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Perceptions and Considerations of Master's Level Social Work Graduates on the Public Child Welfare System

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Abstract

Public child welfare agencies struggle to recruit and retain staff even with numerous pipelines including social work programs. This qualitative, phenomenological study seeks to understand perceptions of recent Master of Social Work graduates of public child welfare and their sources. Researchers collected data from 13 graduates of a school of social work in the northeast to better understand their perceptions of public child welfare and factors in their job selection after graduation. Overall impressions of public child welfare were negative with implications for Findings suggest changes to public child welfare policy as well as schools of social work including closing gaps in education of outcomes and greater collaboration between micro and macro systems.

Keywords: Public Child Welfare, Perceptions, Master of Social Work

Introduction

The public child welfare system is one of the largest systems working with children and families with children and youth entering the system after a determination of abuse or neglect [1]. It has become increasingly apparent that the public child welfare system is lacking prepared and qualified staff, which negatively affects the families that enter the system [2]. Public child welfare is an incredibly challenging profession which requires skilled workers that can handle pressure, make difficult decisions, and produce positive outcomes for children and families. However, the public child welfare system is not meeting the needs of children and families entering the systemhas come under increased scrutiny, and in doing so, drives away prepared, qualified social workers from entering this particular job due to the negative perceptions of the field. Scholars have reviewed this challenge from various angles but have not asked the upcoming, qualified workers themselves that are about to enter the field and are seeking employment opportunities. This research takes a step back and tries to address the workforce issues earlier in the decision-making process.

The purpose of this study is to understand Master of Social Work (MSW) post-graduates' perceptions of working in public child welfare and their sources when making career decisions. While there are efforts made to educate social work students to work in public child welfare, there are still not enough qualified social work graduates working in public child welfare. Examining the perceptions of MSW graduates will provide some guidance as to why the current public child welfare system faces difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified professionals. While a Master's degree is not required to work in public child welfare, it does adequately prepare social workers with the skills required to work in the field.

Relevance to Social Work

Stakeholders in the field of social work have dedicated significant time and efforts to improve the workforce in public child welfare to better the outcomes of children and families [3]. Colleges and universities also take time to create specializations, certificates, and concentrations with incentives for social workers to be prepared to work in public child welfare. Even with this work, there are a great number of vacancies in states such as Pennsylvania [2].

Social workers are well equipped to work in public child welfare including extensive values and skills to practice situations that promote human and community well-being [4]. Not all public child welfare workers have a degree in social work, but child welfare systems in many states have focused on this particular degree to invest time and money in to gain a well-educated workforce [5]. However, a difference in values and practice creates a divide that has put social workers at risk when they enter public child welfare work [6]. Understanding the differences in perception can be helpful in understanding where changes may need to occur in practice.

Literature Review

Literature on perceptions of public child welfare is scarce, and the information is not relevant which supports the need for more research around this topic in the present. Literature is provided below on

perceptions of public child welfare and the intersection of perception with the media. Symbolic Interaction Theory provides a lens in which to view the problem presented.

Perceptions of Public Child Welfare

Perceptions of public child welfare can reduce the eagerness of social work students to enter the field. Negative views of social work can be found as far back as 1973 on the event of the death of Maria Colwell., I it was at this point in time that social work was first connected to a child's death that, which was believed to be preventable [7]. Following the death of a child, demands for reform emerge through political platforms, usually triggered by media coverage. This dynamic leads to the creation of higher standards of worker accountability, and it has the additional consequence of creating anxiety for the workers [8-10].

A multi-state study of 2,910 public child welfare staff using the Perception of Child Welfare Scale found significant factors of stigma, nature of work, blame, and respect [11]. The scale is validated for private child welfare workers, but no validation studies with public agency staff [11]. Public child welfare workers often feel blamed by media after tragedies, which can trigger feelings of job insecurity [11]. The idea of blame was not found in previous studies. The study also found that stigma of the work (public perception) and respect are important constructs that predict worker intent to leave [11]. Studies on the relationship between public child welfare and the media have been conducted internationally [10,12-14]. In sum, the media's portrayal of public child welfare shapes future workers' perceptions and sparks real changes among public child welfare agencies. This may result in a misalignment of workers' expectations, perceptions, and lived experiences in public child welfare work settings, thereby making it less likely that workers would choose and then persist in public child welfare professional positions.

