Professional Ethics and Welfare Reform: The Importance of Ethical Competence

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Abstract: This paper explores the professional ethics of welfare reform providers and its influence in the achievement of welfare reform goals. Four themes address the professional ethics and ethical competence of welfare reform providers.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, known as the Welfare Reform Bill, was passed to eradicate the problems of poverty and welfare by transforming welfare recipients into a self-disciplined, self-directed, and self-sufficient workforce. The achievement of welfare reform goals depends on the competence, motivation, and commitment of professionals who come from diverse disciplines, have different practical experience, operate from different political and ideological standpoints, and make decisions using standards and methods defined by their professional groups. Welfare reform providers (policymakers, social workers, program planners, teachers, and employers) may work from contradictory and conflicting positions, rendering services based on unwarranted perceptions about people on welfare (Abramowitz, 1996). More often than not professionals from the service network view welfare recipients as deficient, dependent, unmotivated, and lacking moral worth. These stigmas are prevalent and powerful, although social welfare scholars and critical educators have repeatedly disproved them (Sidel, 1998). These stigmas bias providers' decisions and judgments and lead to the design and delivery of inadequate programs, which further stigmatize the program participants.

Research has found that administrative practices of welfare agencies define the services they provide which has powerful impacts on program outcomes (Anderson, 2001; Beckerman & Fontana, 2001; Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 1980). The purpose of this paper is to explore the professional ethics of welfare reform providers as portrayed in the literature to understand its influence in the achievement of welfare reform goals. Professional ethics is used as a conceptual framework because (a) in the USA today, public needs are served by persons in professional roles (Josephson, 1998); (b) ethics shape and define the nature of professions (McDowell, 2000), (c) ethical bearing and integrity are the measure for professional credibility today (Bowman, 1998), and (d) 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). The paper begins with a discussion of professional ethics, a description of the method used for reviewing the literature, followed by a discussion of four themes that emerged from the literature review. A conclusion and implications section ends the paper.

Professional Ethics

To discuss professional ethics, a definition of ethics, profession, and ethical competence is needed. Ethics is the study of human conduct in terms of what is right or wrong, what is worth doing, and what should not be done (Velazques, 2002). A profession is an occupation that regulates itself through systematic, formal training; requires technical and specialized knowledge and adoption of basic ethical values and duties; and has a service orientation (McDowell, 2000). The idea of profession implies both cultivation of a certain vocation and a cultivation of ethical competence in practicing that vocation. Ethical competence is the possession of appropriate

personal and professional values and the ability to apply them effectively in professional settings (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996). Some personal values are social sensitivity, tolerance and respect for others, and adherence to a personal moral code. Examples of professional values are adherence to professional codes, impartiality, and concern for the rights of the individual and the welfare of society.

Wilkins (1995) defines professional ethics as a term that employs three distinct but interconnected meanings. The most general understanding of the term refers to the ethics of all professions. Professions across disciplines share similar ethical standards and normative commitments such as 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 displayed by professionals and whether the stated purposes of a profession are served. Professional ethics refers to the values, responsibilities, duties, and obligations that ought to guide the conduct of professionals. Professionals are expected to act rationally to maintain a stable and equitable social order. Intentional or unintentional neglect of clients' rights, professional duties, and social responsibilities erodes public confidence, diminishes the common good, and undermines the foundations of a democratic society.

Method

To explore the professional ethics of welfare reform providers as portrayed in the literature, research was analyzed on welfare-to-work programs published in the proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) from 1997-2003. AERC was chosen because it reflects the changing emphasis and orientation of research in adult education and the growing diversity and maturity of the field. Boyatzis' (1998) inductive approach to interpreting qualitative data through thematic analysis was used. First, descriptors such as welfare, welfare reform, welfare-to-work, and public assistance were established. Second, the AERC online conference proceedings from 1997-2002 were searched year by year. The year 1997 was used as a starting point because it was assumed that welfare-to-work programs would be in place by this time since the PRWORA was passed in 1996. Each descriptor was inserted separately into the category search string to accomplish the search. To ensure that all relevant articles were located each title and abstract were searched for each descriptor. The proceedings from the year 2003 were hand searched because these proceedings were not yet available on line. Seventeen articles contained the descriptors. All articles found were qualitative studies on predominantly black welfare women. These articles were read and categorized according to the major topic of the article. Data were analyzed searching for themes that implied encroachment of professional ethics or provided evidence for exemplary professional behavior. A theme was defined as a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at a maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998).

Article Review and Discussion

Four themes recurred from the review of the literature that address the professional ethics and ethical competence of welfare reform providers. The themes are patriarchal authority, political interests, stereotyping, and teachers' attitudes.

Patriarchal Authority

Patriarchal authority is the primary form of social oppression (Abramovitz, 1996) degrading women's unpaid labor in the home, devaluing women's care giving role, and forcing dependency on men or the government (Sparks, 1999a). Patriarchal authority undermines the

autonomy and freedom of welfare women by depriving them of their right to choose education and training that could help them move out of poverty (Hayes & Way, 1998; Sparks, 1999b, 2002). Patriarchal authority helps guarantee welfare women's inferior position in the economy and the society reserving the lowest paid jobs for them (Sparks, 1999b). Welfare women call this emotional and financial blackmail because they are forced to obey the welfare system to take care of their children.

