NCWWI Traineeships: A National Cross-Site Evaluation of Child Welfare Stipend Programs for Ethnically Diverse Students

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NCWWI Traineeships: A National Cross-Site Evaluation of Child Welfare Stipend Programs for Ethnically Diverse Students

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The task of recruiting and retaining ethnically diverse, qualified, and committed social workers in child welfare is challenging. Federal funding supporting BSW and MSW education has been a catalyst for university–agency partnerships across the country. An important goal of these partnerships is to prepare social work students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies for effective child welfare practice. The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute’s innovative child welfare traineeships program prepares students from 12 social work programs around the country. This study focused on diversity, competency attainment, and readiness for the job. Results showed that programs recruited ethnically diverse students, and after receiving child welfare–specific content and hands-on experiences in the field, students felt competent and prepared for child welfare work.

In 2008, the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) was created by the federal Administration for Children and Families Children’s Bureau to address the driving need for the recruitment and retention of qualified child welfare staff across the country. NCWWI formed partnerships with 12 BSW and MSW schools of social work across the country to provide traineeship stipends to ethnically diverse students to build skills and prepare students for a career in child welfare from 2009 to 2014. The schools of social work that were partners with NCWWI administered traineeship stipends to BSW and MSW students and offered innovative and specialized child welfare course work and instruction as well as structured field placements that provided students with the opportunity to apply their theoretical classroom learning in the field and to obtain guidance and feedback through experiential learning. NCWWI selected the partner social work schools through a competitive application process and fostered a community of practice among the programs and provided supports for recruiting ethnically and culturally diverse BSW and MSW students, developing and implementing innovative child welfare curricula and field placement experiences, and forming partnerships with community agencies to help students successfully make the transition from school to work.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the NCWWI traineeships in recruiting diverse BSW and MSW students, building their child welfare competencies through

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innovative instruction and strategic field placement experiences, and ensuring readiness and commitment to a career in child welfare. This study included longitudinal assessment of traineeship students across the 12 professional social work programs that were partnered with public and private child welfare agencies.

Background

The needs of families with involvement in public child welfare systems are complex, multisystemic, and often multigenerational. There is wide acknowledgment in the field that effective practitioners with strong clinical social work skills are needed to work with families to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children who are either in state custody or are involved in the system (George, 1994; Stone & Stone, 1983). For decades, public and private child welfare agencies have struggled with recruiting and retaining qualified and committed social workers, and national turnover rates are estimated to range between 20% and 40% annually for child welfare agencies (Levine, 2004), with vacancy rates around 12% (O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). Chronic turnover results in inconsistent service delivery and lack of timely and accurate assessments, which can jeopardize outcomes for children and families, including longer stays in out-of-home placement (George, 1994; Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2003; Pardeck, 1984, 1985; Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006).

Public and private child welfare agencies are challenged by the need to recruit and retain workers who have a clear understanding and appropriate expectations of the job, child welfare–specific practice competencies, and the emotional resiliency to serve families in a child welfare setting (Dickinson & Perry, 2002). Moreover, public agencies struggle with hiring child welfare workers who are culturally responsive to the needs of ethnically and socioeconomically diverse families (Jacquet, 2012). In an increasingly global society, child welfare professionals must have the skills to engage families whose culture, race, religion, language of origin, socioeconomic background and family structure may differ from their own. A child welfare workforce that is ethnically and culturally diverse and is inclusive of diverse perspectives and points of view is important for successfully engaging and providing culturally competent services (Alegria, Atkins, Farmer, Slaton, & Stelk, 2010; Pellowe, 1990). The persistently disproportionate number of children of color in the child welfare system, particularly African American children and American Indian/Alaska Native children, elevates the importance of providing culturally responsive services to families. And there is a growing demand for child welfare professionals who have the ethnic and cultural diversity that more closely resembles the communities and families they serve (Courtney, Barth, Duerr Berrick, & Brooks, 1996). An important factor to consider is not just the extent to which the workforce shares the same ethnic identity as the families they serve but also whether they share a similar cultural and community background. Several studies of tribal child welfare found that child welfare practitioners who worked in their tribal communities demonstrated commitment to the communities and families they served, deep cultural knowledge, and strong relationships with those families (Kleinschmit & Craig-Oldsen, 2012; Leake, Lucero, & Potter, 2012). While the importance and potential benefits of a diverse workforce have been postulated, little research has been published about successful strategies for recruiting and supporting racially and ethnically diverse students in schools of social work and preparing them for a successful career in child welfare. The California Social Work
Education Center (CalSWEC) Title IV-E program is one of the few programs with this stated goal, and evaluations of these efforts found that they were successful in recruiting diverse MSW students with a commitment to working with underserved families and who had a high likelihood of staying in public child welfare after the repayment period (Jacquet, 2012).

