



Opening comments

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Opening comments</i>
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Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol. 10 No. 3</i>
Manuscript ID:	<i>103003</i>
Page Number:	<i>3</i>
Year:	<i>2007</i>

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

From the Editor's Desk: Scientific Considerations in Making Choices on Providing Child Welfare Services

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Much of the history of social work, in general, and child welfare, specifically, has been constructed on the assumption that humanitarian beliefs, *sui generis*, were a sufficient basis to justify social values and action. This assumption is tested today from different directions. One direction is simply a question of whether empirical measures of a social action produce the intended results. For example, do interventions with abusing families change for the better the family conditions that result in child abuse? This is the direct form of the charge in the current social work literature to increase the amount of "evidence-based practice" now so much in vogue. It is a call for an epistemological choice of sense data with a disclosure of the data, the instruments, and the use of intersubjective agreement as the basis of the decision that the given choice of a social action was wise. A second direction is to seek to examine a given social value and related action from an ethnographic perspective. How does the value and related action appear through a cultural prism?

For example does a large and extended family, which may be more common in some areas with Mexican American populations, prepare children at an earlier age to assist in child care more than a nuclear family with fewer children in which case the children may be less experienced in caring for a younger sibling? Does that mean that a 10-year-old Mexican American girl providing care for a two-year-old sibling would not be neglect, yet such care by an Anglo 12-year-old would be neglect as child care abilities derive from specific culturally based experiences? Do such social and cultural variations suggest that decisions about appropriate child care should be vetted under corresponding cultural standards? A third direction is to carefully examine the structure and auspices of entities that provide social services. For example, does the civil service uniformity of state-provided services bring a higher bureaucratic toll of rigidity and cost than do such services provided by a local and independent agency? Does a "for-profit" condition serve to prune and focus services and thus yield a higher program return than services provided under a not-for-profit regime?

An important role of this Journal is to secure scholarship and build a scientific understanding that addresses these complex and relevant questions. Some are strictly empirical and methodological. Does Service A prove superior to Service B? Some questions are cultural. Are there clear cultural alternatives that provide similar social values with different mechanisms? Some questions are organizational. Do large and uniform structures or local and more adaptive ones perform better? And what are the measures of "perform"? These questions, particularly as they involve structural or organizational variations in the provision of services, are part and parcel of the tradition of continuing education and the Journal's scholarship mission.

This issue-- Vol. 10, No.3 -- focuses on important changes underway in child welfare with special consideration of federally funded and promoted efforts. Child welfare has long been a central concern of social work, including the difficult area of governmental initiatives in family life and the well-being of minors and citizens. While the concern began under the auspices of private agencies late in the 19th century, by the 1930's it had become a concern of local, state, and federal governments. During the Great Depression the country saw in many ways the largest steps in the funding of social services, including child welfare from the federal level to the states. The 1960's and the 1970's through the War on Poverty with programs such as the Community Action Agency, Model Cities, and Headstart as well as Medicaid increased funding and attention to many social efforts and included impacts on child welfare.

In the 1970's attention turned from program expansion to program refinement and states began to move from more generalized child welfare services to specialization, such as units in child abuse with intake, criminal prosecution and treatment, foster care, and adoptions. These refinement activities continue, but importantly they also presage a changing relationship between government and private agencies. Service responsibility is being moved back to the private sector, and experiments are underway in testing models of

contracting with for-profit entities.

These changing programs and efforts to implement and evaluate them are central to the mission of social work continuing education. This is the aspect of continuing education that works to develop partnerships with organizations to test and refine organizational changes. They present challenging research problems not readily amenable to traditional experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and often require the development of measuring tools as part of the scholarship effort. Our lead special issue editors, Crystal Collins-Camargo and Michael Kelly, help us secure an orientation to these complex and important changes and early efforts to build scholarship that describes and explains what is underway. This issue brings together two papers that discuss the intended changes and three that provide state-by-state comparisons of how the changes are implemented and early-stage return of results. These are both scientifically complex matters of variable identification and measurement and show as well the important activities of achieving scientific designs within the context of ongoing state decisions on the organization of critical social services.

In This Issue

The topics in this issue-- V10, N3-- reflect these important activities. It opens with one of the Special Issue Editor's overview followed by "The Privatization of Child Welfare Services: Issues and Efforts at the Federal Level," which describes the foundations of the research and demonstration efforts described in this issue. Next, the Quality Improvement Center and Pal-Tech's role in coordinating the research efforts of three demonstration projects are described in "Knowledge Development and Transfer on Public/Private Partnerships in Child Welfare Service Provision: Using Multi-Site Research to Expand the Evidence Base." This is followed by descriptions of the practice issues and research strategies to be employed in the state projects: "Striving for Excellence: Extending Child Welfare Performance Based Contracting to Residential, Independent, and Transitional Living Programs in Illinois," and "Maintaining Positive Public-Private Partnerships

in Child Welfare: The Missouri Project on Performance-Based Contracting for Out-of-Home Care." The issue concludes with "Improving Practice and Outcomes Through Collaboration and Performance-Based Contracting in Florida's Child Welfare System."

In 2008, our future issues, we will focus on dealing with the development and application of instruments from the Organizational Excellence Group. Articles will examine empirical and theoretical research focused upon organizational change and improvement. We think it will contribute to the dialogue about efforts to increase quality and innovations in organizations.

Welcome A New Editorial Board Member

We are welcoming a new member to the Editorial Board. John Barton, a senior staff member at the State of Texas' Legislative Budget Board (LBB), has joined us. He brings a long history and leadership among states in investment budgeting. Most states have a legislative mechanism that works with the state legislature to structure agency revenue requests in a common form and aggregate requests of all state-supported entities in an annual or biennial form to balance against available state revenues. In John Barton's career that is the LBB. John's concerns and writings over more than twenty years have looked at state procedures to capture the longer term return on expenditures in social services. John's experiences include, of course, Texas, and through his service and scholarship, comparisons with the process in other states. John's presence will assist the Journal in bringing concerns of social investment and social return to our readership as well as promoting a dialogue among leaders for the development of knowledge that promotes analyses of return on social expenditures.