Media Influence

Research has been conducted through reviews of newspaper articles and other relevant media to determine the relationship between public child welfare and the news media internationally. Laliberte et al. [10] note that the public perception of social workers in the media is generally not positive, but public child welfare workers can be perceived in an especially negative light. Public child welfare workers are aware of this negative view as well as its influence on public perception. In the study, researchers suggested that educators should prepare graduating public child welfare workers for the media's negative construal of their work. They also posit that part of their training should be preparation for working with media and educating them, stating, "our students deserve better" [10].

This international and dated lens is all that was available to review, again pointing to the importance of exploring perceptions of child welfare in the present daythis work. Through an analysis of newspaper articles and the daily Hansard record of political exchanges in the House of Commons in England, it was found that social workers were portrayed as cold, inhumane, and disconnected [12]. In the United Kingdom, television shows were analyzed, and researchers found that social workers in media depictions do little to improve public perception of public child welfare [15]. A similar review was conducted in New Zealand, and Australia's struggle with the media has also been documented [16].

This negative depiction is not only limited to public child welfare workers but also extends to most of human services [17, 18]. Lee and Paddock [19] and Wielde and Shultz [20] indicate a more complex reason behind the negative depictions. Wielde and Shultz [20] studied the depictions of human services in American movies and identified five different depictions, two of which were largely negative. These studies concluded that media does not help the perception of public child welfare workers and, in

fact, contribute to the negative perceptions [20-22]. Results of news media coverage when a tragedy occurs in the public child welfare domain can result in the termination of public child welfare staff, including directors. This can lead to the public's belief that the public child welfare agency was to blame or at fault, thereby creating a negative image of public child welfare in their minds [10, 23].

Coverage by the media is powerful and occurs in multiple forms, which can lead to reactionary changes in public child welfare and a "blame game" that further stigmatizes public child welfare workers and their supervisors [10, 24, 25]. In a content analysis study by Cooper [26], it was found that more rules and procedures were imposed upon the public child welfare workers by management in 2003. Public child welfare staff felt a lack of support and that this, in turn, undermined their authority within communities further exacerbating their ability to work within these spaces [26]. These changes ultimately reduce morale within the agency as they feel the result of the changes as a form of repercussion [10]. Public child welfare workers understand what happens to their coworkers who make mistakes as they get caught up in the "blame game" presented by the media. In a qualitative review of 1,512 articles from major newspapers from 2008 to 2012, social workers were perceived as receivers of referrals and those who remove children from their home to other placements [13]. Social workers were blamed when reports related to something going wrong in the process [13].

Given the abundance of negative attention in the media and its cascading effects (that is, negative media leading to reactionary system change and difficult work conditions), some researchers have suggested collaborating with media as a solution. While reviewing articles to improve their view of public child welfare is important, it is just as important to focus on a solution. A study conducted on United States newspapers from 2000 to 2008 found that it is beneficial for child welfare advocates to focus on communication goals to educate the public about their services in response to the negative views created by the media [14]. This study, however, found that the topic of child abuse in general is framed as an issue that has societal causes as well as solutions.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

The general perception of public child welfare has grown increasingly negative, and the number of prepared social work graduates entering public child welfare as professionals has continued to decline [2, 12]. These phenomena can be explained utilizing symbolic interactionism theory which will be used to understand MSW students' perception of public child welfare.

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Symbolic interactionism (SI) is derived from the works of George Mead [27] and Herbert Blumer [28]. The primary tenet of SI theories is that people assign (i.e., cognitively connect) definitions to cultural symbols. People then base their actions on this constructed understanding of the world around them [29]. Symbols emerge from interactions with the external world and can be anything from language to the form and function of an institution, such as public child welfare. Symbols are influenced by the larger social world, and their meaning can change. Similarly, a person's understanding of a symbol may change to match others' perceptions of the same symbol [29, 30]. This theory has three general assumptions: people work toward and act upon what signifies meaning for that individual; meaning is derived from social interaction; and meaning is adapted through interpretive processes [30]. In the SI perspective, individuals are perceived and understood within the context of their environment.

The SI perspective also suggests that within the environment, there is a shared understanding among individuals of these meanings [30]. This occurs through an interactive process with the world and people around them. An individual may identify what a symbol means to them personally within the context of what is happening around them.