University training partnerships that provide BSW and MSW education and professional development of the child welfare workforce are critical for improving recruitment and retention of an effective and diverse child welfare workforce (American Public Human Services Association, 2005; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; GAO, 2003). To meet the demand for a professional workforce, schools of social work have been building or improving academic programs that offer BSW and MSW degrees and have been working to build stronger partnerships with state and county public child welfare agencies (Barbee, Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, & Henry, 2012). Since the passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, states have been able to use a portion of Title IV-E federal funding that was allocated for foster care and adoption to support accredited social work programs by providing monetary stipends to students who specialize in child welfare. As repayment, students typically must commit to working for 1 year in a public or tribal child welfare agency for each year of stipend money they receive. As a result of the availability of Title IV-E funding, there has been an increase in university-agency partnerships across the country to support BSW and MSW education in service of child welfare (Zlotnik, 2003). One study of Title IV-E programs estimates the number of partnerships offering IV-E education programs has increased from an estimated 68 in 2003 to 144 by 2005, matriculating an estimated 3,000 graduates annually (Barbee et al., 2012).

Evaluations of individual stipend programs have demonstrated their effectiveness in training students who report feeling satisfied with their educational programs, committed to the field of child welfare, and who demonstrate the requisite child welfare practice skills (Barbee et al., 2009; Jones & Okamura, 2000; Vonk, Newsome, & Bronson, 2003). In fact, several studies on workforce turnover have shown higher retention rates of BSW and MSW Title IV-E stipend recipient graduates compared to non-IV-E workers (Dickinson & Perry, 2003; Jones, 2003; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Rosenthal & Waters, 2006). Other studies found that compared to nondegree workers, those who have an MSW are more effective in developing permanency plans (Albers, Reilly, & Rittner, 1993) and collaborating effectively with community providers (Littell & Tajima, 2001). However, a recent review by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Texas Chapter disputed the claim that BSW and MSW child welfare workers are more effective in their jobs and are likely to stay longer compared to other workers, citing inconclusive evidence because of the limited number of valid studies (Rubin & Parrish, 2012). Another reason for the disparate findings might be the lack of distinction between graduates of BSW and MSW programs compared to graduates of specialized stipend programs (Perry, 2006). A study of social work graduates in California found that MSW and BSW graduates scored higher on competency tests compared to nondegree child welfare workers and that IV-E stipend students scored significantly higher than nonstipend MSW graduates (Bagdasaryan, 2012).

While there are important findings in the literature on the efficacy of BSW and MSW stipend programs for worker-related outcomes, there is much inconsistency and a lack of clarity about how these programs can become effective partners with public agencies to develop, sustain, and increase a professional child welfare workforce that will have a positive impact on child and family outcomes. A handful of states with strong university-agency partnerships and successful IV-E programs, including Kentucky, Texas, New York, and California have conducted rigorous
outcome evaluations of their partnerships and contributed most of what is known about the effectiveness of these programs in developing and retaining a skilled and effective workforce (Auerbach, McGowan, & Laporte, 2008; Barbee et al., 2012; Jacquet, 2012; Morazes, Benton, Clark, & Jacquet, 2010). However, most IV-E program staff do not have the resources to conduct their own evaluations, and even those that do have small sample sizes, making it difficult to generalize results.

