THE FUTURE OF CHILD AND YOUTH CARE AS A PROFESSION:
Assessing Administrator Attitudes

Earl N. Stuck Jr.
Director of Residential Care, Child Welfare League of America
Member, International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care

ABSTRACT: On behalf of the Child Welfare League of America, and in cooperation with the International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care, a survey was developed and distributed to 100 administrators of child and youth caring agencies across the United States and Canada. The purpose of this effort was to elicit feedback from these leaders on their support for the professional goals of child and youth care, and to assess the nature and scope of their professional incentive programs and development activities. The forty-three surveys that were returned formed the basis of this study.

The results suggest that, while there is a foundation of administrator support, individuals and child and youth care worker associations may need to rethink current strategies to promote professional goals. Child and youth care will have to more carefully define its field and better structure its promotional activities before administrative support is likely to increase. Additionally, although the responses gave many examples of effective incentives to professional development, the lack of a consistent framework for the sharing of this information has impeded the development process.

These survey results should help to focus new attention on the attitudes and beliefs of those administrators whose daily decisions affect the growth of child and youth care as a profession.

Introduction

The children, youths, and families who live in our residential centers, who participate in community recreational and counseling programs, and who fill our group homes, day care centers, and drop-in centers do not need to be convinced of the important contribution child and youth care makes to their lives. This field's critical role in residential care has been recognized for many years. The recent growth of services in the area of child day care has dramatically increased the need for qualified staff outside of the residential setting. Subsequently, as child and youth work has expanded beyond group care and into the community, many other professionals, in such areas as youth development, family preservation, and professional foster parenting, have recognized the vital function of these staff members who counsel and teach necessary skills through the events of daily life. Relationships with the child and youth care worker are often the first and the most important breakthroughs in our work with young people.

Despite its promise and the real contributions made by child and youth care,the field lags behind its more widely recognized professional counterparts in the related fields of education, social work, psychology, and health care in the achievement of its professional goals. Salaries and benefits remain low. Since career ladders do not always allow growth within the field, advancement for many means leaving child and youth care behind in order to gain standing in human services elsewhere. High turnover and a lack of stable leadership over time are often cited as reasons for the inability of the field to mobilize its efforts toward professional development (Durkin, 1983; Mattingly, 1977).

Clearly, these are problems. Yet they are also symptoms of a field which requires a great deal of its practitioners but offers little in the way of recognition, compensation, and acceptance. Today, the field is arguably less attractive than even a few years ago, as studies reveal that salaries for workers have actually dropped in relation to the cost of living during the last ten years (Curtis, 1991). Too many still leave the field because of overly demanding working conditions and lack of supervision and support.

Carol Kelly and others have noted that all recognized professions have the following characteristics: (1) formal education; (2) an organized body of knowledge with theoretical underpinnings; (3) research activity; (4) a code of ethics regulating the profession; (5) a professional culture or association supporting a long-term commitment to the occupation; (6) autonomy and self-regulation; and (7) a clientele which recognizes the authority and integrity of the profession (Kelly, 1990). Others have added features, such as self-definition as a profession, recognition by other professions, and standards of practice (Krueger, 1991).

Many who have been active in the professionalization movement argue that as an occupational group, child and youth care already meets these criteria. There is little doubt that knowledgeable advocates can point out examples of each of these characteristics to support their case (Krueger, 1991; Stuck, 1991; VanderVen and Mattingly, 1981). Many others would argue that the perceived lack of these things is a major stumbling block to the profession (Powell, 1990). This begs a question—why then, has such an important and needed profession remained such a well-kept secret? Why have broader recognition and the benefits which accompany it so far largely escaped the field?

In an effort to further these professional goals, several initiatives have recently been undertaken under the auspices of such groups as the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), the National Organization of Child Care Worker Associations (NOCCWA), and the International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care (ILCPCYC). One of these has been the development of a survey designed to elicit the viewpoints of human service administrators and other leaders as to the present state and future needs of the child and youth care field, and to engage their support of professional goals.

In 1993, a survey was developed and mailed to 100 administrators from throughout the United States and Canada, requesting feedback in the following areas:

- Background and professional identity of the administrators;
- Their general understanding of the field of child and youth care, and the qualities, skills, and attributes of workers in the field;
- Their assessment of impediments standing in the way of full professional recognition;
- A description of their agency's educational, training, and developmental activities and job incentives designed to promote professional growth; and
- Their suggestions for other administrators interested in promoting the professional goals of child and youth care.

