Preparing Social Work Students for Rural Child Welfare Practice: Emerging Curriculum Competencies

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Preparing Social Work Students for Rural Child Welfare Practice: Emerging Curriculum Competencies

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Multiple issues that are unique to child welfare social work practice in rural areas markedly affect workforce recruitment and retention, yet little attention is given to the proficiencies needed to equip emerging social workers for this growing area of the field. Curriculum content is needed that provides students with the opportunity to master the skills needed to thrive as child welfare social workers in rural areas. Using an evidence-based practice critical thinking model as a guide, a systematic review of literature and documents addresses many of the competencies needed to prepare social work students for child welfare practice in rural areas. These competencies are identified. Suggestions for integration into the social work curriculum are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Child welfare workforce planners in the United States wrestle with how to address workforce recruitment barriers and high rates of practitioner turnover. Similarly, they examine how to best educate child welfare professionals so they will be prepared to deliver responsive services for multineed families with demonstrated or potential child abuse and neglect behaviors. Social work’s emphases on system change, empowerment practice, and community resource development can be useful in preparing social work students for future child welfare practice. In fact, many social work educators collaborate with state and federal policy makers to deliver educational content and child welfare field experiences through programs such as Title IV-E (Social Work Policy Institute, 2014) and the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI; Children’s Bureau, 2012). Social work stipends and child welfare field placements contribute to the preparation and recruitment of social work graduates in child welfare services settings (NCWWI, 2013b, 2013d). University and community collaboration must include developing child welfare competencies that support the learning needs of social work students who will become future child welfare workers.

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Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, and Lane (2005) reported that efficacy or effectiveness in child welfare practice was one important retention factor. Strolin-Goltzman, Auerbach, McGowan, and McCarthy (2007) also included efficacy and job satisfaction. Other factors included life-work fit, job support, supervisor support, and good salaries and benefits (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007). Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, and Dickinson (2008) found job satisfaction was predicted by child welfare workers having any graduate or social work degree but only for those from nonurban settings. Ellett (2009) reported that employees who intended to remain in child welfare had more positive perceptions of self-efficacy and administrative support.

Similarly, rural areas are also at risk for workforce capacity issues involving recruitment barriers and retention challenges. For every 10 miles from a metropolitan area, difficulty in hiring rural social workers increases by 3% (Mackie & Lips, 2010). In an era of increasing urbanization, rural social workers practice with the 19% of Americans who are spread over more than 80% of the nation’s land (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2015). The National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) rural policy statement calls for addressing rural poverty, resource inequality, access to care barriers, and cultural diversity, and social work educators and practitioners can follow these guidelines by preparing students for rural social work practice (NASW, 2009).

Since child welfare and rural areas experience workforce challenges, it seems that child welfare practice in rural areas would be particularly at risk for workforce turnover and shortages. In the past several decades, there has been emerging knowledge about integration of the domains, such as addressing retention of rural child welfare workers (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Mackie, 2012; Lohmann, 2005; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007). Mackie and Lips (2010) wrote that social services supervisors stated a preference for hiring employees who were familiar with rural areas, and consequently, these individuals may be easier to recruit and maintain for rural social work positions than others because of their personal and professional interests in rural life (Mackie, 2012; Mackie & Lips, 2010).

Strolin-Goltzman et al. (2007) surveyed 820 child welfare professionals and found that those working in rural areas who reported lower levels of self-efficacy and job satisfaction were more likely to report an intention to leave their child welfare position especially as compared to suburban areas. They said, “If a caseworker is feeling ineffective on the job and unable to access professional development opportunities, then it is logical that he/she would seek more fulfilling employment” (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007, p. 88). Lower levels of life-work fit reported by workers also predicted higher intentions to leave their jobs for rural child welfare workers (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007). Lower levels of life-work fit indicated the workers’ perceptions of having less balance between work and home activities, feeling less safe, and having less schedule flexibility to deal with home and work responsibilities.

