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TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION: NEW INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

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ISBN 978-1-77385-440-3

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Culturally Responsive Child Welfare Practices: An Integrative Review

Alexandra K. Mack

Disproportionality and Disparity Within the Modern-Day Child Welfare System

This chapter was written as an addendum to the author's field education experience while interning at a Child and Family Services Agency in the United States. According to Detlaff (2015), disproportionality refers to "the state of being out of proportion" (p. 4). Within the context of the child welfare system, disproportionality is described as a phenomenon wherein a racial group is overrepresented within the child welfare system's context compared to their representation within the general population (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). In the United States, African American children are overrepresented within the child welfare system; they make-up 14% of the general population, but 23% of the foster care population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). Additionally, children of Native/Alaskan descent also are disproportionately represented within the system (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). Nationally, Latino children have typically been underrepresented within the welfare system; however, state trends have shown an increasing overrepresentation of these children (Dettlaff, 2015). LaLiberte et al. (2015) note that "disparity is typically used to describe unequal outcomes experienced by one racial/ethnic group when compared to

another racial/ethnic group" (p. 5). Disparity in the child welfare system is evidenced by the fact that kids of colour are more likely to drift in care, less likely to be reunited with families, more likely to experience group care, less likely to find a permanent family, and more likely to have poor educational, social, behavioural, and other outcomes (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011, p. 5).

There are two primary methods utilized to measure disproportionality. The U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services uses the racial disproportionality index (RDI) to "compare the percentage of children by race in the general population to their percentage at various points in the child welfare continuum" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016, p. 2). The second disproportionality measurement tool compares "a particular racial or ethnic population's representation in the child welfare system to its representation at the prior decision point" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016, p. 4).

Racial Disproportionality and Disparity Theories

Understanding the existence of disparity and disproportionality within the child welfare system is writ large, but the theories that provide rationale for the disparity and disproportionality differ and overlap. Hines et al. (2004) provide that "parent and family-related risk factors, CWS [child welfare system] involvement, social factors related to poverty, neighborhood effects" are factors that contribute to disparity and disproportionality (p. 507). Hines et al. also (2007) hypothesize that racial disproportionality and disparity exist due to biased decision-making among child welfare agency staff. Community structures, poverty, and oppression further perpetuate involvement in the child welfare system among families of colour. These authors (2007) further note that the specific contexts of the child welfare system, such as agency structure, culture, resources, and management are contributing factors. Barth and colleagues (2005) propose three primary theories to explain racial disproportionality and disparity: (1) overwhelming needs of families of colour; (2) racial prejudice among child welfare agencies and staff; and (3) the multiplicative interaction between family risk and the child welfare service trajectory.

Culturally Responsive Practices Throughout Service Engagement

Cultural Responsiveness

The consideration of the current rates of disproportionality and disparity lead to the discussion regarding practices that child welfare organizations can utilize to actively address these concerns. Cultural competence, cultural humility, and cultural responsiveness are among the multiplicity of terms used to discuss cultural adeptness. For the purpose of this chapter, the term cultural responsiveness will be utilized. This term is conceptualized in various ways across disciplines and sectors. Within the context of the child welfare system, cultural responsiveness is a framework that "enables individuals and organizations to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, disabilities, religions, genders, sexual orientations, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values their worth" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d., Cultural Responsiveness section, para.1).

The embodiment of cultural responsiveness requires understanding culturally-based differences, recognizing personal bias, and looking beyond these differences to effectively work with families, children, and communities whose contexts differ from ours (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). The subsequent sections discuss culturally responsive child welfare practices to address both disproportionality and disparity.

Culturally Responsive Workforce Development. The implementation of cultural responsiveness throughout the stages of workforce development is essential. According to LaLiberte et al. (2015), child welfare agencies' infrastructure, ethnicity of caseworkers, minimal resources for families of colour, institutional racism, organizational culture, disconnection from the community, and value of services are all aspects that could explicate racial disproportionality and disparity. A cross-state study conducted by the Children's Bureau found that culturally responsive and effective child welfare practice "begins with staff diversity or a staff that reflects the population served by the agency" (Chibnall, 2003, p. 51).