Despite the promising findings among the select IV-E programs that have invested in evaluation, there is a great need in the field for a national study of university-agency partnerships that examine the impact of specialized child welfare education and traineeship stipends in preparing a diverse and skilled workforce with a strong commitment to the field of child welfare.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to examine, through a longitudinal mixed-methods evaluation, the effectiveness of the NCWWI traineeships program in recruiting, preparing, and graduating ethnically diverse BSW and MSW students. This study is part of larger 5-year cross-site evaluation that included 12 MSW and BSW traineeship programs across the country committed to working as partners with child welfare agencies to help students gain the skills and preparation needed for a career in public, private, and tribal child welfare agencies. This study presents qualitative and quantitative findings related to:

1. Traineeships programs’ efforts to recruit and retain ethnically diverse students
2. Students’ experiences in their traineeship education programs
3. Change in self-reported child welfare competencies during their traineeships using a measure that was developed specifically for this project
4. Students’ perceptions of their own preparedness and readiness for child welfare work, beliefs about public perceptions of child welfare, and commitment to a career in child welfare beyond their repayment period

METHOD

The evaluation of the NCWWI traineeships program used a mixed-methods longitudinal design that included a quantitative pretest and posttest questionnaire, called the Stipend Student Inventory (SSI), and qualitative annual interviews with a small, randomly selected sample of students and graduates in the spring/summer of each year of the study. All study components were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Denver as the “school of origin,” as well as by the IRBs for each of the NCWWI traineeships programs.

Participants

The sample of traineeship participants consisted of five cohorts of BSW and MSW students (one cohort per year) who were awarded child welfare stipends from a NCWWI traineeships program.
beginning with the 2009–2010 academic year and ending with the 2013–2014 academic year. In total, across the five cohorts, 344 BSW and MSW students participated in the NCWWI traineeships. Although 12 programs were funded by NCWWI, three programs were partners with five local universities for awarding stipend students (see Table 1); thus, data presented in this paper come from the 261 students who were enrolled in 17 social work programs and who completed a pretest or posttest survey. We also report findings from 24 students who participated in telephone interviews.

**Measures**

**Stipend Student Inventory**

The SSI was developed collaboratively by the NCWWI evaluators, NCWWI traineeships project team, and faculty from the participating programs. The SSI is an online questionnaire administered through Qualtrics survey software (version September 2009–June 2014) and varies somewhat at each of three time points: baseline, annual, and follow-up. The baseline SSI was distributed in the fall to new cohorts of traineeship participants. The annual SSI was distributed annually in the spring to all traineeship students enrolled during that school year. The follow-up SSI was distributed annually in the summer to all traineeship students enrolled during that school year. The follow-up SSI about 6 months to 1 year after graduation from their social work program. Students were offered generous incentives such as gift cards ranging from $25 to $100 distributed in lottery drawings for each administration of the baseline and annual SSIs. Students who completed the follow-up SSI received $10–$20 gift cards, and when available, the opportunity to be entered into a grand prize drawing for an Apple gift card equivalent in value to the cost of an iPad.

Measures included in the SSI focused on traineeship students’ perceptions of and experiences with (a) specialized traineeship programs, (b) preparation for child welfare practice, (c) child welfare work perceptions, and (d) work environment perceptions through individual-, unit-, and agency-level factors. Although some measures are included in all three versions of the SSI, most of the work environment measures were included only in the follow-up SSI and were not used in the current study. Descriptions of the measures included in the baseline and annual SSI.
measures, as well as reliability estimates, are provided next. Measures were developed by evaluators from the Butler Institute for Families unless otherwise indicated.

**Student demographics and child welfare work experience.** In the baseline and annual SSIs, students were asked general demographics questions on education, gender, and race/ethnicity, for example, as well as previous child welfare work history and current child welfare work.

**Traineeship program satisfaction.** In the annual SSI, students assessed their overall satisfaction with their educational programs on several explicit and implicit curriculum elements on three scales: General Program Satisfaction (13 items, e.g., frequency of courses offered and organized social activities; 1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied; \( \alpha = .86 \)), Instructional Content (6 items, e.g., Courses in my stipend program give me the opportunity to practice skills; 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree; \( \alpha = .88 \)), Instructors (8 items, e.g., Instructors model social work values and ethics; 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree; \( \alpha = .93 \)). On a 5-point agreement scale students also rated aspects of their child welfare field placement experience(s) in terms of fit of the position (Field Placement Fit, 4 items, e.g., My field placement was a good fit for my educational needs; \( \alpha = .92 \)), the program faculty person who supervised the field experience (Faculty Field Liaison, 6 items, e.g., My faculty field advisor/liaison gave me feedback about my field work; \( \alpha = .93 \)), and the on-site instructor (Field Instructor, 6 items, e.g., My field instructor assigned me tasks related to my educational goals; \( \alpha = .95 \)).