One recommendation to help prepare social work students for child welfare employment is the infusion of child welfare issues into existing BSW and MSW curricula (NCWWI, 2013a, 2013b, 2013d). This need for preparation may indicate that well-prepared social work students may be more likely to report higher levels of rural child welfare practice self-efficacy. But what is it that social work students actually need to learn to be prepared? The lack of competencies and outcomes specific to rural social work practice means that practice frames designed for any size practice community must be utilized, particularly as drawn from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and child welfare standards in general (California Social Work Education center, 2011; NASW, 2013). There is emerging evidence of topic-based student learning areas for rural practice.
in general, with or without competency frameworks (Daly & Pierce, 2011; Riebschleger, 2007). However, considering that rural people represent almost a fifth of the population spread across most of the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.), there are remarkably few professional literature and organizational documents available that propose rural child welfare competencies for social work education and practice.

This learning needs assessment is intended to provide a snapshot of what is known about rural child welfare practice within a framework of social work student learning needs. The guiding question for the literature and document review is, What are the competencies needed to prepare social work students for child welfare practice in rural areas? The aim is to examine professional literature and organizational documents to explore what is known about rural child welfare education and rural practice competencies to build some newly integrated rural child welfare competencies. The rural child welfare competencies may serve as a beginning base for further curriculum development to enhance the education of social work students for child welfare practice in rural areas.

BACKGROUND

Rural Culture

Rural people can arguably be viewed as a distinct minority or cultural group (Daley, 2015). Similar to other minority groups, they often experience cultural microaggressions in the media and from those from the dominant culture (Sue & Sue, 2013). They may be presumed to be slow and uneducated “hayseeds” and “hicks.” They may experience less access to resources when health and human services providers establish service networks by population without sufficient regard to distances people must travel to obtain services. They are likely to experience intersectional diversity by being part of a rural culture and another minority group. Finally, as with other cultural groups, there is much diversity within rural groups. For example, people living in a small-town rural setting in Massachusetts may be different and have different needs from rural people living in the frontier regions of Montana. Rural cultural perspectives are important to understand and convey in the education of social work students for child welfare practice in rural areas (Belanger, Price-Mayo, & Espinosa, 2008; NASW, 2009; NASW, 2013; NCWWI, 2013c).

Practice in Rural Areas

In addition to working within rural cultural contexts, social workers report rural challenges of professional and geographic isolation, inadequate access to formal community resources, the need to deal with dual relationships, multiple job roles, and a lack of personal anonymity (Belanger et al, 2008; Ginsberg, 2011; Halverson & Brownlee, 2010; Jacobson, 2002). Rural social workers also report advantages of rural practice such as more independence, beautiful surroundings, and collaboration involving interagency and interdisciplinary teamwork. Many report receiving respect from community leaders. Rural workers may engage in using informal networks, and they can sometimes make use of informal resources and relationship skills to create customized resources for clients and families.
The rural social worker may be the single practitioner in a large geographic area, and diverse social work issues will need to be addressed, which highlights the importance of expertise in area resources, cultural nuances, and client-focused strategies such as generalist practice and advocacy skills (Fiske, 2003). Leigh (1998) points out the need for child welfare workers to respect the cultural backgrounds of rural children. The expertise areas for competence development should also address the professional needs of the social worker such as finding ways to connect with social work supervision and other professional relationships for reduced isolation.

Mackie (2007) states that social workers may not be prepared for the realities of rural social work as social work programs focus training on urban issues by default, most social work programs are located in urban areas, and “too often, social welfare policies, treatment modalities, training, and ethics are developed in urban centers, and in conflict with the well-being of rural areas” (p. 117). This may be less an omission than a reflection of funding, resources, and worker populations primarily existing in urban areas. However, it should be noted that rural social workers may deal with locale challenges associated with transportation, generational poverty, and cultural competence (Belanger et al., 2008b). Regardless, some social workers may view rural social work as a short-term stepping-stone to better positions in urban and especially suburban areas, and others accept positions without preparation for the slower pace, social isolation, starkness of geography, or issues associated with rural social work (Chenoweth, 2004; Northern California Training Academy, 2007; Mackie & Lips, 2010; Schmidt, 2008). The development of rural resources, policies, practice models, and research “are all overdue in the field of child welfare” (Belanger et al. 2008b, p. 16).