This can be influenced by the media, events, and people who provide information. This definitional process is fluid; the individual is constantly taking in new information that may substantiate and/or change their understanding of a particular symbol. Over time, a stable symbolic meaning emerges, and the individual makes decisions based on this understanding. Individuals can be influenced to share the same meaning as others, even though a particular individual might define the meaning for themselves. Personal experiences also play a part in how information is received and interpreted by each individual person [30].

Symbolic interactionism provides a useful framework to understand humans' behavior within their environment and social contexts [30]. Qualitative research strategies align with SI, as they require researchers to "mine" data for constructed themes and meaning and prompt researchers to notice how meaning shapes the phenomenon being studied. The SI perspective can be helpful in working with individual clients in micro social work practice, as it encourages the examination of meaning related to relationships or situations in the context of a person's life [29]. SI can also be utilized to explore the different meanings that human groups attach to symbols.

Gaps

Gaps in the literature include current (within the last decade) research on perceptions of public child welfare and influence of the media. There could be more research as well on perceptions specific to various levels of social workers in both their education and post-graduation views of public child welfare to better understand where the perception derives. Social workers are viewed in various forms in the media, and more information is needed to understand perceptions drawn from those views rather than real life experiences.

Materials and Methods

Design

This study incorporates a qualitative methodology which allowed the investigator to explore a little-knownpoorly researched topic and capture the lived experiences of respondents [31]. Primary data were collected through online surveys and then opt-in interviews. Data was then analyzed qualitatively and mined for new meanings that emerged organically.

Secondary data obtained from a university in the Northeastfrom the gatekeeper was available to this investigator as well. The main goal of this study was to understand the decision-making process of MSW graduates as well as their perceptions of public child welfare.

Variables

The independent variable included the child welfare specialization and Master of Social Work degree. The dependent variables included perceptions of child welfare as stigma, nature, respect, and blame and intent to work in public child welfare. Other variables were identified during the phenomenological analysis.

Research Question

The research presented here emanates from a broader research agenda that explores child welfare workforce concerns [3]. The present study reflects the portion of findings that are related directly to the following research question:

1. When making career decisions, what are MSW post-graduates' perceptions of working in public child welfare and what information led to the perceptiontheir sources?

Perceptions →Decision Making→ Workforce Composition→ Quality of Services to Children

As noted above, the role of perception is poorly understood and may significantly affect the workforce composition in child welfare. The purpose of this study is to understand perceptions related to MSW graduates' career decision-making process. The investigator utilized a two-prong analytic strategy, employing phenomenological analysis and analyses based on categories derived from the literature [31].

Hypothesis

1. MSW graduates with a child welfare specialization have an integrated perception of the public child welfare system, derived from several sources.

Setting

This study focused on Master of Social Work graduates so the investigator connected with a prominent, large northeastern university, which offers both graduate level social work programs and child welfare specialization in an urban setting. This university was the only source of data collection.

Sample

The purposive sample included MSW graduates. If MSW graduates did not complete the child specialization, they would be excluded from this research. This university's child welfare specialization comprises full time and advanced standing programs, and both clinical and macro concentrations. Participants were recruited through email correspondence after emails were provided by the gatekeeper. Recruitment strategies are detailed below. Forty-seven MSW graduates were invited to participate; 28 percent (n=13) completed the online survey. Fifteen percent (n=7) participated in the follow-up interview.

Data Collection

Data collection and the research process was approved through the Millersville University Institutional Review Board.

The online survey was self-administered to the 47 alumni of the program utilizing Qualtrics. In the email including the survey, it also made clear to participants: (1) the purpose of the study, (2) the voluntary nature of participation in the study, and (3) protection of the confidentiality of the participants' names.

After participation in the online survey, the investigator reached out, with consent from the participant, to schedule an interview. Interviews were conducted over Zoom due to the geographic locations of graduates to accommodate participation. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed through NVivo software. Identifying information was not included in the transcriptions.

Results

The following data summarized below stems from the result of this author's dissertation [3].

