SELF-EFFICACY AMONG A SAMPLE OF CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

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Abstract - The work of child welfare is central to securing a resilient future for society. Protecting children and helping families is a complex task that those in the child welfare field tackle each day. One measure of the ability and confidence to perform such work is self-efficacy. This studyexamined self-efficacy in children and family services employees during a three-year period. The changes in self-efficacy were related to the provision of field training given to the child welfare employees during their first year of employment. It was determined that self-efficacy was statistically significant in regard to training, with a positive outcome in two of three years. Frequency of training topics, caseload size, and training strength were also analyzed in the study.

Keywords - Child Welfare, Self-Efficacy, Training

I. INTRODUCTION

The field of child welfare comprises the work of front-line employees who are charged with protecting children in events of abuse or neglect. Self-efficacy in this specific field is paramount to successfully providing services to children and families. Indeed, the lives of the most vulnerable members of society, i.e., children, are in the hands of these employees. Self-efficacy is noted as the belief one has about their capabilities which in turn can affect many processes and outcomes. This concept was developed by Bandura [1] and has been widely used in the helping professions. For instance, self-efficacy was examined in relation to dissatisfaction in child welfare practice [2], well-being and resilience among teachers [3], and attitudes toward evidenced-based practice in social work [4].

The umbrella organization for the study is the Arkansas Academic Partnership in Public Child Welfare, a partnership of nine participating universities who are dedicated to training and educating prospective and current child welfare workers throughout the state of Arkansas (U.S.). The Partnership has existed since 1991and remains the longest continuing running project within theUniversity of Arkansas system. The Partners consist of two private universities and seven state supported universities. The Partnership was initially created as a response to child welfare reform efforts that were common during the 1990s. During that time, the U.S. government recognized the value of linking child welfare state agencies to universities to bolster the ranks of professionally prepared social workers into the child welfare field. Subsequently the U.S. government passed legislation creating the IV-E entitlement program to bolster these activities. The funding (Title IV-E) is currently provided through the Administration for Children and Families and is distributed to the state child welfare agency and funneled to universities throughout the United States [5].

Field training is one component of the Arkansas Academic Partnership in Public Child Welfare. It is provided to every new Family Service Worker (FSW) employed by the state child welfare agency. Field training is augmented by formal classroom training through a child welfare academy that trains every new worker in five (5) foundational units and four (4) concentration units [6].Newly hired employees in child welfare receive up to one year, and in some cases beyond one year, of training and education provided by a field trainer. Every new FSW is seen by a field trainer who provides weekly support to the employee in the worker's office and in the field during visits with clients and attendance at court hearings.

Nested inside field training endeavors is an assessment system that helped determine the self-efficacy of FSWs who responded to an initial and subsequent survey provided by their field trainer.

II. ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

2.1. Field Training Activities

The assessment system was developed circa 2011 in response to the desire toascertain if field training provided to new employees in their first eight months of training resulted in increased self-efficacy. The concept of self-efficacy was utilized because it appeared to be a valid measure of field training impact, and was a measure thought to be more palatable to employees, who might be concerned about information being used for employee evaluations.

The field training delivered to these workers falls into three distinct areas based on the stage of employment [7]. All FSWs receive field training in their first year of employment and in some cases beyond. Field training activities during the orientation or pre-

classroom training focus on providing support and encouragement to the new employee, assisting the employee with orientating to agency and office culture, training on policy, and assisting with problem solving.The second phase of the field training effort is presented while the employee is progressing through classroom foundations and concentrations training. During this time the training is highly focused on augmenting classroom training in the form of accompanying the employee on at least three client home visits, training on interviewing and assessment, training on policies presented in classroom training, educating the employee on community and agency resources, and reinforcement of best practices in the field of child welfare. The third training phase is for the period of time beyond the formal classroom (foundations and concentrations) training. During that time, the field trainer maintains regular contact with the employeeand provides support for agency specific requirements (home visits, information system reporting, additional policies and procedures). It is during this phase that the self-efficacy assessment takes place. All the field training activities are grounded in the principles of Safety Organized Practice which is a child welfare practice approach that emphasizes a collaborative approach to working with the child and family. This targeted training approach focuses on the following training modules: Assessment, solution focused questions, collaborative assessment and planning framework, creating harm, worry and goal statements, child's voice in assessment, child's voice in planning, circles of safety and support, family time, and behaviorally based plans [8].