Current Knowledge of Rural Child Welfare Learning Areas or Competencies

There is some emerging literature on learning areas or competencies for rural child welfare practice. Belanger and Brooks (2009) in collaboration with the Child Welfare League of America argued for the development of professional guidelines for rural cultural competency. They examined rural cultural competencies for child welfare professionals, including paying attention to the unique needs of rural cultures, being self-aware about one’s own culture, engaging in respectful cross-cultural communication, advocating for rurally and ethnically competent practice, reducing language barriers, talking about rural (and urban) communities with other professionals, and taking responsibility to learn about rural cultures and the diversity within them.

The Training for Excellence in Child Welfare Practice in Rural Oregon and Alaska initiative examined rural child welfare worker practice adaptations, strategies, and skills (Portland State University, 2007), particularly the three Rs of rural child welfare practice: dealing with increased remoteness, working with lower levels of resources, and putting strong emphases on relationships. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013), rural child welfare practice includes the concepts of defining rural, identifying strengths of rural communities, and facing challenges in rural communities exacerbated by high rates of poverty and substance abuse, combined with low rates of education and employment.

Averett, Carawan, & Burroughs (2012) found that BSW and MSW students who completed a rural macro field placement reported feeling prepared for generalist practice, yet rural social workers with practice experience have described feeling unprepared for the personal and...
professional challenges related to rural social work (Chipp et al., 2011; Graham, Brownlee, Shier, & Doucette, 2008).

This study focuses on the concept of efficacy for rural child welfare workers. Simply put, social work students who are better prepared for rural child welfare practice may be more likely be recruited and retained. Even if not retained, they are more likely to be more effective practitioner while they are working in rural child welfare. Next, efficacy is presumed to be enhanced by learning experiences tied to targeted competencies. Social work educators may be a part of helping their students be better prepared for rural child welfare practice. However, to do that, it is important to begin with what is known about rural child welfare competencies.

**METHODS**

The procedures to ascertain rural child welfare competencies aligned with the critical thinking strategies toward evidence-based practice developed by Gibbs and Gambrill (1998). The work herein began with a guiding question: “What are the competencies needed to prepare social work students for child welfare practice in rural areas?” According to CSWE (2008), “Competencies are measurable practice behaviors that are comprised of knowledge, values, and skills” (p. 3).

Triangulated sources of learning needs and competency information were drawn from the professional literature, professional organization websites, rural textbooks, and targeted journal websites. Sources of data and keywords used were recorded. Literature source search engines included ProQuest, CINAHL, EBSCOhost, ERIC, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, Search Plus, Social Services Abstracts, Web of Science, and the Taylor & Francis website. Document sources were drawn from searches of professional organization websites including the Children’s Bureau (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb), the Child Welfare Information Gateway (https://www.childwelfare.gov/), the Child Welfare League of America (http://www.cwla.org/), CSWE (http://www.cswe.org), NASW (http://www.naswdc.org and www.socialworkers.org), NCWWI (https://www.ncwwi.org), the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (http://www.nrcpfc.org/), the Society for Social Work and Research (http://sswr.org/) and the Association for Baccalaureate Program Directors (http://www.bpdonline).

Additionally, the investigators searched the indexes and content of 16 rural textbooks. Finally, they conducted targeted searches of the following journals for possible rural child welfare competency content: Contemporary Rural Social Work, Child Welfare, Journal of Social Work Education, Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work, and Families in Society. The following keywords were used in several dozen one-to-four keyword combinations: child welfare, rural, social work, practice, education, challenge, challenges, competency, competencies, curriculum, relationship, relationships, dual relationships, community, communities, family, families, culture, cultural, drive time, distance, and geographic distance.

