

Deeds and Consequences: Ethical Issues in a Welfare-to-Work Program

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Abstract: This paper explores the impact of a lack of sensitivity to the ethical issues that surfaced in a specific welfare-to-work program on participants' perceptions, self-esteem, and motivation. Ethical issues in three areas were identified and discussed: (a) professionalism and accountability, (b) participant and provider relationships, and (c) shared responsibilities.

Ethical issues: it sounds banal and trite. For ages philosophers have written hundreds of books in an effort to understand, explain, categorize, and label moral, immoral, and amoral human behavior and the rationales behind our actions. Yet, there still is not a universally accepted way of analyzing ethical situations (Hatcher & Aragon, 2000) and ethical issues are not a favored topic for discussion in public arenas or private conversations (McDowell, 2000). However, as a society we do feel that people should be trustworthy and fair in their dealings with each other. We expect behavior that promotes the welfare of individuals, organizations, and communities. Yet as recent events demonstrate, our society faces a crisis in professional responsibility (McDowell, 2000). Professional associations are worried about the image of their professionals, and as a result, they have developed and enforced codes of ethics to protect the public and their own interests. Codes of ethics postulate that adoption of and adherence to a set of standards for work-related conduct requires a personal commitment to act ethically and individual responsibility to aspire to the highest possible standards of conduct.

Ethical issues are inherent in much of what adult education practitioners do (Cervero & Wilson, 2001). The ethics of practice are discussed in specific areas of adult education, such as program planning (Caffarella, 1998; Cervero & Wilson, 1994); administration, advertising and marketing (Sork & Welock, 1992); counseling, advising, and continuing professional education (Lawler, 2000); and recently, web based adult education (Holt, 1998). An ethical issue occurs when harm to individuals is inflicted by incompetent and unscrupulous practitioners (Gordon & Sork, 2001) or customers, colleagues, participants, and stakeholders are not treated fairly or with integrity (Caffarella, 1998; Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Lawler, 2000). Ethical issues arise from a clash of interests in program planning, exercise of power in decision-making, questionable administrative actions, creation of discriminatory programs, unfair treatment of the less powerful, and violation of principles, standards, and policies.

Understanding the "cause and effect side of being ethically... and socially responsible" (Hatcher, 2002, p. 9) is essential for the success of any professional situation. Identifying ethical issues requires knowledge and awareness of the values of the profession and of the cultural and socioeconomic background of the participants (Lawler, 2000). Although scholars increasingly stress the importance of planning programs for adults, which focus on the relationship between cultural, social, economic, and political systems in society (Wilson & Cervero, 1996), there is little evidence that these relationships are noticed and implemented in designing welfare to work programs.

In 1996, Clinton Administration enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) with the purpose of moving existing welfare dependants to self-sufficiency through work. Employability skills became vital for the success of

welfare programs and recipients, pushing education and training issues to the forefront of the welfare reform debate (Zargari, 1997). Programs emerged to help welfare recipients acquire job skills, reform their work attitudes, and find and retain employment. The success of these programs depends on the ability of welfare-to-work agencies to foster placement opportunities with public agencies, profit and not-for-profit organizations, and to establish relationships with welfare recipients. Welfare reform evaluation reports measure program impacts on employment and welfare benefits, counting as successful programs that moved recipients from welfare to work (Orr, 2001). Recent government reports, for example, state that the US has made great progress in the implementation of the welfare-to-work reform, concluding that with the passage of PRWORA, welfare has been successful. As president Bush said in his speech on February 26, 2002, “Doors of opportunity that were shut and sealed have been opened – in no small measure because of the efforts of welfare recipients themselves. Even those who raised doubts about welfare reform must concede that millions of mothers previously dependent on welfare have proven themselves capable of holding jobs” (Bush, 2002, p. 2). However, literature today is still scarce on what impact and consequences programs have on the welfare recipients, their perceptions of the process, and their standard of living. New welfare to work programs simply demand that the individual develop a new identity, way of life and knowledge without regard to their varied and unique life experiences, emotions, and demographic attributes (Kilgore, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss a lack of sensitivity to ethical issues in a specific welfare-to-work program. We focused on three areas: (a) professionalism and accountability, (b) participant and provider relationships, and (c) shared responsibilities. The paper is divided into a discussion of ethics and professionalism, the welfare to work program, and a discussion section which includes the three areas. Implications for program planning and implementation conclude the paper.