Workforce diversity is defined as "the systematic and planned commitment by the organizations to recruit, retain, reward and promote a heterogeneous mix of employees" (Henry & Evans, 2007, p. 72). Within

the context of the child welfare system, the pursuit of a diverse workforce is not merely a focus of diversification of cultures and ethnicities, but also of age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, values, ethnic culture, education, language, lifestyle, beliefs, physical appearance, and economic status (Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 2000).

Prior to making adjustments, it is necessary for an organization to assess their levels of cultural responsiveness regarding areas of strengths and areas for growth. The Institutional Analysis developed by The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and Ellen Pence of Praxis International, LLC is specifically geared to conduct cultural organizational assessments. The Institutional Analysis tool is used to "uncover problematic policies and practices that define and constrain child welfare systems, with a focus on contributors to racial disparities in child welfare services and outcomes" (Center for the Study of Social Policy [CSSP], 2020, Institutional Analysis section, para. 1). The primary process of understanding systematic disparities is to ask questions "from the standpoint of children, youth, parents, and caregivers involved with child welfare systems" (CSSP, 2020, Institutional Analysis section, para. 2). The tool also focuses on asking how something comes about, rather than who does the action (CSSP, 2020). Other helpful tools include "A Guide to … Planning and Implementing Cultural Competence Organizational Self-Assessment," by Georgetown University (Goode et al., 2002) and the "Assessing Organizational Racism tool," by the Western States Center (Jones & Okun, 2003).

Cultural competence and anti-racism training have been essential tools in combating disparity and disproportionality within the child welfare system. Augmented cultural awareness and sensitivity tackle the issue of disproportionality by directly addressing workers' racial attitudes and biases which affect their decision-making regarding families of colour (Chibnall et al., 2003). At all points in the child welfare system, race represents a significant factor in decision-making by professionals (Hill, 2007). Hence, the necessity of cultural competence and anti-racism training.

The effectiveness of anti-racism training hinges on taking a self-assessment approach as opposed to a survey approach, which focuses primarily on external cultural factors and stereotypes. The self-assessment approach encourages professionals to self-reflect on the issues of race and culture (Johnson et al., 2009). Cultural responsiveness is an evolving process that

depends largely "on self-reflection, self-awareness, and acceptance of differences, and is based on improved understanding as opposed to an increase in cultural knowledge" (Webb & Sergison, 2003, p. 291).

The child welfare system consists of social workers and staff and relies heavily on mandated reporters to initiate the referral and investigation process. Decision makers within the system are quite numerous, particularly in the early stage, including "teachers, healthcare staff, law enforcement, judges and mental health providers and even community members who report suspected maltreatment to child protective services" (Johnson, 2009, p. 688). This broad list of engaged professionals and community members highlights the necessity of ensuring that culturally responsive practices are standardized and implemented at every point of engagement. It is necessary that all professionals who are involved in the child welfare system and its processes attend culturally responsive training to effectively streamline culturally responsive practices.

Although a diverse workforce provides a multiplicity of benefits for organizations and their clients, the process of moving toward a more heterogeneous work force increases the likelihood of more friction and conflict (Henry et al., 2007). This increase in friction and conflict is the result of prejudice, ignorance, and derogatory comments, and requires managerial and organizational interventions to ensure that these behaviours and attitudes do not escalate to ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and culture clashes (White, 1999). The pursuit of diversity and inclusion within an organization typically follows a six-stage process: denial, recognition, acceptance, appreciation, valuing, and utilization (Porras & Silvers, 1991). The ability to assess where the organization is in this process is a necessary and helpful step in moving toward diversity.