A content analysis approach was used to examine information drawn from these sources (Krippendorff, 2012). Specifically, investigators searched independently for competency needs’ data for child welfare, rural, and rural child welfare workforce preparation, especially as applied to social work education. An iterative review of content and a consensus decision-making process led to investigators’ identification of the most strongly emphasized and most frequently
identified social work student learning competencies for rural child welfare practice. Key literature and website documents were identified to accompany each learning content area. In some cases, existing social work student learning competencies were identified for a content area. A search for divergent data was also conducted. Finally, examples of suggested rural child welfare practice competency objectives were developed by the investigative team members, all of whom have lived and practiced in rural areas.

**FINDINGS**

Nine main curriculum topics identified from the rural social work literature are salient to providing services to rural child welfare consumers. Curriculum topics were also developed from the literature and document review resources, and are displayed in a summative table (see Table 1) as well as in the following narrative.

**Poverty**

Poverty is a persistent problem in rural America (Fitchen, 1998). The median income in rural areas is $42,881 versus $54,042 in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). In fact, the latest poverty rate in rural America is 16.6% versus 13.9% in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). There are fewer nonfarm jobs, and with little to no public transportation options in rural areas even people with jobs may struggle to get to work. In addition, educational achievement lags behind the rest of the country, so jobs that are available in rural areas are lower paying. Poverty and the adaptive ways of how to live in poverty are generational, cultural, and specific to geography (Brown & Lichter, 2004; Snyder & McLaughlin, 2004). Child welfare workers must be engaged in continual assessment of the demands families in rural areas face. A change in the price of utilities, groceries, or medication or a road closure adding 20 miles to a work commute can be devastating to a family structure.

For parents who are involved with the child welfare system, poverty can be a barrier to meeting the goals of a case plan. Parents’ inability to pay for some services or having to leave work to attend appointments for counseling and visits with children in foster care are barriers to successfully completing the plan. Lack of public transportation options and no access to a vehicle are also barriers for these families. It is important for rural child welfare workers to be aware of these barriers when writing case plans or assisting families to find resources that are flexible with work schedules or that even exist in rural communities. In addition, when at all possible, child welfare workers should provide transportation when needed to facilitate access to visits and counseling or other case-related appointments.

**Resources**

Rural social work is primarily affected by challenges associated with geographic distance from urban areas, insufficient resources, and funding, as the bulk of budgeting is focused on urban areas. Urban resources may be hundreds of miles away, making them essentially inaccessible (Mackie, 2012). Rural areas are significantly lacking in treatment programs, social work in schools, and other enrichment programs for children (Belanger & Stone, 2008; Substance Abuse
TABLE 1
Suggested Rural Child Welfare Competencies by Topic Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Topic Area</th>
<th>Rural Considerations</th>
<th>Child Welfare Considerations</th>
<th>Suggested Rural Child Welfare Competency By Graduation, the Student Will Be Able to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Persistent rural poverty</td>
<td>Poverty produces barriers to successful case plan completion</td>
<td>Advocate for and provide needed services for children and families living in poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Formal resources lacking; informal resources common</td>
<td>Resources to complete case plan may not be available in rural area</td>
<td>Identify and use formal and informal resources in rural and contiguous areas to provide services to child welfare consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma</td>
<td>Lack of specialty trauma services; historical trauma, veterans</td>
<td>Need for competent trauma-informed services</td>
<td>Accurately discriminate among appropriate trauma services; provide or refer and monitor trauma treatment to meet the needs of child welfare consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural competency</td>
<td>Self-reflection; humility</td>
<td>Culture shock regarding placements; Indian Child Welfare Act</td>
<td>Be cognizant of and educate children and foster parents about rural/urban and intersectional cultures; adopt a humble, self-reflective stance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalist practice</td>
<td>Practice in isolation at times; need to target micro-, mezzo-, and macrointerventions</td>
<td>Child welfare workers work in small groups or in isolation with little other professional backup or assistance</td>
<td>Engage, assess, plan, implement and evaluate work with child welfare consumers using ecological-systems theory (e.g., multiple system interventions); identify children and families in rural environmental contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy/need for support</td>
<td>Rural social workers are geographically isolated and practice in small groups or as itinerant workers from metro agencies</td>
<td>Safety concerns; seek supervision, support, and collegial relationships</td>
<td>Practice autonomously and seek supervision or assistance as warranted; exercise caution and practice safety measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dual relationships</td>
<td>Inherent in living and working in rural areas</td>
<td>Confidentiality is crucial in providing child welfare services</td>
<td>Use clear boundaries and confidentiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Social capital enhances advocacy ability; need for policy/research skills for presentation</td>
<td>Form and maintain excellent reciprocal relationships with communities; advocate, present, and inform using evidence-based practice skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University–community collaboration</td>
<td>Rural student proximity is problematic</td>
<td>Title IV-E and NCWWI models</td>
<td>Form and maintain reciprocal collaboration between community leaders and university educators; engage in outreach to rural students and communities; develop and test collaboratively developed rural child welfare competencies in social work education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Rural competency themes are based on the work of Pierce and Daly (2011) and Daly and Pierce (2011), as drawn from Ginsberg (2005), Lohmann (2005), and Riebschleger (2007).
and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2011). To compensate for these service gaps, rural social workers must be able to make use of informal community supports (Chenoweth, 2004; Chipp et al., 2011; Daley, 2010; Riebschleger, 2007; Waltman, 1986).