Forty-three responses to this questionnaire were ultimately received (34 responses from 16 states, and 7 from 4 Canadian provinces), and these formed the basis for this study. The format of the survey, which asked for primarily narrative answers to 15 questions, as well as the decision to poll an admittedly nonrandom sample of administrators who were identified as "most likely" respondents, combined to limit the survey's potential for statistical analysis. However, the comments represented a varied and thoughtful range of opinions that shed considerable light on the values and activities of the administrators whose decisions impact the present and future of child and youth care.

Survey Results

The first group of questions concerned the background of the administrator completing the questionnaire. Administrators were asked about their own experience both in the field and as an administrator. The answers showed an average level of experience, in the field of child and youth care, of 15.9 years, and in an administrative capacity, of 11.1 years. A large majority, 35 of 42 respondents, indicated that they had at one time been employed as child and youth care workers, although only seven of the respondents named child and youth care as their present profession. Social work was listed by 11; educator and psychologist by one each. A majority of the respondents listed their present job title (such as program director, executive director, administrator, consultant, supervisor, or manager) instead of a profession. Respondents listed the professional association memberships to which their agencies belonged more often than those to which they belonged as individuals.

Administrators were asked if they felt that child and youth care, as it is currently practiced, is a true profession. Well over half (25 of 43), answered no to this question. The most often cited reasons were "Lack of certification / professional standards" (11), "Not enough support / salaries / respect" (8), and "No standard body of knowledge" (4). When asked why child and youth care professionalization efforts have often met with lukewarm support from administrators in the past, the most common response by far was, "Fear that higher qualifications will demand higher pay" (19). "Fear of unions" (8) was next, followed by "Administrators don't understand the value of the profession" (7), and "Administrators don't want to give up power" (6). Another question asked what, in their opinion, is necessary in order for administrators to fully support the profession. Responses included, "Develop an understanding of administrators' self-interest" (11), "Re-educate administrators to the importance of the profession" (10), "Develop standards for certification and credentialing" (8), and "Gain support from funders" (7).

Several questions asked the respondents to describe the attributes, qualifications, abilities, and skills that they perceived as important in competent child and youth care workers. These questions looked at which characteristics were most commonly found and which were most difficult to find in child and youth care staff. The responses were very individualized.

Those listed as most important to look for when hiring child and youth care workers tended to cluster in three general areas. Most often described were characteristics that promoted the worker's *ability to form relationships,* such as communication ability, liking children, motivation to help, sense of humor, team spirit, warmth, caring attitude, flexibility, realistic attitude, and openness. Natural *personality traits,* such as self-awareness, confidence, maturity, enthusiasm, positive attitude, common sense, dependability, honesty, and patience, formed the next most frequently described cluster. Least often mentioned were those attributes that described actual *learned skills* acquired through practice, education, or experience. These included advanced education, prior experience, ability to learn, experience in caregiving, counseling skills, relevant training, recreational skills, prior life experiences, written and verbal skills, and systems knowledge.

In general, the administrators were able to describe the kinds of people they valued, but they were unclear about the actual skills successful workers needed.

When asked which attributes were most commonly found in prospective employees, respondents again focused on the personality traits and relationship abilities mentioned earlier for prospective applicants, but rarely mentioned learned skills. The two things listed as hardest to find were, "People who want to make child and youth care a career" (6), and "Relevant experience" (6).

Several questions examined the kinds of formal education, pre-service and in-service training, and other staff development activities that the

respondents provided for child and youth care staff in their agencies. The responses show that minimum educational qualifications for entry level workers varied greatly. A high school diploma was required by fifteen agencies, a BA or equivalent by eleven, and an Associate Degree by seven. Seven asked only for experience, while one respondent specified only "No felony or abuse history," and another,"The ability to fog a mirror." Nearly all of the respondents who listed a college degree as a minimum qualification stated they often made exceptions on a case-by-case basis.

Two-thirds of those responding (25) stated that they did offer *pre-service* training. Only five offered it before hiring, while thirty-four provided some training during a probationary period. Most (33) stated that they also provided *in-service* training to child and youth care staff, and that attendance was mandatory. On the average, staff training was offered one to two times per month, for a monthly total of three to four hours. Twenty-seven respondents offered some form of tuition reimbursement. Several noted that they had once provided a more comprehensive staff development program, while others had dropped it altogether because of budgetary constraints.

Training programs covered a wide range of subjects. Those involving issues of social control and safety, such as "Crisis intervention/physical restraint" (15) and "CPR/first aid" (9) were the most often mentioned. These were followed less frequently by subjects involving the client population and specific intervention techniques, such as "Child development" (6), "Separation" (4), "Helping skills" (4), "Activities" (3), and "Teamwork" (3).

The last set of questions asked the administrators to describe their experience with regard to recruitment and retention of child and youth care staff—specifically, what were the most effective tools used to recruit staff, and what incentives appeared to be most effective in retaining and developing professional staff.