Demographics

Majority of Participants in the online survey were white women with a micro concentration their MSW degree. Eighty-five percent of survey respondents (two men, nine women) were white. Fifteen percent of survey respondents (two women) were black. Eight percent of respondents self-identified as Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin. The average age was 30.61 years (SD = 3.07, age range: 25 - 39 years). Sixty-two percent of the participants had micro concentration (clinical), and 38 percent had macro concentration (research, policy, or leadership) as students. Thirty-eight percent reported that they have worked in the public child welfare sector, with 23 percent indicating that public child welfare was their first job after graduation. Eight percent (n = 1) of the participants still work in public child welfare. Eighty-five percent of participants were undecided as to whether they would work for public child welfare in the future.

Interview participants tended to be white females with a micro concentration as students. All interview participants completed the online survey. One hundred percent of interview participants (two male, five female) were white with 14 percent identifying as

Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin. Interview participants had a mean age of 31.29 (SD = 3.50, age range: 29 - 39). Eighty-six percent of participants had micro concentration as students. Forty-three percent have worked in public child welfare with 0 percent currently working in public child welfare. For 14 percent of participants, public child welfare was their first job after graduation. Eighty-six percent of participants are undecided as to whether they would ever work for public child welfare in the future.

Experience since Graduation

Interview participants (n = 7) were asked to share their experiences in the field of social work since graduation. For some, the descriptions of the jobs they have had were connected to emotions and aspirations. For example, one participant shared, "my overall views is that we're overworked and underpaid." Participants shared some reasoning behind transitioning from one job to another or identified areas they wanted to learn such as languages or skills.

Perceptions of Public Child Welfare

Asking participants questions related to the perceptions of public child welfare can help to understand the symbols and meanings attached to the public child welfare system through the lived experiences of respondents. Both online survey participants and individual interview participants were asked to share their perceptions of public child welfare as well as what they believe has influenced those perceptions. Individual experience and peers were indicated as main influencers in the perceptions of public child welfare. The majority of messages heard by MSW graduates were negative. Survey participants, therefore, identified a negative perception of public child welfare. Interview participants also identified a negative view of public child welfare, with a varied perception as a close second.

Influencers

Influencers are individuals or experiences who have influenced the perception of MSW graduates. Interview participants (n = 7) were asked what they believed influenced their perception of public child welfare.

Individual Experience. Four (57.14 percent) MSW graduates reported that their experiences influenced their perception of public child welfare. These experiences comprised interactions with public child welfare workers or those being served by the public child welfare system. One participant described, "being the person that has to go into a mother's, a new mother that just had a baby's room to say that we need to call (*public child welfare*) for X reason and seeing their reaction…"

Media. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates identified that the news media influences their perception of public child welfare. One participant described seeing news articles where kids fall through the cracks and bad things happen to them. For example, "a couple things happened in (*locations*) um where you know kids kind of fell through the cracks."

Public Child Welfare Workers. Two (28.57%) MSW graduates reported that workers in the public child welfare system influence their perception of public child welfare. Workers identified in interviews included caseworkers, "terrible person on the hotline," peers that worked in public child welfare, and other individuals working directly in the system.

Peers. Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates shared that their perception of public child welfare is influenced by their peers, specifically coworkers, "word of mouth," and other individuals they worked with.

Service Providers. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate reported that service providers influence their perception of public child welfare. Service providers are those who do not directly represent public child welfare but provide similar services or contract with the state to provide services.

Messages

Interview participants (n = 7) were asked to share the things that they heard about working in the public child welfare field before they became a professional social worker. They were asked to share what those messages had been.

Individual Experience. One (14.28 percent) participant reported that while working in a previous job, they witnessed and were traumatized by how young people were treated by a professional in public child welfare. A participant shared, "I was so traumatized by what I witnessed and how the young people were treated."

Little Messages. One (14.28 percent) participant shared that they did not have much exposure to public child welfare before they became a social worker. They may have heard a few messages about family situations such as, "what you hear and like what you hear about the kids in the school or what you hear about their family situations."

Media. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates reported that media influenced their perceptions of public child welfare workers. One participant shared the example of the show Law and Order SVU, where they portray public child welfare workers as a "villain" or very ineffective. Another graduate described how they heard about the "negatives" of public child welfare workers in a rap song when they were younger. The song had a part that said something about social workers "taking their kids away."

Negative Messages. Four (57.14 percent) MSW graduates stated that the messages they heard created negative perceptions about public child welfare. For example, they heard messages that child welfare workers took children away or ripped them from their homes. Other messages were that it is a hard job, and that they will experience burnout or feel overworked. One participant reported that there is a lack of support or consideration for mental health from supervisors. One MSW graduate heard that public child welfare is a punitive system. For example, "it's difficult more because the high stress of it and long hours and just the mental toll that it can take being exposed to all different levels of you know other people's trauma through you."