Child welfare and rural social work practice are both plagued by a lack of available resources that have an impact on the ability to provide effective services to clients (Templeman & Mitchell, 2001). Informal supports essential for rural practice may be insufficient for mandated child welfare protocols. The prevalence of substance abuse co-occurring with domestic violence and child abuse is common (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014), yet rural areas often lack substance abuse and family services (Belanger & Stone, 2008). The combination of persistent systemic poverty and lack of transportation services make resources inaccessible (Belanger & Stone, 2008; Mackie, 2012). In rural child welfare, more children may be involved in a tribe, thus tribal agencies will be involved. When tribal and nontribal professionals are hindered by resource issues, meeting the spirit and intent of the Indian Child Welfare Act can seem impossible. These challenges can negatively affect family preservation (Belanger & Stone, 2008). Policy changes are needed at regional and state levels to allocate funding to preserve rural families and child safety. Child welfare workers must be able to identify and use available resources.

Trauma

Workers in child welfare experience more stress than other social worker or human services workers (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). Because of the many traumatic experiences of children involved in the child welfare system, including the prevalence of overlapping experiences with child abuse or neglect and domestic violence in families (Cross, Mathews, Tonmyr, Scott, & Ouimet, 2012; Postmus & Merritt, 2010) and the lack of trauma-specific services in rural communities, it is important for child welfare workers to competently deliver trauma-informed services (Connors-Burrow et al., 2013; Ko et al., 2008; Kramer, Sigel, Conners-Burrow, Savary, & Tempel, 2013; SAMHSA, 2011). In addition, more than 500 recognized Tribes in rural America have experienced historical trauma that requires specialized knowledge (White House Rural Council, 2011).

A more recent urgent need in rural America is caring for the large number of veterans and their families. About 6.1 million veterans live in rural America, and 44 % of the current armed forces are people from rural America (White House Rural Council, 2011). These veterans and families may enter the child welfare system for post-traumatic stress disorder, domestic violence, and addictions, all common concerns that may lead to issues of child maltreatment.

In rural areas the social worker may be the only professional trained in trauma-informed practice, and these social workers need skills to train other first responders, school personnel, and health services professionals in this practice. This is an urgent and persistent need in many parts of rural America (SAMHSA, 2011).

Cultural Competency

When the skill base of cultural competence is replaced with cultural humility, client groups of differing cultures and community positions are embraced (Ortega & Faller, 2011). The concept of cultural humility could strengthen the purposeful use of self, noted by Pierce and Daly (2009) when workers employ self-reflection that includes a recognition of the power imbalances that
influence clients, workers, and the services they share (Ortega & Faller, 2011), especially for child welfare workers in rural areas that are home to tribal people.