Responses indicate that, as a *means* of recruitment, "Word of mouth/Other satisfied workers" (22) was clearly the most effective, outdistancing "Job fairs/University affiliation" (11), and "Newspaper" (5). "Training/professional development"(8), "Competitive starting salary"(8), and "Advancement/career ladder possibilities"(5) were most frequently mentioned as successful recruitment *incentives*.

In terms of incentives that promote retention, "Advancement/career ladder possibilities"(13) was most often mentioned, followed by "Training/professional development"(12), and "Child and youth care worker empowerment"(10). "Wage/benefit package"(9) and "Adequate salary"(4) were the only financial issues described. Opportunities to grow in the job, to feel empowered, and to be recognized for contributions were, in the opinion of most administrators, the major incentives that promoted retention.

Finally, administrators were asked to offer suggestions to others interested in developing the profession of child and youth care. A range of ideas

was received. The importance of establishing national standards for certification and credentialing was stressed by many, as was the need to become more involved in state associations. Ways to show appreciation for and to empower child and youth care staff were also seen as important. Twenty respondents called for the creation of a forum for administrators interested in the development of professional child and youth care to share experiences and ideas.

Discussion

Taken as a whole, the results offer ample cause for optimism as well as concern to those in the field who care about the development of a profession of child and youth care.

The rate of return for this rather lengthy form was quite high. The feedback received was extensive. That so many administrators in positions of authority related former direct experience in child and youth care is encouraging, since their understanding and commitment to the field can be presumed. However, few continue to see child and youth care as their professional identity. It is discouraging, as has been noted elsewhere, that so many saw the job as a stepping stone and found leaving the field and taking on new professional identities a necessary part of personal career advancement (Durkin, 1983; Stuck, 1992). Since the issues of advancement potential and career ladders figure so prominently, especially in the area of line staff retention, this is clearly an area that needs attention.

The majority of those responding did not think that child and youth care, as currently practiced, is a true profession. While the reasons were varied, most tended to imply that the field lacked certain defining and structural features, such as national credentialing and professional standards, a consistent body of knowledge, and degree programs. Without clearly defined and structured ways of describing the profession; of laying out basic qualifications, outlining necessary skills and competencies, and establishing viable career ladders; the field was seen as too loose a collection of related concepts to be fairly called a profession. The result was apparent in a host of secondary responses having to do with lack of support, salaries, respect, and acceptance from other professions. Rapid turnover and a wide variation of child and youth care worker qualifications from agency to agency also contribute to a pessimistic outlook for professional recognition.

An organized and energetic education campaign has often been called for to combat this perception. Indeed, many of the pieces described as missing by administrators do exist in research, articles, and certification standards at the local level (Krueger, 1992). However, the feedback from this sample of administrators would seem to indicate that they are unaware of these. They believe that the structural foundation of the field should receive attention first. Work to unify the definitions and the body of knowledge that underpins the field; to describe basic and advanced skills

and competencies; and to develop national standards for certification, credentialing, and educational preparation should be the top priority. This feedback reinforces the calls of others for development of consistent definitions across the field (Powell, 1990). A program of public and professional education could be built on this solid foundation.

The respondents highlighted a number of reasons why child and youth care professionalization efforts have not always received administrators' wholehearted support. Three of the four most frequently mentioned responses dealt with money and control. Fears that higher qualifications will mean higher pay, concerns about unions, and other supposed losses in power and control speak to a belief that as empowered professionals, child and youth care workers might upset the balance of agency staff. More highly skilled staff were seen as potentially more demanding of resources and more likely to expect a say in the organization. In fact, these *are* very realistic outcomes of a profession as it gains respect and recognition.

Other answers to the survey indicate that empowerment and self-determination, as well as adequate salary and benefits, are among the strongest incentives for retention and job satisfaction. This is supported by recent research which showed that career ladders, involvement in decision making, and participation in in-service training contributed to greater satisfaction and commitment among workers (Krueger, 1985; Krueger, M., Lauerman, R., Beker, J., Savick, V., Parry, P., & Powell, N., 1987). If, as responses also suggest, the most difficult characteristics to find in prospective child and youth care workers are relevant experience and "wanting to make child and youth care a career," then administrators will have to overcome their fear of empowered line workers. It should not be surprising that the people most likely to remain and contribute positively to children are also those who expect reasonable recognition and a "say" in program direction.

Many of the respondents were quick to point out that they would readily welcome empowered child and youth care staff, provided the public-sector agencies with which they contract, as well as those responsible for licensing and regulation of their programs, would work with them to meet the added costs. The critical role of these public agencies and that of the other funders, such as foundations and the United Way, was stressed by several respondents.