**Child welfare competency self-assessment.** In the baseline and annual SSIs, students were asked to complete the child welfare competencies scale (58 items, baseline whole-scale \( \alpha = .93 \), annual whole-scale \( \alpha = .93 \)), which was developed to address 10 topic areas related to child welfare practice. The competencies were developed collaboratively and represent competencies from several models used by other universities and accepted as practice standards for the field. All items were measured on a 6-point agreement scale.

Results from exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal axis factoring and direct oblimin rotation and parallel analysis on data from the annual SSI sample (\( N = 212 \)) indicated a 5-factor solution for competencies that were subsequently labeled Human Services Structure and Policy (12 items, e.g., I have a working knowledge of the Indian Child Welfare Act (\( \alpha = .90 \)), Safety and Risk Indicators (8 items, e.g., I have a working knowledge of indicators of physical abuse; \( \alpha = .92 \)), Child Welfare Service Delivery (13 items, e.g., I understand the difference between Safety and Risk Assessment; \( \alpha = .92 \)), Child Welfare Practice Skills (18 items, e.g., I understand and can apply a strengths-based, family-focused approach; \( \alpha = .96 \)), Ethical and Culturally Competent Practice (5 items, e.g., I have working knowledge about the impact of race, ethnicity, and culture on individual and family functioning; \( \alpha = .84 \)).

**Child welfare work perceptions.** The annual SSI included several measures asking students to assess their readiness for and commitment to child welfare work: Readiness for Child Welfare Work (5 items, e.g., I have the necessary knowledge and skills to be a successful child welfare professional; \( \alpha = .93 \)), Public Perceptions of Child Welfare Work (see Auerbach et al., 2015; 14 items, e.g. Child welfare workers are held in high esteem; \( \alpha = .82 \)), and Years (a categorical item that asked respondents how many years they expect to stay in child welfare (1 = less than 1 year, 2 = 1–3 years, 3 = 4–6 years, 4 = 7–10 years, 5 = more than 10 years, 6 = the rest of my career, and an I don’t know option).
Interviews with Current and Graduated Students

In addition to the SSI, qualitative data were collected each year through interviews conducted with a small sample of current and graduated students. For each year of the study, those who were current students and graduates were randomly selected (using SPSS) and invited to participate in 30- to 60-minute telephone interviews for which they were compensated with a $20 gift card. Interview protocols included questions asking about program and field placement strengths and challenges, preparation for the job, peer support, and general perceptions about child welfare.

Data from interview transcripts with 10 BSW students and 14 MSW students and all annual SSI survey open-ended questions were organized and coded using Atlas.ti 7.5.2 software. Data were selectively coded by themes within questions as well as open coded using a modified grounded theory approach to identify emerging salient themes outside the structure of the interview protocol (Glaser, 1978; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990); after data coding, themes were examined separately by degree and across both groups.

RESULTS

Recruiting a Diverse Student Population

Self-reported ethnic identity of student recipients of the NCWWI traineeships stipends reflected greater diversity than the U.S. population as a whole, with 39% of students identifying as White/Caucasian, 34.0% as Black/African American, 16.9% as Hispanic/Latino, 9.3% as American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1.2% reporting another race/ethnicity or nonresponse (see Table 2 for more participant demographic information).

Student Retention: NCWWI Traineeships Admission and Graduation Rates

A total of 349 stipends were awarded to traineeship students between 2009 and 2013. After receiving stipends as BSW students, five students received an additional stipend to pursue an MSW degree from the same traineeship site (thus, of the 349 stipends awarded, there were 344 unique students). Typically, programs awarded stipends for 1 year, although some programs funded students for 2 or more years. Of all stipend recipients, 90% completed their degrees. Stipend recipients pursuing MSW degrees were somewhat more likely to graduate (93.1%) than were students pursuing BSW degrees (86.3%), as the majority of students who withdrew or were terminated from their program of study before graduation were BSW stipend recipients (see Table 3).