Preparing undergraduate students for rural child welfare practice begins with training students in the practice of self-reflection. The areas of knowledge acquisition are not limited to theories, methods and approaches; they include the development of humility. Professionals practicing in rural areas need to develop a sense of self that goes beyond professional identity.

For the child welfare worker in a rural community, the cultural challenges can be great. Foster children who are placed in diverse communities they are unfamiliar with must learn to cope with new ways of living. This may be true for urban foster children placed in rural areas, and vice versa. Further, Briskman (2012) notes that rural practice may include work with children and families who are immigrants and refugees. Placement in an unknown culture may feel isolating and uncomfortable to the children, which may increase trauma in an already traumatic placement process. It is important for child welfare workers in rural areas to consider clients’ social constructions of family, which may include extended kin and others (Laird, 2005). Social work educators must also provide cultural competence education to dispel myths and stereotypes about rural people. Students should be exposed to the common values of individualism, independence, tradition, and how these factors affect resistance to change (Templeman & Mitchell, 2001). It is not possible to teach students about all Native American/aboriginal nations within a social work curriculum, but a basic understanding of tribal cultures is necessary (Mathias & Benton, 2011). Of utmost importance for all child welfare workers is a thorough knowledge of and adherence to the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, which sets out rules for providing services to tribal children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Generalist Practice

The rural social worker may be the single practitioner within a large geographic area, and it can be expected that diverse issues will need to be addressed, outlining the importance of expertise in all areas of social work (Fiske, 2003). Gibbs, Locke, & Lohmann (1990) describe generalist practice as a good match for rural social work due to its person-in-environment focus that addresses the unique challenges of isolation, poverty, and reliance on community support found in rural practice. Combined with the mastery of core micro and macro social work competencies, and a proactive strengths based perspective, a generalist social worker may be the best candidate for rural social work practice (Jones et al., 2013). Riebschleger (2007) found in a study that rural social workers “need to understand that nearly everything is connected”. Families we serve are connected; Clients and their families are connected to differential power positions such as teacher, coach, law enforcement officers and community elders and leaders. Generalist workers must use all of the resources, relationships, and knowledge of the community to provide services to child welfare consumers because many times rural child welfare workers work in very small groups, and are often alone (Fiske, 2003). They provide the professional stance between client families and others in the community and are well-respected and influential professionals in the community. The work can be lonely and stressful as work in small groups or in isolation puts pressure on the worker to have excellent engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation skills to provide competent services to child welfare consumers. Lack of supervisory input or geographically close colleagues means workers must maintain competent and up
to date theory and skill knowledge. In addition, critical thinking and the ethics of practice are important components in the education of students who will practice many times in isolation in rural areas.

Autonomy and Need for Support

Social workers who appreciate autonomy may be drawn to rural practice. After controlling for position, practitioners in rural and smaller agencies report remaining in their positions longer, having greater autonomy and decision-making authority, and having greater agency support, fairness, and opportunities for professional growth than practitioners in urban and larger agencies. Rural practitioners also report less demanding workloads and stronger job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, and intent to stay with the agency (Landsman, 2002, p. 811).

Autonomy comes with the price of diminished or non-existent support from supervisors or co-workers (Mackie, 2012; Graham et al., 2008; Schmidt, 2008). While worker safety is a universal characteristic of child welfare practice (Hawranick, McGuire, & Looman, 2009), rural practitioners are faced with the contributing factor of isolation (Mackie & Lips, 2010). Rural child welfare workers are often required to visit homes where cell phone reception is unavailable, decreasing worker safety. Social workers may be threatened with or experience violence (Hawranick et al., 2009; Shields & Kiser, 2003). In-home meth labs are prevalent in rural areas, as neighbors are less likely to smell the toxic fumes, and farm chemical ingredients are easier to secure than other illegal drugs (Haight et al., 2005). Rural workers must understand the safety risks of these rural issues, and create and utilize outside support such as regional NASW groups or a confidential networking group with individuals in other helping professions as an alternative to social work support (Chipp et al., 2011; Daley & Pierce, 2011).