Front Door

The Front Door pillar of the child welfare system concentrates on *how* children and families gain access to services. Commonly, the nature of the Front Door system is forensic, technocratic, and risk-averse, focusing primarily on reports and risk assessments (Lonne et al., 2021). Front Door-related procedures include hotline calls, referrals, investigations, and in-home services. Essentially, the Front Door is a culmination of engagements and decisions that influence whether a child will be removed from their

home. There is increasing concern that many Front Door processes and systems have the effect of widening the net. The focus on "children at risk" as opposed to "children in need" has further contributed to the system's forensic nature. This focus decreases child welfare practitioners' ability to identify family strengths and engage thoroughly with the family; it also can limit clinical judgement and decrease consistent decision-making in reporting and assessing concerns (Lonne et al., 2021).

Data from the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4), the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), and the State of California were utilized to assess the child welfare referral system, which operates under the Front Door pillar. According to Mumpower, the referral system is "less accurate for Blacks than for other racial or ethnic groups," as demonstrated through higher rates of false positives and false negatives, and more referrals that lead to unsubstantiated findings (2010, p. 364). The identification of disproportionality within the referral system has caused multiple states to implement processes to decrease disproportionality.

Among the variety of national-, state-, and county-level efforts, two counties in New York utilized culturally responsive practices to decrease disproportionality rates. Qualitative research was conducted to identify thematic patterns of factors that contributed to the decrease in disparity, including preventative measures and community resources. The counties also engaged other systems within the community that are correlated and connected with the child welfare system (e.g., Department of Juvenile Justice, Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, Office of Minority Affairs, Hispanic Counseling Center) to discuss potential strategies to eliminate racial disparity within the child welfare system. These gatherings involved discussion groups, community training, and school-based initiatives (Pryce et al., 2019).

One strategy is provided through Blind Removal meetings, which are intended to enable unbiased decision-making. Blind removal meetings "involve the presentation of cases to determine the need for removal without any information that may identify the family's race and socioeconomic status" (Cullen et al., 2021, p. 13). Data reveal that the blind removal process helps heighten practitioner awareness of "institutionalized racism and implicit bias" (Pryce et al., 2016, p. 17). Furthermore, evidence

demonstrates that the blind removal process, along with related training, "increased staff awareness of institutionalized racism and implicit bias and reinforced the values of self-examination and cultural diversity" (Casey Family Programs, 2021, p. 3).

Temporary Safe Haven

The Temporary Safe Haven pillar involves a focus and a belief that foster care must be a temporary safe haven, with planning for permanence, which begins the day a child enters care (Child and Family Services Agency, 2019). Unfortunately, despite all efforts, some children need to be removed from their parents to provide them with the best protection. It is necessary that child welfare practitioners utilize culturally responsive approaches to mitigate against the harm that often results from removals.

Family-centered approaches are highly recommended as a means of decreasing racial disparity within the system. The American Humane Association (2010) notes that there are six core aspects in conducting a family group decision-making session. These include: (1) having an independent conference coordinator who supports respectful and honest interactions during the conference; (2) providing agency resources to convene the extended family group and prepare them for their role as "decision-making partners"; (3) ensuring that the family group has time to meet and discuss the plan privately; (4) giving preference to the plan developed by the family, once agency concerns have been addressed; (5) implementing follow-up processes to track progress and achievements; and (6) assisting family groups in carrying out their plans by connecting them to the resources and services that will best meet their needs (American Humane Association, 2010).

The Family Group Conferencing Model (FGC) was first legislated by New Zealand to lower reliance on legal and protective interventions, and to advance the principles of family responsibility, children's rights, cultural affirmation, and community-state partnerships. The FGC occurs prior to the case moving to court (Waites et al., 2004). Benefits of this model include built-in checks and balances, removal of power imbalance, and a focus on the authority of the family to solve their own problems. The social worker plays the role of coordinator and focuses on organizing the conference by inviting family members, preparing the family for

participation, providing sufficient information without attempting to influence, allowing families to have time alone to deliberate, and assisting with negotiating the final plan (Waites et al., 2004).

