

Recommendations

Based upon analysis of the data and professional experience in the field, the researcher makes the following recommendations about what needs to occur before the field is ready to move toward professional affiliation. Most of these recommendations are related to recognition by others of the important contributions child and youth care workers make in a youth's treatment progress. Since agencies who employ child and youth care workers are diverse and have differing hiring standards and practices regarding education and qualifications, it will be difficult for the field to make consistent progress toward professionalization without some commitment by administrators to begin to work with child and

youth care workers to agree upon the minimum competencies, skills and education requirements, as well as the development of a career path that will help child and youth care workers gain recognition and remain in the field.

Child and Youth Care Workers Must Become Involved in Efforts to Professionalize

The majority of child and youth care workers who participated in this research project were unaware of the professional development opportunities available to them outside of their agencies and the existence of professional associations in other states and at the national level.

In order for any movement toward professional affiliation to be made, child and youth care workers must extend themselves beyond their agency cultures and systems, and become more involved in the field. They must take the initiative to find the research, read the research and then share their findings with each other.

Finally, child and youth care workers must begin to demonstrate their worthiness as professionals. This must be practiced and modeled through every interaction a youth care worker has with youth, peers, and administrators. They must be able to act like professionals, be able to articulate their needs as professionals, and demonstrate their commitment to providing a higher level of quality care to youth. Before they can be accepted as professionals, they must prove they are worthy of the status.

Provide Opportunities for Child and Youth Care Workers to Meet Each Other

Because child and youth care workers do not often attend off-site training events and interact with child and youth care workers from other agencies and areas of the state, there is a great sense of isolation. They need to be provided opportunities to interact with each other in order to promote a professional identity. They need to be able to share their stories and experiences with each other, and to learn about different agency cultures, values and activities. Hopefully, this will be the means by which self-identify as a profession is developed, articulated, and from which a profession can emerge.

Develop Professional Standards and Practices

Despite the growth of education and training opportunities nationally as well as Kentucky, child and youth care has yet to establish minimum qualifications for its workers. The reason for this may be because a large portion of child and youth care workers enter the field with little formal education. To implement a minimum formal educational standard would mean excluding many employed workers.

Additionally, the majority of child and youth care workers enter the field with little or no experience in working with youth. It is more common in Kentucky's urban areas to find experienced and skilled child and

youth care workers due to the larger population. However, it is difficult to find formally educated and/or skilled and experienced child and youth care workers in the rural areas because there are fewer applicants from which to select.

The lack of accessibility by agencies to hire educated and trained workers has created a pool of workers who have no formal education and must obtain the majority of their skills and knowledge through on-the-job training. For the majority of workers in the field, this form of training and education, combined with their experience, is the basis on which they perform their work. It is critical that any movement toward professional affiliation begin with a certification or accreditation of informal education and training. Even if the field is not ready to regulate itself as a profession, child and youth care workers should not be excluded from professional affiliation and/or certification because they lack a formal degree. However, once the field makes significant gains in establishing a greater level of autonomy and credibility, which certification will help promote, it will need to establish minimum educational standards in order to continue to move itself forward as a profession.

Provide Opportunities for More Meaningful Interactions Between Administrators and Child and Youth Care Workers

It is evident that there is a major disconnect between child and youth care workers and administration. There is a great deal of difference between how child and youth care workers think they are perceived by administrators, and how they are perceived by administrators. As the findings demonstrate, child and youth care workers feel "invisible" to administrators and don't believe administrators value their commitment to serving youth. Conversely, and as was clearly articulated during the administrator focus groups, administrators said they do value the role child and youth care workers have in helping them meet their program goals for the care of children and youth. Administrators want to invest in quality care for youth, which means an investment in their staff. However, with that said, there are significant communication problems between the two groups that must be addressed.

The researcher recommends that administrators (which includes program directors, managers, and supervisors) spend more time interacting with child and youth care workers and the youth during their daily activities. Regular meetings between administrators and youth care workers would also be an excellent way to enhance communication and make workers feel more valued by being able to provide input and direction into agency activities.

Professional affiliation could ultimately promote better communication and interactions between administrators and child and youth care workers by virtue of the recognition one acquires if a part of a profession. The interactions and communication between child and youth care workers and administrators would become more meaningful as each began to see the other as having equally valuable and important roles in providing

quality services to children and youth. An association could help expedite this through its activities and services supportive to the needs of both groups.

Child and Youth Care Workers Should be Involved in Making Decisions About Client's Needs

A major issue that emerged during the focus group analysis was the child and youth care workers' desire to become more involved in decision making practices. This included input into agency goals, the development and enhancement of programs, and most importantly, input into a youth's treatment planning and future placement decisions. Through their daily interactions with youth, child and youth care workers develop close relationships, often learn important information not shared with the therapists or counselors, and understand what motivates a youth's behavior. They want and need to become partners in the decision making process because they can make significant contributions about what will best meet a youth's individual needs. Once they become partners in these processes, it is anticipated that they will experience enhanced self worth as team members, and enhanced credibility as professionals.