Social work educators must stress the importance of safety training and skills for initiating and maintaining professional supervision and collegial relationships to reduce professional isolation. Students in child welfare settings need knowledge of ethical decision making models and skills in their application within their agencies.

Relationships

Rural social workers must be specifically cautious regarding dual relationships, as it is inevitable that they will occur in rural areas, and care must be taken to assure ethical behavior (Pugh, 2007). NASW recognizes that dual relationships will exist within rural areas, but rural social workers must retain a delicate balance between community involvement and professionalism (NASW, 2009). It may be expected that rural social workers are available at all times, so it is important to develop and enforce boundaries that reflect personal needs and confidentiality (Pugh, 2007). Confidentiality is extremely important in the provision of child welfare services. Families must be able to trust that the worker will provide effective and confidential services. It is important to discuss with families how to handle chance encounters at the grocery store or school, and social Work educators can role-play ways to deal with confidentiality and dual relationship issues to develop these skills in students.
Leadership

Rural child welfare workers exercise leadership in many areas. First, they provide leadership and advocacy for the child welfare consumers with whom they work. By providing competent and caring services and engaging in collegial relationships with collateral contacts, they increase their social capital within the community (Belanger, 2004). Social capital is an important concept for rural child welfare workers to understand. Rural communities are based on reciprocal relationships. Those workers who form and maintain good relationships with others (lawyers, judges, teachers, etc.) will have higher social capital, which will allow them to have more influence in advocating for their clients’ needs (Belanger, 2004). Belanger, Copeland, and Cheung (2008) found that those who had higher social capital were more successful at recruiting and maintaining rural foster homes, for example. Social work students preparing for work in child welfare also need skills and knowledge in policy analysis that incorporates an understanding of state and regional budgeting history and appropriations for social services. Leadership skills in advocacy, collaboration, and public speaking are natural areas of competence (Mathias & Benton, 2011).

Further, as child welfare social workers advocate for their clients, they need to have knowledge in applied research to use and present current research to others such as judges or lawyers (Vandivere & DeVooght, 2014). Students should leave every program with knowledge of where to find data and skills to apply and present their findings.

University–Community Collaboration for Change

The NASW (2012) recommends that workers in public child welfare should possess social work degrees appropriate to the worker’s supervisory role. However, almost half of the child welfare workers surveyed by Barth et al. (2008) did not have a social work degree. Evidence indicates that child welfare field placements may lead to students pursuing child welfare careers (Alperin, 1998; NCWWI, 2013b, 2013d). Conversely, having an interest in the field of child welfare in the form of a professional commitment to children and families may lead to a higher level of satisfaction with placement in a child welfare setting (Zlotnik et al., 2005).

Rural child welfare social work provides multiple challenges that are not often addressed in social work education. To better retain rural child welfare social workers, universities should recruit potential social workers from rural areas, as they have an investment in the rural lifestyle as well as a keen understanding of rural social work issues. It may be appropriate for BSW program faculty to recruit university students from rural high schools. This may bring BSW students with a rural focus into the profession. Efforts should be made to create partnerships between institutions and rural organizations, and to increase access to education by creating and supporting blended learning programs that combine online course work with face-to-face learning (Mathias & Benton, 2011). There may be positive results from collaborations between universities and communities that focus on curriculum development (NCWWI, 2013d). Rural child welfare organizations may use in-service training to increase their workers’ region-specific knowledge, quality of service, and skills (Turcotte, Lamonde, & Beaudoin, 2009). Rural child welfare workers have varied and complex knowledge that can be used for curriculum focus groups, guest lectures, and adjunct rural social work faculty appointments.
DISCUSSION