Ethics and Professionalism

Ethics studies the moral standards of a society to determine whether they are permissible or impermissible (Velasquez, 2002). Ethics is important because it helps maintain strategic focus and direction and because professionals must be viewed as competent, credible, sincere, and caring by those they serve (Berman & Bonczek, 1998). For welfare-to-work program planners and providers, an ethical perspective suggests that addressing service delivery and management issues must be an indispensable part of policy. The interaction among stakeholders, welfare service providers, and welfare participants must be built on the principle of interdependency, collaboration, and the underlying assumption that all partners should receive what they need.

Contemporary philosophy has divided ethics into three ethical theories. These are metaethics, the study of the origin and meaning of ethical concepts; normative ethics, the search for ultimate right vs. wrong moral standards that regulate proper behavior; and applied ethics, which analyzes controversial business, societal, medical, and environmental issues, utilizing metaethics and normative ethics as analytical frameworks. Thus, ethical theories provide a common language for communicating, discussing and evaluating ethical issues (Hatcher, 2002).

To analyze the ethical issues and providers’ mischief-making in the welfare-to-work program, we used an analytical framework based on three prominent normative theories: virtue ethics, duty ethics, and consequentialist ethics. Virtue ethics advocates moral education and stresses the importance of developing good habits of character, such as respect, trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, reliability, responsibility, fairness, caring, and generosity. Duty ethics bases moral behavior on principles of obligations and duties to ourselves and to others, and focuses on

the moral nature of the deed. Duties to others, for example, involve benevolence, fidelity, not harming other individuals, improving the conditions of others, acknowledging other people's rights of welfare, freedom, and pursuit of happiness (Wood, 1999). The consequentialist ethics focuses on the consequences and contingencies of our actions for us and/or for other people, measuring right and wrong actions by their favorable or unfavorable outcomes (Hatcher & Aragon, 2000). The boundaries between the principles of these theories are not clearly delineated, and an ethical issue may be a topic of more than one theory. In the light of this framework, we analyzed the ethical issues that arose during a welfare-to-work program and the impact on welfare participants and program outcomes.

The Welfare-to-Work Program

The welfare to work program recruited participants who have been on welfare in the recent past with the goal to move them into entry level positions with local law firms by providing a training program, internship experience, job placement, and a personal mentor. The service provider hired various vendors to train participants on interviewing and presentation skills, work behaviors, literacy, computer, and basic legal terminology. Criteria for admission in the program were a negative drug test, a high school diploma or General Education Diploma (GED), successful completion of the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), and a personal interview score sheet. Participants were referred by local one-stop agencies, which provide employment services and handle cases for welfare recipients, or by welfare recipients' caseload managers. Sixteen participants, 2males and 14 females of Hispanic and/or African American ethnicity, were selected for the program. Participants had varied educational and employment backgrounds.

Participants were required to attend a 16-week mandatory training orientation that included a curriculum designed by a local community college vendor. The curriculum design included topics in life skills management, keyboarding, math, and literacy/grammar. Students were required to be in attendance Monday through Friday, 8:30 AM- 4:30 PM. The program offered payment to students for program participation. Upon completion of the program, participants were guaranteed an entry-level placement in a local law firm. Participants were to be assigned mentors at the law firm where they were placed.

Discussion

We compared actual with desired program outcomes to identify problems with ethical behavior and to suggest some directions for welfare to work program planning.

Professionalism and Accountability

Professional competence is a complex and multifaceted concept, which incorporates four core components: knowledge competence, functional competence, behavioral competence, and ethical competence (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996). These components are interrelated and dependent on each other. Knowledge competence is the possession of work-related knowledge and the ability to apply this knowledge into effective use. Functional competence is the ability to perform work-based tasks to produce specific outcomes. Behavioral competence is the ability to behave appropriately in work related situations. Ethical competence is the possession of appropriate personal and professional values and the ability to apply them effectively in professional settings. Accountability means recognizing the consequences of what we do. It demands that professionals lead by example, pursue excellence, and exercise self-restraint

(Josephson, 1998). Situations occurred in which the professional competence and accountability of welfare-to-work providers could be questioned. For instance, providers were not on time for their appointments. When they were late, they were disruptive. These same providers constantly promoted professional behavior as a must for success for the welfare participants, but were violating the same norms, which resulted in their failure to model the desired behavior and attitude. Providers often took participants from classes for administrative reasons while insisting that attendance and participation were vital for success and mandatory. This contradiction interfered with participants' learning and devalued the training process.