Each of the three training phases are undergirded by 76 child welfare subject areas, any of which can be selected by a field trainer and/or an employee during the training period. The topics are situated within three broad areas which are child welfare practice, general human services and social work knowledge or skills, and content specific to the child welfare agency (e.g., policy and procedures [9].Field trainers are assigned to employees based on geographic location, university partnership, and availability.

2.2 Sample

The sample in the study were employees (Family Service Workers) with the Arkansas Department of Human Services who deliver front line child welfare services to clients experiencing adverse family situations. Employees hired must have the formal education equivalent of a bachelor's degree in social work, sociology, psychology, or a related field [10]. All the individuals were in their first year of employment and were trained through the Arkansas Academic Partnership in Public Child Welfare.

The self-efficacy data are derived from three data periods: a) July 1, 2021 to May 31, 2022, b) July 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023, and c) July 1, 2023 to March 31,2024. For the remainder of the paper, these years will be designated as Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3. The time periods are contractually determined through external funding.

Table 1 details the pre and post survey sample size for each of the years under consideration.

Year	Pre-Survey Sample Size	Post-Survey Sample Size
Year 1	51	19
Year 2	40	11
Year 3	28	14

Table 1

2.3. Procedures

A self-efficacy survey is administered in the first month after the completion of the first classroom training concentration unit. The post survey is given at about the four-month mark of employment. Each employee rates their perceived skill and knowledgein regard to a Learning Path [11].

The rating scale is known as the Learning Path and consists of an ordinal scale tying back to the state agency work competencies. The five skills levels are as follows:

1. "Unfamiliar" evidenced by the statement that "I lack most of the basic knowledge and skills to successfully function in with my job-related duties."
2. "Developing" indicated by the statement "I possess some but not all knowledge and/or skills to successfully function within my job-related duties."
3. "Adequate" related to the statement "I possess all needed knowledge and/or skills at a basic level to successfully function within my job-related duties."
4. "Advanced" or "I possess advanced knowledge and/or skills at a basic level to successfully function within my job-related duties."
5. "Mastery" described as "I possess expert knowledgeand/or skills at a basic level to successfully function within my job-related duties."

Pre and post surveys are identical and the difference between the first and second survey indicates the level of change in the employee's perceived skill and knowledge.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four broad areas of results will be presented: Field training topics, average caseload size of workers, initial self-efficacy scores, and post self-efficacy scores. Training strength was also evaluated. The latter is a score between 0 and 20, that combines the average subject post self-efficacy score with the change in self-efficacy between the initial and post surveys. This translates into consideration of a field

training effect, which is turn may inform what training may be needed in the provision of field training to child welfare staff [12].

3.1. Results for Year 1

During the period of time from July 1, 2021 to May 31, 2022, the top five requested fieldtraining topics were Foster Care (1,428), Case Management (1,244), Communication Skills (772), Policies and Procedures (748), and Information Systems (689). The bottom five training topics requested and/or delivered were Developmental Disorders of Childhood (15), Human Trafficking (13), Physical Health (10), Physical Disabilities (7), and Nurturing Families of Arkansas (2). All 76 subjects were utilized during this time.

The average caseload size of new workers who returned initial surveys was 10.44. This metric is provided as a factor that could presumably impact self-efficacy. The range of caseloads was 0 to 81. If a worker had no cases, it would be presumed that they might not be able to gauge their own self-efficacy as they have not been exposed to actual casework practice. The average caseload size of new workers who returned post surveys was 22. The range was 0 to 77 in terms of caseload size.

The average initial survey score for all surveys (n=51) yielded a self-efficacy score of 5.74. The post survey average(n=19) was 6.97. This change of 1.23 indicated that initial scores were more in the range of slightly above the adequate level to nearer the advanced level of self-efficacy. An unpaired t test was used to evaluate statistical significance, which was deemed to be very significant, t (1352) =9.0368, p = <0.0001).