A systematic literature and documents review found that competencies needed to prepare social work students for practice in rural areas could be explored within nine overarching topic areas: poverty, resources, trauma, cultural competency, generalist practice, autonomy/need for support, dual relationships, leadership, and university–community collaboration. Specific competencies were developed for each of these topic areas by integrating some of what is known from social work education for child welfare, rural, and rural child welfare sources. To better serve vulnerable children and families, the effects of pervasive systemic poverty and a need for resource development must be addressed. Rural child welfare workers must learn how to use formal and informal resources to help meet the needs of children, families, and communities. Rural child welfare practitioners must attend to ameliorating the impacts of trauma on the lives of rural people. Culturally competent child welfare workers are prepared to assess and respond appropriately to rural and cross-cultural considerations. This means the rural child welfare workers implement the key constructs of generalist practice, such as multiple system interventions as well as empowerment and strengths-based practice. To engage in ethical practice, students must learn methods for balancing dual relationships. Social work students must be prepared also to demonstrate advocacy and resource-building leadership through professional support networks, community connections, and a commitment to adaptations. Self-care and work-home life balancing are important skills for building strong and enduring rural child welfare practitioners. Finally, collaboration between community agencies and university educators can be used to build and test rural child welfare competencies, offer child welfare social work student field placements in rural areas, and work toward organizational change efforts to strengthen worker support within child welfare services (NCWWI, 2013d).

Recommendations for Social Work Educators

The CSWE (2008) EPAS are presently under revision. Although social work education is not required to provide proficiency in these areas, preparation for this work is important. Social work educators need to build rural child welfare competencies into the social work curriculum in a planned way and then measure student assessment of learning.

The structure of curriculum formats may vary. Students who have field placements in rural areas report feeling prepared for generalist rural practice, so it is important to create community partnerships to facilitate rural child welfare placement options (Averett, Carawan, & Burroughs, 2012). Lennon-Dearing, Florence, Garrett, Click, and Abercrombie (2008) found that a collaborative elective course between social work and health programs that combines online and experiential learning is beneficial for future medical social work in rural areas, and this type of course work may be a good opportunity for students to develop teamwork skills in rural child welfare practice. Offering rural social work electives may provide interested students with practice skills, yet it only provides exposure to those who seek rural social work skills. Requirement of a rural practice course may be ideal, but this may be difficult to incorporate into a curriculum that is at capacity.

There are numerous research opportunities for social work educators, beginning with program evaluation to assess student attainment of rural child welfare competencies, long-term student workforce retention, and what constitutes efficacious rural child welfare social work practice. Rural practice successes and challenges need to be analyzed, and programs for training workers with rural cultural competence need to be disseminated. Social work
educators are well poised to collaborate with child welfare and rural agency leaders to help build a stronger rural child welfare workforce, evidence-based practice knowledge that incorporates rural cultures, and, potentially, improved services for rural child clientele (Belanger & Stone, 2008; Zlotnik, 2010).

Limitations and Summary

The identified rural child welfare competencies are not drawn from a new study; instead, they are from a systematic literature and document review. However, since knowledge of rural child welfare learning needs and strategies is formative, a well-developed literature and organization site review and summary may be helpful for future exploration ventures. Additionally, an exploration of social work education competencies would logically extend to links to CSWE’s (2008) EPAS. At the time of the preparation of this work, the EPAS student learning competencies were in the midst of extensive change. The investigators chose not to include EPAS standards to avoid providing obsolete information at the time of publication. They should be added in future endeavors on identified social work practice competencies. Finally, this exploratory work is not all inclusive. Additional stand-alone child welfare competencies are not addressed herein, and the suggested rural child welfare competencies are untested examples for further work. However, they do demonstrate new knowledge development in the area of social work education for preparing students for child welfare practice in rural areas.

This learning needs assessment provides a snapshot of what is known about rural child welfare practice within a framework of social work student learning needs. These rural child welfare competencies serve as a beginning base for further curriculum development and testing to enhance the education of social work students for child welfare practice in rural areas.

REFERENCES