The other recommendation related to joint decision making is to include child and youth care workers in the hiring process. The researcher spoke with several child and youth care workers who felt that the stress placed on them by new workers was greater than the stress and challenges placed on them by the youth. They believed that by being involved in the hiring of their peers, they would be able to help reduce staff turnover by asking the right questions and ensuring the individuals were fully aware of the environments in which they would be working. They felt that the problem with turnover was the hiring of individuals who do not possess the appropriate value systems to work with youth in care. Since it is the responsibility of the child and youth care workers to mentor new workers and assimilate them into the culture, it only makes sense that they be involved in the interview and selection process.

In any occupation, at any level, individuals want to be recognized, respected, and made to feel their contributions are valued. It is good practice in whatever field to get input from staff at all levels. More efficient teams could develop within child caring agencies if child and youth care workers were asked to participate in the decision making process.

Obtain Administrator Support of Professional Affiliation

Although the administrators who participated in the focus groups appeared to be supportive of professional affiliation in general, their level of support is still uncertain. Administrators have huge demands to meet increasing service needs for children and youth in care. They must plan

within the confines of budget cuts, licensing mandates, and staff turnover. As such, it is easy to support the concept of professional affiliation, however, it may be difficult for them to demonstrate their support until evidence that professionalization will benefit them is presented. This may occur in the form of reduced turnover, increased staff morale, better outcomes for youth in care, or something similarly rewarding.

Because there are few opportunities for child and youth care workers to interact with and meet each other, it is difficult for them to organize themselves into an association. Unless a group of committed workers emerge who want to develop an association on their own time, it will be the support of the administrators that will create any movement toward professional affiliation.

Avoid Over-Bureaucratization of the Profession and Its Practices

Issues related to accountability and its affect on the practice of child and youth care and the delivery of services must be considered in order to avoid goal displacement. There is the likelihood that the field will have to exchange some of the informal relationship-building qualities of the work for more efficient and measurable practices and outcomes. The awareness of such possibilities must be acknowledged and addressed, to the extent possible, at every stage of the field's movement forward as a profession. There are no identifiable solutions on how to avoid this and maintain the essence of what sets child and youth care apart from other professions. One suggestion is to make sure the competencies and standards lead the profession rather than allowing licensing and regulatory bodies to interpret and mandate what they become. The latter would be detrimental to the profession and dilute its distinctiveness within the care giving systems.

Implications for Future Research

This exploratory study only identifies and attempts to label the primary and to a degree, the secondary attitudes and perceptions of the participants. There are numerous questions that remain as to the level of readiness of the field to professionalize. There is also the major task for further assessment of the degree of support that is needed by administrative leaders to encourage such affiliation.

One outcome of this research project was the development of a certification development team that is currently working on a Kentucky child and youth care worker certification process. This group will need research on the current training and professional development programs being conducted statewide, regionally and locally (including in-house training programs), as well as the educational programs offered by universities and community colleges. This information could be used to help the certification development team determine its continuing education requirements, and to maintain a clearinghouse for information about child and youth care worker training activities, as well as other certification processes already in place.

There is a vast body of knowledge in the field as evidenced by the numerous professional journals specific to child and youth care. However, a problem is that few students and former or current child and youth care workers, are aware of this research base. These journals seek not only scholarly material, but also anecdotal and personal stories about child and youth care. Any material related to the field is actively being pursued by these journal editors. It is recommended that future coursework for child and youth care workers include a module on writing for the profession. The addition of this educational component would not only enhance the writing skills of child and youth care workers, but would add to the knowledge base and literature.

CONCLUSION

If these recommendations are made within the practice of child and youth care in Kentucky, the researcher is confident the results would be more competent, content, and committed workers, serving Kentucky's most vulnerable children and youth. Although the benefits can't be ascertained, it is the researcher's belief that at a minimum, the communication and information sharing practices within participating agencies would be greatly improved.

As Kentucky moves toward developing a child and youth care worker certification process without the benefit of an association to develop and support it, the challenges to obtain buy-in and support from child and youth care workers is evident. It is the researcher's opinion, and that of several national leaders in the field, that in order to move toward professionalization, child and youth care workers must make it happen, and the role of agency administrators should be to promote and support it rather than lead it. The challenge in Kentucky and the nation is the sustainability of the effort to professionalize, without the direct involvement of those it is aimed to serve.

Carla Kirby holds a Master of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Eastern Kentucky University and is a Program Administrator with the Kentucky Department of Juvenile Justice. She is vice-chair of the Kentucky Youth Worker Certification Development Team and has been involved in the professional development of child and youth care workers throughout her career. A copy of the study from which this excerpt was taken can be obtained by email request to cgkirby@mail.state.ky.us.

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