The scores with the highest training strength were Reasonable Efforts (13.3), Sexual Abuse (13.0), Supportive Services (13.0), Reports (11.5), and Structured Decision Making (11.0). These scores indicate that survey respondents had a higher level of self-efficacy in regard to these particular training subjects. The lowest level of training strengthwas related to the topics of Poverty versus Neglect (3.6), Child Neglect (3.9), Environmental Safety Issues (4.4), Assessment of Risk (4.5), and Casework Supervision (4.5).

3.2. Results for Year 2

The second data point covers July 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023. The top five requested field training topics were Case Management (1081), Communication Skills (638), Child Welfare Information System (625), Case Load Management (546) and Policies and Procedures (520). Topics that were least of concern to workers in terms of training were Positive Parenting Program (2), Child Care (3), Immediate Safety Plan (4), Human Trafficking (4), and Physical Disabilities (11).

For those who returned an initial survey, the average caseload size they carried was 15.3, with a range of 0 to 53. Post survey respondentscarried an average caseload size of 16, and the range was 0 to 34 cases.

The average pre survey score (n = 40) was 6.12, with the post survey (n = 11) scores equaling 5.54. This demonstrates a decrease of 0.58 in self-efficacy instead of the expected increase. An unpaired t test revealed a statistically significant finding, but in the opposite direction of what would be expected,t (1120) = 3.5242,p = 0.0004. Possible reasons for such a finding will be discussed in a later section.

The training topics with the highest training strength were Assessment of Risk (11.2), Child Maltreatment Definitions (8.3), Child Maltreatment Protocol (7.8), Communication Skills (7.8), and Assessment of Safety (7.1). Subjects needing future training efforts were Transitional Youth Services (-1.5), Child Development Milestones (1.4), Child Welfare Information Systems (2.7), Assessment (3.7), and Court Testimony (4.0).

3.3. Results for Year 3

The final analysis covered the period of time from July 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024. Field training subjects were selected by the field trainer in conjunction with the needs and requests of the employee. There were 76 subjects available for selection. During this time, the top five requested field training topics were Case Management (1,114), Safety Organized Practice (751), Communication Skills (675), Child Welfare Information Systems (593), and Home Visits (514). The subjects that were least frequently selected during this period of time were Developing the Adoption Packet (1), Supporting Adoption Placements and Case Plan Communication and Maintenance (2 each), Recruitment, Matching and Selection and Disclosure and Pre-Placement Activities (each with a frequency of 3).

The average case load size for this period of time for initial respondents was 14.14 with the range occurring between a low of four to a high of 26. This reflects a somewhat new trend of workers having a caseload (previous years reported a low of 0). The caseloads carried by the post-survey group was an average of 19, with a range from 5 to 37.

The initial self-efficacy survey score (n=28) was 5.88. Post surveys totaled 14, and the post self-efficacy survey score rose to 7.46. The difference between the two self-efficacy scores was 1.58. This statistic is more in line with expected findings in relation to self-efficacy. An unpaired t test indicated a statistically significant finding of t(811) = 9.7407, p<0.0001.

The training topics with the highest training strength were Court Testimony (14.1), Structured Decision Making (14.0), Disabilities (13.7), Assessment of Safety (13.3), and Neglect (12.4). Subjects that were least used and thus had low training strength were Substance Use Issues (1.0), Transitional Youth Services (4.8), Interviewing Skills (5.4), Mental Health (6.4), and Communication Skills (8.0).

3.4. Comprehensive Results

The training topic most frequently chosen by employees for further training was overwhelmingly Case Management (3,439) followed by Communication Skills (2,085). Information Systems (1,907) and Foster Care (1,428) rounded out requested topics in the double digits. Conversely the topics least requested generally focused on disabilities and physical health (n=43).

Caseload size for these newly hired employees ranged from 0 to a high of 77 during the three reporting periods. Average initial caseload size was 10, 15, and 14respectfully for Years 1, 2, and 3. Average post-survey caseload size was 22, 16, and 19 for Years 1, 2, and 3. This information is presented in Table 2.