Participant-Provider Relationships

Respect is the moral obligation to display regard for the worth of people, no matter who they are or what they have done (Josephson, 1998). It reflects one's civility, courtesy, tolerance and acceptance. A respectful person treats others with consideration and lack of prejudice. Administrative practices of welfare agencies have a powerful impact on welfare clients (Anderson, 2001). The success of welfare reform depends on the ability of welfare-to-work agencies to place welfare clients in jobs leading to self-sufficiency and economic viability, to act in their favor, and to build rapport with them. Instead, program providers tend to see, though unconsciously, welfare clients as responsible for their economic situation (Lent, 2001). Participants shared that they were treated as "nobodies" by people who looked down on them because they did not have respect for them. Providers did demonstrate a very low opinion of the participants and never missed an opportunity for a negative remark. A negative perception of participants' environment, lifestyle, and experience biased providers' decisions and judgements, which decreased participants' motivation and willingness to participate. Participants were treated as irresponsible and immature regardless of whether they were or not, which demoralized them. Such treatment resulted in loss of hope and trust, and low self-esteem, which were contrary to the program goals. Participants felt the lack of respect on behalf of the program staff, and this complicated their freedom of expression. They complained that the planner's direct contact had no experience dealing with people on welfare and that she needed lessons in "people skills," two said they had to confront her and remind her they were adults. Dealing with the direct contact often made participants uneager to attend class or bring necessary concerns to the front. The unstable economic situation of welfare recipients makes them vulnerable to the whims of program planners (Lent, 2001), and it is easier for them to give up rather than go through humiliation.

Shared Responsibilities

"The notion of shared responsibility implies that each organization must take responsibility for fulfilling their role as a part of a larger, concerted effort" (Berman & Bonczek, 1998, p. 217) when planning programs. The effective operation of programs for welfare recipients depends on coordinated activities of inter-organizational networks and the motivation and commitment of their personnel (Jennings & Krane, 1998). Shared responsibility implies a mutually beneficial relationship between agencies. Welfare reform has failed to achieve its goals because the critical role of an adequate and functional service delivery network of organizations has been underestimated (Jennings & Krane, 1998) and critical implementation and management issues have not been considered a central component in the policy design.

Five agencies were involved in the design, delivery, and implementation of this program. Weak partnerships and communication breaches resulted in poor administrative decisions. For

instance, a fundamental program component, paid internships for each participant, did not materialize due to providers not communicating directly with the firm decision-makers. This did not stop the service provider from publicly stating that internships did exist. Often there were issues with paying participants on time, securing bus passes, and negotiating personal and program conflicts, all of which were responsibilities of different agencies that had failed to communicate effectively and efficiently with each other. All this was at the expense of the participants: one participant became homeless, one dropped out of the program, two were labeled as problems, and many others experienced financial difficulties. By the conclusion of the program, some participants still did not have job or internship placements as promised by program planners at the beginning. Some feared that the time devoted to the program had been wasted and that they had been lied to.

Implications

Employing an ethical perspective to viewing problems could offer a more constructive approach to the planning, design, and delivery of welfare to work programs. Knowledge and understanding of ethical theories is essential for identifying resolving, and/or avoiding ethical issues. Training on ethics could help providers accomplish their goal of creating self-disciplined, self-directed, and self-sufficient participants because they will learn to be attentive and responsive to participants' needs and concerns. Ethical training could educate the powerful and privileged program providers and planners about the marginalized population they serve and end the vicious practice of creating undue stereotypes. This in turn could foster self-esteem and pride in the welfare participants.

If the welfare-to-work initiative is to succeed, it requires providers to have knowledge of ethics to inform and drive their strategic approach to the planning, design, and delivery of welfare-to-work programs and to ensure that participants' interests are consistently served and important issues are not overlooked. Banal and trite as it may sound, those who claim that their primary interest is helping the less fortunate should adhere to and advocate ethical behavior. Failure to do so will perpetuate the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the welfare-to-work initiative.

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