Employment Obligation Fulfillment

After graduation, 50.1% of all stipend recipients fulfilled their employment obligation by working in a public child welfare agency, while 16.9% were employed in private child welfare settings, and 2.9% were employed in tribal child welfare settings. MSW stipend recipients were somewhat more likely to fulfill their employment obligation in a public child welfare setting than were BSW stipend recipients. Some BSW stipend recipients deferred completion of their employment obligation while they pursued MSW degrees, and a small group of stipend recipients elected
to repay their stipend after graduation rather than complete an employment-based repayment option (see Table 3). In addition, 12 stipend recipients, most of whom were BSW students, defaulted on their employment obligation after graduation because of a change in career goals or because they were unable to locate suitable employment within the time allotted by their program.

**Workforce Retention: Employment After Obligation Completion**

Of the 314 stipend students who have graduated to date, 42.4% have completed their employment obligation (55 BSW students and 78 MSW students) and 35.4% are working toward completing their employment obligation. Of those who have completed their employment obligation, 87% (n = 116) remain employed in child welfare settings (91% of MSW graduates and 81.8% of BSW graduates).
Students’ Experiences of Their Traineeships Education

Qualitative Findings

There was great variability in students’ responses about their traineeship experiences as different cohorts of students matriculated through the 12 social work programs. In this section, we present global themes that emerged from responses we collected over the 5 years of the study.

From the interviews and open-ended survey questions, BSW and MSW students’ responses converged on the following key strength areas related to their programs: program faculty and staff, instructional content, preparation for the job, networking, and peer support. These strengths continued to be identified over the 5 years of the evaluation by different cohorts of BSW and MSW students. The various aspects of program faculty and staff that students appreciated most were their availability, provision of support, and willingness to share their knowledge and experience. Students also appreciated the topics and preparation their programs offered that allowed them to expand their knowledge and hands-on experience to apply what they learned in their internships or jobs. As one MSW student stated,

My experience as a child welfare trainee was exceptional. It allowed me to not only use my practice skills, but also trained me on areas that are relevant in an urban community. It allowed me to put an actual face to the things I was learning in the classroom into real world practice.

A BSW student said, “I learned a lot during the time I was there. Students at other agencies even felt like I was getting a lot from the practicum class.”

When we asked students to identify areas for improvement of their traineeship programs, we found a clear divergence in BSW and MSW students’ responses. BSW students were more likely to identify logistical challenges, such as needing more thorough and timely communication regarding program requirements and stipend allocations, when and which courses and
workshops were offered, and more time to network with their trainee peers at their own school and at other NCWWI traineeships programs.

Meanwhile, MSW students were more likely to report program challenges with their field placement experiences. Interview and open-ended responses indicated that many MSW students had field placements that did not fit well with their child welfare interests; or their field instructors or faculty advisers failed to give them the supervision or mentoring they were seeking. An MSW student said,

The school should not just leave it to the student’s agency to handle field placement. If the school sees that the student is unhappy and most importantly, not getting the skills and education needed through field placement, they need to step in and find the student a more enriching education experience through field placement.

Also, because many MSW students were already working in child welfare, they were more likely to feel that classes and field placements were geared toward new social workers and not accommodating to students with a child welfare work history. An MSW student stated,

I have come to this school with a great many skills and I feel that that is not always taken into consideration. There should be a better way to see the value that comes to the program with people who have been in the field for a while.

**Program and Field Placement Satisfaction**

Responses on the satisfaction items of the SSI bore out the generally positive sentiment found in the qualitative data, as students were, on average, highly satisfied with their traineeship experience. A series of independent samples $t$-tests tested for differences between BSW students and MSW students across several educational program and field placement experience variables. Although BSW students’ mean scores on General Program Satisfaction, Instructional Content, and Instructors and Field Instructors were higher those of MSW students, $t$-test results indicated there were no statistically significant differences (see Table 4). However, BSW students did report significantly higher satisfaction compared to MSW students on Field Placement Fit and Faculty Field Liaisons (see Table 4).

**Program-Related Change in Students’ Child Welfare Competencies**

To examine change over time from baseline to annual in BSW and MSW students’ child welfare competencies, we ran a $2 \times 2$ (time) repeated measures ANOVA. We found a statistically significant main effect of time indicating that BSW and MSW students reported significant increases in their knowledge of child welfare over the course of 1 year, $F(1, 168) = 96.15$, $p \leq .001$, $\eta^2 = .36$. While the main effect of degree was not significant, the interaction between time and degree was statistically significant, $F(1,168) = 4.07$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, indicating that the two groups changed at different rates. Follow-up analyses showed that BSW students’ mean scores, $M(82) = 4.76$, were significantly lower than MSW students’ scores $M(88) = 4.94$ at baseline, $t(168) = -1.96$, $p = .05$. However, by the end of the year, there was no longer a significant difference between BSW and MSW students’ perception of their child welfare competency: BSW students, $M(118) = 5.29$; MSW students, $M(142) = 5.36$, $t(258) = -.82$, $p = .41$. 