Time Period	Average Initial Caseload	Average Post Caseload	Range
Year 1	10	22	Initial 0-81 Post 0-77
Year 2	16	16	Initial 0-53 Post 0-34
Year 3	14	19	Initial 4-26 Post 5.37

Table 2

Self-efficacy data was collected via an initial survey at onset of employment and subsequent survey at about the 8-month mark. For two of the three years, self-efficacy scores increased from pre to post. However, the middle year (year 2) revealed a decrease in the self-efficacy score. See Table 3. The statistical significance, using an unpaired samplest-test procedure revealed statistical significance for all three years.

Time Period	Pre-Survey Self-Efficacy Score	Post-Survey Self-Efficacy Score	Change in Score	Statistical Significance
Year 1	5.74	6.97	+ 1.23	t=9.0368*
Year 2	6.12	5.54	- 0.58	t=3.5242*
Year 3	5.88	7.46	+ 1.58	t=9.7407*

Table 3

Training strength was analyzed for each of the three years. This is a score between 0 and 20 that combines the average subject post self-efficacy score with the change in self-efficacy between the initial and post surveys. This translates into consideration of a field training effect. The score can be used to consider what training topics are valuable, or perhaps what topics need to be reconsidered or deleted. The highest training strength recorded was 14.1 for Court Testimony, followed closely by Structured Decision Making (14.0). Several other topics had training strength at the 13 level (Reasonable Efforts, Substance Abuse, Supportive Services, Disabilities, and Assessment of Safety. In regard to the lowest training strengths recorded, Transitional Youth Services scored at a -1.5, all others were in the range of 1.0 to 8.0. There was also overlap where in one year a certain topic yielded a high training strength score and, in another year, the same topic yielded a low training strength score (Court Testimony and Communication Skills).

3.5. Discussion

Three years of data was gleaned on the elements of training topics, caseload size, self-efficacy, and training strength.

There were 76 subjects that a child welfare employee and their respective field trainer could select to focus on for the training period. All 76 subjects were utilized at one point or another in the analysis. Not surprisingly, the topics most likely to be chosen were those that form the crucial work of providing child welfare practice: Case Management, Communication Skills, and knowing how to input and document these activities (Information Systems).

In terms of caseload size, a broad range was presented. The lowest number was 0 and the highest number 81. The lowest number (0) can be explained by the fact that a case had simply not yet been assigned to the employee at the time of reporting. We would assume that no Family Service Worker would remain without cases for very long. The highest number of 81 is quite concerning, as it is likely not feasible for any one person to attain any appreciable level of competence with that high of a caseload. Indeed, caseload size has been linked to employee turnover [13]. Factors to consider in the caseload equation is that a graduated caseload size was in effect for at least two of the reporting years which stipulated that a new employee might acquire up to three “primary” cases when they were past their initial classroom training. In subsequent years, this policy was revisited, resulting in increased limits on new cases.

Self-Efficacy was used to determine the impact of field training, with the assumption that self-efficacy increases the longer one is employed, and especially when considering that an extensive training period has occurred. Self-Efficacy had statistically significant results for Year 1 and Year 2 in a positive direction. However, the middle year revealed that Self-Efficacy decreased. This is a conundrum not easily explained. Assumptions related to this instance might be that it was simply an aberrational year in some unknown regard, or that in fact field training had a negative impact, or more likely that the initial Self-Efficacy ratings were higher than they should have been (i.e., an overly confident new employee).

Training strength varied within the analyses, with some topics having both a high and a low training strength. Additionally, training strength is tempered by a variety of external factors such as other training initiatives (i.e., there has already been agency supported training on a particular subject and the employee has been trained enough on the topic). A second factor impacting training strength again relates to external factors such as outside events (e.g., child death) that impact training topics and the response to the topic. A third factor may be that the employee simply hasn't experienced the need to know about a certain topic (e.g., if you don't have a child on your caseload who is the focus of child neglect, you may not feel you need information on this topic).

In summary, the analyses revealed that measurement of self-efficacy was informative in ascertaining the effect of field training and yielded statistically significant results. It was also illuminating to examine training topics, caseload size, and training strength which may assist in future planning for training this important segment of the workforce.

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