Patriarchal authority is exercised when caseworkers interpret women's needs for them, conceal information on available options, and force women into programs that often do not prepare them for the jobs available in the local economies. Sparks (1999b) shares the story of a welfare woman who had called most of the medical clinics in the surrounding rural area and had found there was no demand for medical receptionists, yet she was ordered into a six month program by her caseworker only because that program had slots open. Caseworkers assert their authority with unfair sanctions such as taking away childcare vouchers, reducing amounts of food assistance, not returning calls, or conveying inaccurate information to employers (Andruske, 2000; Hayes & Way, 1998; Sandlin, 2001; Sparks, 2001). Instances in which caseworkers treat welfare women with empathy are rare. Such instances show that concern, consideration, and good communication ensure positive attitudes and helping relationships and play a significant role in the achievement of meaningful results.

Political Interests

Executors of welfare reform policy have differing political interests and educational orientations which lead to uneven policy implementation (Sparks, 2002). For instance, proponents of the "work-first" approach argue welfare women get hands-on training from working that is better than learning abstract concepts in training programs. The primary focus of the "work-first" approach is to place welfare women immediately to jobs, even if the jobs are low-skilled, provide little training and pay wages below the poverty level. The assumption is that through work, women will acquire basic abilities and knowledge that will enable them to move to more skilled jobs and highly paid positions (Hayes & Way, 2001).

Proponents of the human capital approach advocate education and training as the prospect of moving welfare women from poverty to economic self- sufficiency (Adams, 2002). But education for unskilled and low skilled welfare women is a complicated activity because a wide range of stakeholders are involved with providing the service (Sparks, 2002). Education for low skilled welfare women is often inadequate and low quality because of poorly designed fast-track training programs. Such education does not help welfare women move away from dependency and poverty but instead helps supply the market with cheap labor and helps maintain the gendered history of denying welfare women fair education and decent compensation.

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 women are perceived as deficit-driven and as the single cause for their economic situation (Andruske, 2000; Sandlin 2002; Sparks, 1999b, 2002). The stereotypical portrayal is that women on welfare 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 tend to consider the personal and emotional issues of welfare women as

impediments to the learning process (Sparks, 2002, Sandlin, 2002). Case managers and employers consistently report that welfare clients bring undesirable work habits to the work place because they have never worked and have never been in any kind of structured activity. Lack of skills, lack of punctuality, illiteracy, absenteeism, low motivation, bad attitudes, unreliability, and personal hygiene are problems (Sparks, 1999b). Employers screen and eliminate welfare women who are likely to be troublesome. Welfare providers enforce close oversight and strong sanctions to "shape" the behavior of welfare women. These practices limit opportunities for strengthening work skills and habits, for finding lasting employment, and disregard welfare women's right of well being.

Teachers' Attitudes

Teachers' beliefs, relationships, and learning environments hold a key to successful or unsuccessful engagement and participation in welfare-to-work programs (Ziegler & Durant, 2001). Teachers, whose ideology is covertly racist and sexist, reinforce the stigma and help perpetuate mainstream stereotypes about welfare women (Sandlin, 2002). These teachers continually stress the idea that welfare women 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 disturbing that there are teachers who are operating within these prevalent myths instead of being advocates for welfare women. Teachers' inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the worth of students leads to low motivation, diminished learning capacity, and discontent with learning activities.

Teachers, who want to make a difference in welfare women's lives, persist in helping them achieve their goals and aspirations regardless of the obstacles and the unfriendly system they have to navigate. They treat participants with respect, appreciation, and lack of prejudice which fosters self-esteem and pride (Ziegler & Durant, 2001; Sparks, 2001). Trusting relationships are built through delegation of leadership roles, teamwork, and collaborative activities that develop a sense of group membership. Developing meaningful relationships through an ethic of care empowers welfare women to participate in learning activities and to take control of their lives.

Conclusion and Implications

Differing value systems, alternative courses of action, and conflicting obligations shape the practice and decision-making of welfare providers and generate either negative or positive consequences. Negative consequences result from a failure to adhere to standards of ethical competence and social obligations. The article review illustrates that breaches in professional ethics and professional responsibilities include failure to recognize welfare women's rights to welfare, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness; failure to treat welfare women with respect and lack of prejudice; and failure to help welfare women realize their potential. Educators who believe education has the potential for achieving social change and that welfare women deserve respect and appreciation for their life journeys bring about positive consequences.

Welfare reform providers operate as parts of a larger endeavor, welfare reform, which aspires to eradicate the problems of poverty and welfare by transforming welfare recipients into a self-disciplined, self-directed, and self-sufficient workforce. Practices and decision-making geared towards positive consequences imply that social sensitivity, tolerance, and care have a strong influence in welfare reform context. To help cease the problem of social injustice and to advance welfare recipients' educational attainment and independence, welfare reform providers should critically examine the contexts in which they operate by questioning their own

assumptions and privileges and by resisting stereotyping. 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 (Lawler, 2000). Awareness of why welfare reform providers make certain choices and what the consequences of these choices are for welfare clients may result in stronger commitment to ethical conduct and a more responsible and ethical practice.

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