To test for differences in child welfare competences over time among students of various ethnicities (American Indian/Alaska Native, Black or African American, Latino or Hispanic, White or Caucasian, or Other [identified as Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or mixed race]) on child welfare competency gains, we conducted a 2 (time) × 5 (group) repeated measures ANOVA. Again, there was a significant main effect of time, $F(1, 165) = 56.92, p \leq .001, \eta^2 = .26$, indicating that all groups improved over time (see Figure 1). There was also a significant main effect of ethnicity, $F(4, 165) = 3.71, p = .006, \eta^2 = .08$, indicating that one or more groups had higher or lower average (across time points) competency scores than one or more other group(s). However, follow-up pairwise comparisons between groups did not reveal any significant differences. In addition, the time by ethnicity interaction was nonsignificant, indicating that groups did not differ significantly from one another in rates of change over time. The results of this ANOVA should be interpreted with caution because of unbalanced group sizes.

Readiness for the Job

Qualitative Findings

Overall, students were satisfied with how their programs prepared them for working in child welfare. An MSW student stated, “The knowledge and skills I have acquired set me apart from child welfare workers who went the traditional route for employment.” Another MSW student stated that because of the traineeship experience,

I was able to get the right expectations. I know what to expect now going into the job. If I didn’t have experience in child welfare I would have been blindsided and overwhelmed—the experiences and complexity of the system. I know what to expect now walking into a foster home—especially a family foster home.

Many students found their field placement and field seminar particularly helpful in providing them with on-the-job experiences. A BSW student said, “During my traineeship I had the
opportunity to engage with children, apply my sympathy with them and obtain more knowledge with families of different cultures and backgrounds."

Quantitative Findings

On average, traineeships students reported feeling ready for child welfare work, $M(250) = 5.50$, $SD = 0.60$ (on a 6-point agreement scale). To determine whether BSW and MSW students differed in their perceptions of readiness, we conducted an independent samples t-test and found a trend-level difference whereby BSW students reported feeling somewhat more prepared ($M(114) = 5.58$, $SD = 0.60$) than MSW students ($M(136) = 5.43$, $SD = 0.60$), $t(248) = 1.95$, $p = .053$.

To gain an understanding about which aspects of NCWWI traineeships programs were most predictive of student readiness for the job, we ran a sequential regression for the combined sample of BSW and MSW students regressing readiness for the job on degree program (Degree), followed by field experience (Field Placement Fit, Field Instructors), followed by educational program variables (Instructional Content and Instructors), and finally Public Perceptions of Child Welfare and Child Welfare Competencies. For all students, each set of predictors that was added to the model resulted in a significant change in the $F$ statistic, and the final model was significant, $F(7, 209) = 19.28$, $p < .001$, explaining 39% of the variance. Of the seven predictors of BSW and MSW students’ readiness, only Public Perceptions of Child Welfare and Child Welfare Competencies were statistically significant in the final model (see Table 5).

When asked about their expected commitment to child welfare work, less than half the students (46.2%) indicated they would remain in child welfare for more than 10 years or the rest of their career (see Table 6). However, a majority of students (70.5%) expected to stay in child welfare past their employment obligation (which ranged across all NCWWI traineeships programs from 1 to 3 years).
A nonsignificant chi-square test indicated no difference in distribution pattern across the Years response options for BSW and MSW students, $\chi^2(6) = 4.32, p = .63$.

**DISCUSSION**

This study examined the outcomes of a federally funded 5-year initiative to strengthen university-agency partnerships and recruit and support ethnically diverse BSW and MSW trainee-ships stipend students in 12 schools of social work across the country through innovative instruction and field experience. In this article, we present the cross-site results tracking student progress over the course of their stipend program to determine whether they have gained the necessary child welfare competencies and feel prepared and committed to becoming a child welfare social worker.