Risks of Work. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate shared that they had heard "horror stories" of public child welfare workers getting "stabbed" when visiting a home or experiencing threats being directed toward them.

MSW Perceptions

Largely, perceptions from the survey and interview are similar, thereby suggesting the result would be the same regardless of data collection method. Because of this finding, results will be compiled from both in one place. Participants (n = 13) were asked to share their perceptions of public child welfare.

Negative Perception. Twelve (92.31 percent) MSW graduates' perceptions are that the system is broken, inconsistent, there is poor management, the system is in constant crisis, outcomes for children are poor, and the system is unpopular with families due to its punitive nature. On participant stated, "the system is unpopular with families, caseworker positions are underfunded, and outcomes for children are poor." Participant one shared the following quote:

> It's like a piece of Swiss cheese, that's just like gaping holes where there needs to be professionals that get paid well, have the experience to, and are from the communities they're working in to actually see like an overhaul of positive change.

Public Child Welfare Workers. Three (23.08 percent) MSW graduates' perceptions of public child welfare workers are that they lack appreciation and that they are overworked, and employees are underpaid. A participant shared that public child welfare workers were "very inconsistent with respect to how cases are handled/treated."

Responsibilities. One (7.69 percent) MSW graduate shared that they perceive the responsibilities of public child welfare to contribute to the ineffectiveness. They believe that administrators make decisions that do not benefit clients. Public child welfare agencies have too much autonomy to conduct services, leading to differences in different geographic locations. Public child welfare should employ leaders in the field, and workers should have a social work or similar degree. A participant shared, "I believe there is really great work happening at community based NPO's, but I feel that the overarching system of (public child welfare) is not a leader in public child welfare."

Positive Perception. Two (15.38 percent) MSW graduate shared that their perception has been changed positively by other agencies that have been doing amazing work. Another MSW graduate believes there is "value" in the system, and it is necessary.

Varied Perception. Three (23.07 percent) MSW graduates shared that their perception of public child welfare varied. One participant shared that they believe it can be a beneficial system if all the parts are moving well. Another MSW graduate shared that, as public child welfare varies to a great extent based on the state and county, their perception changes based on each agency. One shared, "people are trying to do the best that they can, and sometimes the among of people on a on someone's caseload is not sustainable to provide everything that they, that people need."

Unique Findings

The following findings were not addressed in research questions, however, unexpected themes emerged that are relevant to perceptions and factors related to the decision-making process: public child welfare effect on social work, importance of public child welfare, punitive nature of public child welfare, and perception changes.

Also of note, 70% of MSW graduates that participated in the interview shared their perception of public child welfare shaped their career decisions. At least one sharing that they left public child welfare employment due to their experiences.

Discussion

Findings provide valuable insight into MSW graduates' perceptions of public child welfare and implications for practice. Participants identified that their own experiences had the most influence on these perceptions. For participants who have not worked in public child welfare, there are other sources of strong influence. They hear stories directly from families they work with or have negative experiences with public child welfare in other ways. The findings of this study confirm that MSW graduates hear negative stories from peers, public child welfare PCW workers, professors, families, and children themselves. Reunification and adoption stories are just as if not more prevalent as negative experiences, but MSW graduates did not share those during this research. This gap in information could indicate a point of entry for messaging that creates more positive expectations among graduate students. It suggests that professors and coworkers can intervene with the positive stories that could change the perception of public child welfare. Interview participants discussed in other questions how professors made a difference in their perceptions and even changed negative perceptions to positive perceptions. More research could explore the role of faculty in the creation and dissemination of images and information that shape MSW graduates' perceptions.

Overwhelmingly, the perceptions of public child welfare from MSW graduates were negative. MSW graduates also felt the community views public child welfare in a negative light. They often excluded public child welfare workers from this assessment of negative perception, noting that they are doing the best they can. This suggests that MSW graduates believe the challenges in public child welfare are systemic and hinder workers. Participants understood case workers must operate in bad working conditions, and often take the blame themselves for errors. The micro/macro divide in how to address these challenges appears to shape participants' perceptions at every level, and the lens of symbolic interactionism brings this dynamic into sharper focus. Here, respondents separate the worker from the system, though the interaction between the two is what creates the challenges that become the "meaning" of public child welfare. This view again confirms that changing perceptions and improving systems will undoubtedly include mending the disconnect between micro and macro social work practice. Symbolic interactionism requires interaction, and if micro and macro are separated it creates an "us versus them" mentality. It allows case workers to blame the system of public child welfare for their problems, and in turn, the system can blame the case workers for their problems.

