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**Professionalism, Ethics, and Welfare Reform:
The Importance of Ethical Competence**

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Abstract: This paper examines the professional ethics of welfare reform providers to determine its role in the achievement of welfare reform goals and to suggest an alternative context, based on professional ethics, for discussing the success or failure of welfare reform. Four themes emerged from the analysis of literature. First, patriarch authority keeps welfare women at the bottom of society. Second, different political interests weaken partnerships and services at the expense of welfare recipients. Third, welfare recipients are unjustly stereotyped and perceived as deficit-driven and as the single cause for their economic situation. Fourth, teachers' beliefs, relationships, and learning environments hold a key to sustained and successful engagement and participation in welfare-to-work programs.

Introduction

Welfare reform attempts to transform welfare recipients into self-disciplined, self-directed, and self-sufficient workforce. The success of this initiative depends on the competence, motivation, and commitment of professionals who come from diverse disciplines, have different practical experience, operate from different political and ideological frameworks of reference, and make decisions using standards and methods delimited by their professional groups. As a result, those who work on behalf of welfare recipients may in fact work from contradictory and conflicting positions (Sparks, 2001), rendering services based on unwarranted perceptions about people on welfare (Sandlin, 2002). More often than not professionals (policymakers, social workers, program planners, teachers, and employers) view welfare recipients as deficient, dependent, unmotivated, and lacking moral worth (Andruske, 2000; Sandlin 2002, 2003; Sparks, 1999, 2002). These stigmas are prevalent and powerful, although social welfare scholars and critical educators have repeatedly disproved them (Sandlin, 2002). These stigmas bias providers' decisions and judgments. As a result they create and deliver inadequate programs, which further stigmatize the program participants. On the contrary, critical educators who believe that education has the potential for achieving social change and that welfare recipients deserve respect and appreciation for their life journeys are able to help people on welfare achieve their aspirations, regardless of the obstacles (Sparks 2001, 2003; Ziegler & Durant, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the professional ethics of welfare reform providers to determine how it plays a role in the achievement of welfare reform goals and to suggest an alternative context, based on professional ethics, for discussing the success or failure of welfare reform. To do so, I analyzed research on welfare-to-work programs published in the proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) from 1997-2003. I chose the AERC because it reflects the changing emphasis and orientation of research in adult education and the growing diversity and maturity of the field. I used professional ethics as a conceptual framework because (a) ethics shape and define the nature of professions (McDowell, 2000), (b)

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ethical bearing and integrity are the measure for professional credibility today (Bowman, 1998), and (c) there is a growing consensus that our society faces a crisis in professional ethics due to professionals' failure to deliver social services that protect social values (McDowell, 2000). I begin with a discussion of professional ethics, followed by a discussion of four themes that emerged from the literature review. I conclude with thoughts on linking research to practice.

Professional Ethics

To discuss professional ethics, a definition of profession, ethics, and ethical competence is needed. A profession is an occupation that regulates itself through systematic, formal training; requires technical and specialized knowledge and adoption of basic ethical duties; and has a service orientation (McDowell, 2000). Ethics is the study of human conduct to determine whether it is permissible or impermissible (Velazques, 2002). Human conduct is rational and intentional: people can choose one course of action or an alternative course of action (Bowman, 1998). Mature adults (and professionals) are expected to act rationally to maintain a stable and equitable social order. Almost every decision a professional makes has ethical ramifications. For instance, choosing a solution to a problem implies rational formulation of a value judgement and intentional choice among available alternatives. Therefore, apart from technical proficiency, professionals must possess ethical competence to be able to fully benefit the people they serve (Bowman, 1998). Ethical competence is the possession of appropriate personal and professional values and the ability to apply them effectively in professional settings (Cheatham & Chivers, 1996).

The term professional ethics employs three distinct but interconnected meanings (Wilkins, 1995). The most general understanding of the term refers to the ethics of all professions. Professions across disciplines share similar ethical standards and normative commitments. They emphasize wholeness of character, personal and professional integrity and honesty, support for others, and respect for democratic processes. The second meaning focuses on a particular profession and articulates the normative characteristics unique for that profession. The third meaning refers to the kind of ethics professionals actually display and whether it serves the stated purposes of a profession (Wilkins, 1995). In sum, professional ethics refers to the values, duties, responsibilities, and obligations that ought to guide the conduct of professionals. When professionals act in a way that breaches moral values, duties, and responsibilities, they have acted with ethical incompetence and have failed to meet their social obligations.

Method

I used Boyatzis' (1998) inductive approach to interpreting qualitative data through thematic analysis. First, I established descriptors such as welfare, welfare reform, welfare-to-work, and public assistance. Second, I searched the AERC online conference proceedings from 1997-2003 year by year. I chose the year 1997 as a starting point because I assumed that welfare-to-work programs would be in place by this time since the Personal Responsibilities and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was passed in 1996. I inserted each descriptor separately into the category search string to accomplish the search. To ensure that all relevant articles were located I searched each title and abstract for each descriptor. I hand searched the proceedings from the year 2003 because these proceedings are not yet available on line. Seventeen articles contained the descriptors. I analyzed the data searching for themes that implied encroachment of professional ethics or provided evidence for exemplary professional behavior.

Article Critique

Four themes emerged from the review of literature and are discussed in this critique: patriarch authority, political interests, unjust stereotyping, and teachers' attitudes.