The results of the study indicate that the partnering NCWWI Traineeships programs were able to successfully recruit and support ethnically diverse stipend students who had a high completion rate, worked primarily in public child welfare agencies after graduation to fulfill their

### TABLE 5

**Regressions Predicting Readiness for Child Welfare Work for All Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degree$^a$ (BSW or MSW)</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Field Experience Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Placement Fit</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.16$^+$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Instructors</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational Program Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Content</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-Level Variables</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Perceptions of Child Welfare</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.17$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Welfare Competencies</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.42$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.39</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>19.28$^{**}$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$Coded 0 = BSW, 1 = MSW; $^p < .10$; $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

### TABLE 6

**Years of Expected Commitment to Child Welfare**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I Don't Know</th>
<th>Less Than 1 Year</th>
<th>1-3 Years</th>
<th>4-6 Years</th>
<th>7-10 Years</th>
<th>More Than 10 Years</th>
<th>Rest of Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Combined</strong> ($n=251$)</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BSW</strong> ($n=114$)</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MSW</strong> ($n=137$)</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
employment obligation, and tended to stay in child welfare once they had fulfilled their employment obligation. This finding mirrors, somewhat, the body of work showing higher retention rates of BSW and MSW Title IV-E stipend recipient graduates (Dickinson & Perry, 2003; Mor Barak et al., 2001; Rosenthal & Waters, 2006). However, some of the graduates of the current study are still in the work obligation period, and others have only just completed their 1–3 years of child welfare employment obligation, so it is still early to draw conclusions about retention of these graduates in the child welfare workforce. Continued follow-up studies will yield more information about their career path and long-term retention in their current agency and in the field.

Students participating in the NCWWI traineeships programs across the country were largely satisfied with their education, particularly with their instructors and the course content. These findings point to the programs’ successful implementation of innovative child welfare curricula and field placement experiences, and their efforts to create an inclusive climate in their programs that welcomes and supports diversity.

This study also examined the importance of field placement fit and students’ satisfaction with their field placement experience. Several studies point to the critical importance of the field placement experience in preparing social work students for a successful career in child welfare (Alperin, 1998; Dettlaff, 2008). BSW students were more satisfied with field placement fit and their faculty liaisons compared to MSW students. This may be because many of the MSW students in this study had previous work experience in child welfare. Thus, their professional experience may make them more discerning about their field placement, or they might have been looking for a field placement experience that challenged them in new ways and gave them the opportunity to hone their practice skills in a new environment. Qualitative interview data with MSW students with child welfare experience suggest they are seeking education programs that engage and challenge veteran workers and are not just tailored for students new to child welfare.

BSW and MSW students across all 12 programs demonstrated significant gains in child welfare competencies over the course of a year, and these competencies were especially predictive of students’ perceptions of preparedness and readiness for child welfare work. Although some groups of students may have scored lower than others at baseline (e.g., BSW vs. MSW), all groups of traineeships students showed increased competency over the course of the year. Such evidence of student gains indicates that programs are providing content that meets the needs of diverse students and that the content helps prepare students for real-world experiences in the child welfare field. Not surprisingly, BSW students reported lower competency for child welfare practice at the beginning of their stipend programs compared to MSW students (many of whom, as noted earlier, had previous child welfare work experience). However, within a year of study, BSW students’ ratings of their competencies had caught up to those of students in the MSW program, suggesting that specialized curricula at the bachelor’s level are an effective strategy for preparing child welfare workers.

Most stipend students reported that they felt prepared to work in child welfare and indicated a commitment to a career in child welfare beyond their repayment period. Although NCWWI traineeships retention data are preliminary, to the extent that this highly skilled and educated population of traineeships students remains in child welfare after repayment and commits to many more years of service, hiring agencies are likely to experience decreased turnover and more consistent and client-appropriate service delivery, resulting in positive outcomes for children and families (GAO, 2003; George, 1994; Pardeck, 1984, 1985; Ryan et al., 2006).
The schools of social work that were partners with NCWWI focused especially on the development of leadership skills in the hope that their graduates would assume a leadership role in their agencies in various job positions and that some would eventually rise to managerial-level positions. Some of the students were BSW graduates entering the workforce for the first time, while many of the MSW graduates were returning to or continuing with their employment. It was clear from the interviews that the returning students expected to be able to use their new skills on the job and to have an expanded role in the agency as a result of their degree, whether it was a stronger voice or a career path to a higher position. It was unclear, however, whether the child welfare agencies that hire the graduates would foster and support the leadership skills of these graduates in the ways they hoped. A great deal of research has documented the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of child welfare agencies (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Ryan et al., 2006), and the perception of Title IV-E graduates that their skills and knowledge were not being used by their agencies (Fitch, Parker-Barua, & Watt, 2014; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006).