Symbolic interactionism allows for a deeper understanding of "negativity," as well. Participants across the board felt that the community views public child welfare negatively, and they resisted being associated professionally with the public child welfare practice. It may be that public child welfare symbolized "negative" or "bad" practice and therefore, participants resisted the association in fear that it would be applied directly to them. It is interesting to note that while participants thus avoided public child welfare, they felt guilty about doing so. Though speculative, this finding could suggest that service to children symbolizes "goodness" that makes respondents feel uncomfortable about eschewing public child welfare, which is populated by the most vulnerable children. Respondents' emotional connection to career choices is ripe for additional research. Participants typically expressed themes of wanting to do good work and wanting to feel valued, but it appears public child welfare could not, in their view, meet these aspirations.

Strengths and Limitations

Several methodological strengths support the findings of this study and meet gaps in current knowledge. Data was collected through both an online survey and individual interview, which illustrated reliability through similarities in answers regardless of the way data were collected. The sample was relatively homogeneous in nature because the participants were from the same program and had the same certification and degree. In this case, the sample size reached saturation with 13 participants in the online survey and 7 individual interviews [32, 33]. Choice of theoretical framework allowed for a greater understanding of the perceptions of MSW graduates of public child welfare in both meaning-making and decision-making processes.

Participants understood that the investigator was looking at perceptions of public child welfare, which poses a limitation in this study. Understanding the purpose of the interview and survey could have influenced participants' responses. For example, perhaps they wanted to be "helpful" or "defend" their decisions regarding career choices. The timing of this study may be important, as well. Data was gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced answers of participants. For example, clinical workers may consider the job factor of mileage reimbursement for traveling to homes, schools, etc. However, the pandemic has changed the setting of work to more at home and virtual work. Many social work jobs have stayed virtual, so a few participants expressed having looked for virtual or flexible work. Another limitation is the lack of diversity in the sample with most of the participants being white in race. Having a more diverse sample could potentially have implications for the findings of this study.

Implications for Social Work

Implications of this study for social work span social work education, training, and systemic change and leadership. Results from this study suggest that educators could do more to prepare public child welfare workers for the challenges in the field. While direct work in public child welfare is a direct service job, participants were seeking more skills in leadership, organizational change, and social justice [3].

For clinical students, more training can be provided in these areas. While educators prepare students for work in public child welfare, there may be gaps in perceptions, risk, and alignment to ethics and values of social work. Positive stories from the field may be helpful in recruiting social work students to the field of public child welfare.

Media coverage of public child welfare and its missteps may create a shared understanding that public child welfare organizations are a difficult place to work. This study confirms that MSW graduates share and consider these perceptions in their career decision-making process [3]. Many participants suggested the need for change in public child welfare's punitive nature for social workers to become more interested in employment. Educational leadership could be added to curricula in the content of child welfare specializations to better prepare students. Leaders in the field of public child welfare can take more time and preparation to mitigate the impact of negative media messaging to ultimately improve services to vulnerable families.

Further Research

A larger replication of this study, including diverse study sites, would add to the certainty of its findings. The research question could be broadened to include different levels of education and regions. Future studies could explore themes identified here with greater depth and refinement. Finally, though students comprise a captive audience for messaging and education, this research reveals that personal experiences happening outside of educational settings are weighed most heavily during decision making processes. Given this finding, a far greater understanding of how and why these experiences matter is needed.

Conclusions

Public child welfare continues to experience challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff with significant evidence of these factors. Stories of broken systems and burned-out social workers become the definition that is passed through generations of social workers who may want to help children and families. Meaningful change will involve teaching more macro level skills to social workers to become the change agents in the public child welfare system. When the qualified workers no longer show interest or believe in the system they have studied, it requires further understanding of how this came to be and what may create that change. By targeting multiple points, providing further research, and creating space for innovation, we can begin to create change.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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