Patriarch Authority

Patriarch authority undermines the autonomy and freedom of welfare mothers (Hayes & Way, 1998; Sparks, 1999, 2002). It deprives them of their right to choose education and training that could help them move out of poverty. Women's needs are interpreted for them, information on available options is concealed, and women are forced into programs that often do not prepare them for the jobs available in their local economies. Sparks (1999) tells the story of

one welfare woman [who] had called numerous medical clinics in surrounding rural communities to see if she could find a job as a medical receptionist without any luck, yet she was mandated into a 6 month program by her caseworker because the program had slots open. (Educational Stratification section, ¶ 6)

Andruske (1999) points out that many welfare mothers feel the presence of symbolic violence from welfare frontline staff who treat them "just like a number, just like an animal" (Findings to Date section, ¶ 2) by forcing them to wait in long lines for their welfare checks, to ask a question, or to request a food voucher.

Political Interests

Government agents, policymakers, and the general public do not understand what it means to be poor and "believe that ending welfare is as easy as attending a program, renewing or learning a new skill, desiring a job, and finding a job" (Andruske, 1999, Findings to date section, ¶ 3). Although governments, politicians, and the general public demand welfare roles be slashed quickly and welfare recipients be fixed up to reduce costs and dependency, the welfare reform has failed to achieve its goals because the critical role of the concerted effort of interorganizational networks has been underestimated (Andruske, 1999, 2003; Hayes & Way, 1998; Sparks, 2001). Often government agents are trapped between fulfilling government quotas and acting as advocates for welfare recipients (Andruske, 1999). Those committed to social justice are challenged to deal with politics of control and issues of unequal power, which try to silence their voices and opinions (Hayes & Way, 1998; Sparks, 2001).

Unjust Stereotyping

The success of welfare reform depends on the ability of welfare providers to place welfare clients into jobs leading to self-sufficiency and economic viability, to act in their favor, and to build rapport with them. However, welfare recipients are perceived as deficit-driven and as the single cause for their economic situation (Andruske, 2000; Sandlin 2002; Sparks, 1999, 2002). The stereotypical portrayal is that people on welfare, especially women, embody all negative American traits: laziness, dependence on government, wanton sexuality, imprudent reproduction, and lack of values, which cultivate violence, school failure, out-of-wedlock births, and perpetuate poverty by passing it from generation to generation (Sidel, 1998). Program planners, providers, and adult educators who are asked to design and deliver fast-track programs to meet the time limits of cash assistance (Sandlin, 2003; Sparks, 2002) tend to consider the

personal and emotional issues of welfare adults as impediments to the learning process. As a result, they do not acknowledge women's skills, experience, and knowledge in the educational settings (Sparks, 2002).

Teachers' Attitudes

Teachers' beliefs, relationships, and learning environments hold a key to sustained and successful engagement and participation in welfare-to-work programs (Ziegler & Durant, 2001). Teachers, who treat participants with respect and appreciation, have a strong positive effect on them (Sparks, 2001). They are able to foster self-esteem and pride in the welfare participants. These teachers persist in helping participants achieve their goals even if they have to navigate an unfriendly system. Ziegler and Durant (2001) sum up:

Being respectful, appreciating learners' accomplishments, and viewing participants' past histories in a positive way are three means teachers utilize to develop positive relationships with the participants. . . . Relationships are fostered through teamwork, collaboration, peer coaching, and learners' assuming leadership roles because these activities lead to a sense of shared experience and common purpose. Collaborative activities develop a sense of group cohesion . . . and help connect learners to others in the class. (Findings section, ¶ 4)

Teachers, whose ideology is covertly racist and sexist, reinforce the stigma and help maintain mainstream stereotypes about welfare recipients (Sandlin, 2002). These teachers continually stress the idea that welfare recipients are dependent, unwilling to learn and work, have moral problems, and abuse the system (Andruske, 2003, Sandlin, 2001, Sparks, 2002,). Sandlin (2002) states: "It is troubling to find teachers who ideally should be advocates for welfare recipients but who instead are operating within these dominant myths" (Discussion section, ¶ 1), the unfortunate victims of which are primarily the poor caught in the welfare system.

The themes illustrate that many welfare providers have failed to understand that being ethically and socially responsible is essential for the success of their professional duties (Hatcher, 2002). They have ignored their obligation to display regard for the worth of their clients no matter who they are or what they have done (Josephson, 1998). They have failed to treat people on welfare with respect, consideration, and lack of prejudice. They do not regard them as rational and self-sufficient beings. They do not recognize their rights of welfare, freedom, and pursuit of happiness. They fail to help them realize their potential. Therefore, their professional ethical behavior does not maximize the overall good and does not capitalize positive consequences for the society.

Linking Research to Practice

Most professions see their purpose as service to others and encourage behavior that promotes the welfare of individuals, organizations, and the community. However, the four themes reveal that disregard for professional ethics in the welfare-to-work context is a norm rather than an exception. Welfare providers tend to consistently abdicate their responsibility of care and civil rights (Sparks, 2002). Policymakers, caseworkers, and teachers are inclined to uphold and perpetuate stereotypical beliefs about the poor. When ethical thinking and decision-

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making are applied, however, the practice of welfare-to-work providers is rewarded with ethical, responsible, and sustainable ends. This implies that providers should be aware of the importance of possessing and applying ethical competence to maintain strategic focus when planning and implementing welfare-to-work programs and to ensure that welfare recipients' interests are consistently served.

Applied ethicists advise we develop and use a holistic strategy of systematic inquiry into utility, justice, rights, and caring in order to capture all factors when we make moral judgments. Lawler (2000) suggests that improvement of ethical competence and practice can be achieved through conversations among reflective practitioners on the ethical dimensions of their work and through self-education. Formal ethics training based on welfare-to-work goals and case studies will increase chances for success. The time has come to "fix up" welfare providers to slash and reduce the social cost of their controversial ethical behavior.

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