Evaluation Challenges

Designing and conducting a cross-site study of multiple traineeship programs, BSW and MSW, with different curricula, instructional approaches, field study designs, student populations, agency partnership structures, and stipend policies presented many challenges. Some of the challenges in conducting the cross-site evaluation included coordinating the collection of data at several time points through online surveys and navigating the requirements of numerous IRBs housed at each university.

One of the most critical challenges was finding a way to assess child welfare competency gains across various programs. Competencies are the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and personal attributes that are associated with effective job performance and provide the basis for recruitment, selection, education, and professional training of staff (Bernotavicz & Locke, 2000). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) uses the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) to accredit BSW and MSW programs and establish thresholds of professional competencies for social workers (CSWE, 2008). However, there is no standardized national model of competencies needed for child welfare knowledge and practice. State child welfare training systems have developed models of job-related competencies to guide the recruitment, selection, and preservice training of staff; however, competency models vary by jurisdiction and are often not linked to the competencies used by BSW and MSW social work programs. The California Social Work Education Consortium has developed competencies for public child welfare as the basis for the Title IV-E stipend program and ongoing professional development through its training academies and also integrated these competencies with the EPAS core competencies used in all social work programs (CalSWEC, 2011).

Because there are no national child welfare competency models or standards that guide preparation and education of child welfare stipend students, there are also no standardized measures of competencies. In fact, there are few existing validated child welfare knowledge tests, and those that have been developed and tested are keyed to specific competencies of a particular school or public child welfare agency. This necessitated the creation of such a measure for use in evaluating NCWWI traineeships programs. For this study, a child welfare competency self-assessment measure was developed based on a thorough review of the
literature and existing competency models from various states, including California, Maine, Ohio, Colorado, and New York among others, and a collaborative development team of child welfare scholars from across the country representing the partnering schools of social work. Psychometric testing found the measure to be a valid and reliable way to capture individuals’ perceptions of their gains in knowledge and skill across critical child welfare domains for BSW and MSW students. The use of our newly developed self-report competency assessment was successful in measuring growth in a broad set of child welfare competencies over the course of the program and in comparing competencies of BSW and MSW students across a large number of diverse programs.

Limitations

One limitation of the current study is the reliance on self-report measures to assess students’ program satisfaction, readiness for work, and especially, student competencies, instead of standardized, validated knowledge tests. However, as noted earlier, the measures created for this study captured change over time in these constructs that were corroborated by content from student interviews. Another limitation of the study is that growth in skill development was measured from the point in time when students received a child welfare stipend, not from the beginning of their education program. Since some schools awarded stipends in the students’ second (or later) year of study, rather than the first, a year of skill acquisition would not have been captured by our tool.

Conclusion

Few studies examine the impact of specific efforts to recruit and retain ethnically diverse child welfare stipend students across multiple traineeship programs. The NCWWI traineeships were designed to capitalize on the success of the Title IV-E training programs in directing social work students toward a specialization in child welfare and preparing them with the child welfare practice skills and coping mechanisms for working in a stressful agency environment, setting it apart from more generalized social work education (Barbee et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2006). Results from the current traineeship study confirm findings from evaluations of individual Title IV-E programs that BSW and MSW students are highly satisfied with critical elements of the educational programs, including the quality of curriculum and instructors, and the experiences they gain in their field placements. This study also demonstrated the importance of the field placement experience in preparing students for a career in child welfare. BSW and MSW stipend students graduate from their programs with significant gains in child welfare competencies over the academic year(s) of their stipend and demonstrate high levels of readiness and commitment to child welfare work as well as strong foundations for social work practice. Findings examining how successfully these students make the transition from school to work, critical supports that ensure successful transition, and outcomes related to competency, job performance, and retention will be presented in future publications.
REFERENCES