The results of this survey are encouraging to those who seek inventive ways to improve recruitment and retention and promote professional development. Respondents described a surprising diversity of incentive and staff recognition programs. While no one claimed to have all of the answers, there was a range of actual and proposed innovative agency-level programs that would appear to have tangible impact. These included formalized career ladders, broad-based training and educational opportunities, merit bonuses, flexible time policies, and worker recognition pro-

grams.

That this richness in ideas exists at the local level reinforces the frequently heard recommendation that a forum be established for sharing this kind of information, and that an ongoing child care administrators' network be created as a support to child and youth care professional development.

Imperatives for the Future

This survey gathered feedback from a sample of agency administrators who employ child and youth care workers. It gave a voice to those whose decisions greatly impact the future of child and youth care. In doing so, it described many inventive ideas and sources for support of this emerging profession. It also outlined several areas where those individuals and associations interested in the development of the profession might rethink strategies and redouble efforts in response to identified barriers.

The full development of the profession of child and youth care will require many things. Six imperatives stand out clearly from the survey data:

1. Create a clear and unambiguous definition of the scope of the field, describing child and youth care's legitimate role across the range of services; and providing lifelong career possibilities. Definitions already developed by such groups as the International Leadership Coalition, NOCCWA, and the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research will prove to be helpful models.

2. Develop national credentialing standards as a basis for future licensing, certification, and self-regulation at the local level. These standards need to address the gamut of professional issues, including:
   Core values and competencies,
   A description of the knowledge base,
   A code of ethics,
   Formal educational preparation,
   Pre- and in-service orientation and training,
   Levels of professional recognition,
   Specialties within the field,
   Career ladders, and
   Guidelines for public approval, licensing, and certification.

3. Challenge administrators and workers to take greater responsibility for learning about developments in the field and implementing them.

4. Forge stronger relationships with existing child and youth caring organizations at the state and national level.

5. Create a network of administrators to share professional development resources and ideas and to promote support of the field of child and

youth care at the agency level.

6. Develop a strategy to educate the public in general, and the public agencies which purchase child care services in particular, about the value of and the need for qualified child and youth care staff members.

To quote Rod Durkin, "The administrators and child (and youth) care workers have many mutual self-interests. Administrators are held most accountable in the overall quality of child care. . ., and the (workers) can make administrators look either good or bad. Administrators can therefore be a powerful ally of child (and youth) care workers." (Durkin, 1983) p.12

The opportunity to engage this alliance is now. The field must step forward to accept this challenge.

Note: A copy of the survey on which this article is based can be obtained from Earl Stuck, Child Welfare League of America, 440 First Street, NW, Suite 310, Washington , DC 20001-2085.

References

Curtis, P. *(1991). Child Welfare League of America Salary Study, 1991.* Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Durkin, R. (1983). The crisis in children's services: The dangers and opportunities for child care workers. *Journal of Child Care, 1*(5), 1-13.

Kelly, C. (1990). Professionalizing child and youth care: An Overview. In J. Anglin, C . Denholm, R. Ferguson, & A. Pence(Eds). *Perspectives in Professional Child and Youth Care* (pp. 167-176). New York: Haworth Press.

Krueger, M. (1992). A review and analysis of the development of professional child and youth care work. *Child and Youth Care Forum, 20*(6), 379-391.

Krueger, M. (1985). Job satisfaction and organizational commitment among child and youth care workers. *Journal of Child Care, 2*(3), 17-23.

Krueger, M., Lauerman, R., Beker, J., Savicki, V., Parry, P. & Powell, N. (1987). Professional Child and Youth Care Work in the United States and Canada: A Report of the NOCCWA Research and Study Committee. *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work, 3*(1), 19-31.

Mattingly, M. (1977). Sources of stress and burnout in child care. *Child Care Quarterly, 6*(2), 12-137.

Peters, D. & Madle, R. (1991). The development of effective child and youth care workers. In J. Beker & Z. Eisikovits, (Eds.), *Knowledge Utiliza-*

tion in Residential Child and Youth Care Practice, (pp. 291-311). Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Powell, D. (1990). Professionalism and the Child Care Field: What Model? In *J. Anglin,* C. Denholom, R. Ferguson, & A. Pence(Eds.), *Perspectives in Professional Child and Youth Care* (pp.177-186). New York: Haworth Press.

Stuck E. (1991). Report from the colloquium entitled, The Future of Child and Youth Care as a Profession. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Stuck, E. (1992). Effective staff recruitment and retention: Remembering why we're here. *The Child and Youth Care Administrator, 4*(2), 19-24.

VanderVen, K. and Mattingly, M. (1991). Action agenda for child care education in the 80s: From settings to systems. *Child Care Quarterly, 10*(3), 279-288.