Where children have been identified as needing to be removed from the care of their parent(s), kinship care is a culturally responsive practice with a myriad of inherent protective properties. Kinship care "enables important biological ties and can assist children with loss and grief issues, which can go unrecognized in the context of child welfare service delivery" (LaLiberte et al., 2015, p. 26). Children in kinship care also experience fewer home transitions, which is foundational to their overall emotional and psychological health (Winokur et al., 2008). Kinship care may provide a more conducive environment for positive ethnic identity perspectives than foster care. It is suggested that individuals who serve as kinship caregivers be paired with peer-to-peer support, which is a culturally responsive approach that increases child safety and caregiver's capacity to fulfill their responsibilities (Denby, 2011).

Well-Being

The Well-Being pillar is rooted in the belief that "every child has a right to a nurturing environment that supports healthy growth and development, good physical and mental health, and academic achievement" (Child and Family Services Agency [CFSA], Well Being Section, 2019, para. 4). Not only does every child have a right to nurturing environments, but children are expected to be better off after their stay in foster care. This pillar focuses on the services provided and engagement with families.

A case study was conducted on a New York County that utilized a system of care approach to provide culturally responsive practice during the well-being phase, which is offered through two primary modalities. The first modality focused on creating partnerships with local systems that serve children and youth, including "schools, mental health, juvenile justice, special education, foster care, and child welfare" (Pryce et al., 2019, p. 51). Hurlburt et al. (2004) found that increasing the connection between the child welfare system and local mental health services can decrease racial disparity outcomes within the system. This is especially true for African American children ages 6–10, who are more likely than their White counterparts to have unmet mental health needs (Burns et al., 2004).

Children within the child welfare system require a variety of assessments and health services. In response to this need, multi-agency collaboration helps to provide improved service access and outcomes (Hurlburt, 2004). The intent of this systems approach is to effectively streamline services to assist youth in the child welfare system. The second modality focuses on an access team consisting of frontline workers who help clients navigate the system. Instead of contacting multiple organizations or agencies for services, clients contact the access team, who is responsible for assisting clients in connecting with services. The county administration noted that the care approach system made it easier for families to access and remain connected to services (Pryce et al., 2019).

Another culturally responsive practice involves ensuring that families and children have access to care and that the services are culturally competent. It is recommended that child welfare agencies develop a diverse list of therapists, counselors, and other service providers so that they can readily refer families to providers who are culturally competent and, when possible, converse in the preferred language of the client (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Further, it is recommended that caseworkers also assume responsibility for identifying aspects of an individual's culture that may impact an individual's engagement with services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

Exit to Permanence

The fourth pillar, Exit to Permanence, strives to have every child exit foster care as quickly as possible into "a safe, well-supported family environment or life-long connection" (CFSA, Exit to Permanence Section, 2019, para. 5). This pillar also focuses on providing older youth with the skills they need to succeed as adults. At the time of the study, research was not available regarding culturally responsive practices during the Exit to Permanence phase.

Implications for Social Work Field Education

Field education practicums provide opportunities for students "to integrate and apply theory to practice, and to examine, critique, and test out in action the knowledge, values, and principles studied in academic courses" (Bogo, 2006, p. 163). Furthermore, the quintessential relationship between

the student and their field practicum places the student in a recipient position while the field practicum and supervisor are the primary providers of knowledge (Bogo, 2006). However, this research opportunity afforded the author with the experience of gathering and providing insight for institutional use. Research highlights that this form of student contribution is beneficial for two reasons. First, research findings note that students' satisfaction with their field education experience improves when they are given opportunities to increase their understanding of the population they are working with and the provided services (Alperin, 1998). In addition, Zlotnik (2002) notes that research conducted within the field education context can be beneficial to further institutionalize the relationship between social work education and public child welfare and ensure that quality services are provided for consumers.

Recommendations

This literature review provides an overview of culturally responsive practices within the context of child welfare agencies' programmatic implementation. The following recommendations are directed at American child welfare organizations for use in tandem with the implementation of the culturally responsive practices discussed in previous sections of this chapter. However, other jurisdictions may have parallel concerns and therefore may benefit from the following recommendations.

For many child welfare organizations, engaging in or increasing culturally responsive practices will require organizational change. It is recommended that organizations utilize a "phase model" to implement change (Packard et al., 2015). The Availability, Responsiveness, and Continuity (ARC) Organizational Intervention model "involves the use of trained change agents to help change culture, climate, and performance in human service programs" (Packard et al., 2015, p. 446). This model addresses the critical importance of the organizational context, and more specifically social, strategic, and technical factors that impact prospects for improving program operations and outcomes. The ARC model includes seven steps: (1) assessing the present state of the organization; (2) creating a sense of urgency; (3) clarifying the change imperative; (4) ensuring support and addressing resistance; (5) developing an action system; (6) implementing the change plan; and (7) evaluating, institutionalizing, and celebrating

effective change (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006; Palmer et al., 2009; Proehl, 2001). It is recommended that child welfare agencies undertaking organizational change to enhance cultural responsiveness utilize the ARC model or a similar phase model.

According to Tilbury et al. (2010), "performance indicators are not neutral or merely technical — they represent viewpoints and values that may influence policy and practice" (p. 226). Performance indicators influence how issues are defined, how and where resources are allocated, what programs are funded, and the conceptualization of children and family outcomes (Grasso & Epstein, 1987; Martin & Kettner, 1997). Additionally, "child welfare performance indicators contain implicit values about what is important in practice and how best to intervene to meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families" (Tilbury et al., 2010, p. 226). In light of the influence of performance indicators on programmatic investment, it is recommended that, for the sake of accountability and vision casting, cultural responsiveness be implemented into child welfare organizational performance accountability measurements.

Regarding field education, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) notes that a primary competency of social work education is to prepare social workers to work in varied contexts with diverse populations (CSWE, 2008). Furthermore, social work education strives to assist students in acquiring adept awareness of the client's community and cultural context (Colvin, 2013).

Therefore, in alignment with these CSWE educational objectives, it is recommended that field education supervisors and students collaborate on ways to integrate opportunities for discussing, applying, and promoting culturally responsive practices within the field practicum setting. The particulars of the discussion and implementation will likely vary depending on the specific population served. Campinha-Bacote (2002) provides insightful recommendations such as increasing cultural awareness, engaging in skill-based interventions, seeking more profound cultural knowledge, participating in cultural encounters, cultivating cultural desire, and implementing action-oriented practices as beneficial modalities apt to enhance cultural responsiveness within the context of field education.

Conclusion

In contrast to historical rates of underrepresentation, the American child welfare systems, on a national and state level, experience high disproportionality and disparity rates for families and children of colour (Hill, 2007). As a result, researchers have engaged in robust discussions regarding theories exploring the rationale for racial disproportionality and disparity of child welfare, and they have identified specific practices to address these concerns. This literature review explores and categorizes culturally responsive practices within the structure of Washington, D.C.'s Child and Family Services Agency outcome-based plan, the Four Pillars.

Furthermore, the author provides recommendations for child welfare agencies interested in implementing or enhancing their cultural responsiveness. Owing to the influence of performance indicators on policy and practice, the author recommends that child welfare organizations seeking to become more culturally responsive include, as a performance measurement domain, cultural responsiveness by incorporating it in their state-specific performance measurement language and structure. It is further recommended that organizations utilize the Availability, Responsiveness, and Continuity (ARC) Organizational Intervention model, or similar phase models, to assist in the organizational change necessary to support cultural responsiveness (Packard et al., 2015).

Additionally, implications for field education are considered, particularly the integral role that field education plays in practitioner training and competency building. Within the context of field education, specific actions are recommended: providing opportunities for increasing cultural awareness, engaging in skill-based interventions, seeking more profound cultural knowledge, participating in cultural encounters, cultivating cultural desire, and implementing action-oriented practices Campinha-Bacote, 2002).

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