Professional development opportunities as retention incentives in child welfare

Sherrill J. Clark [a,*], Richard J. Smith [b,1], Kazumi Uota [c]

[a] California Social Work Education Center, School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley, 2850 Telegraph, Suite 215, Berkeley, CA 94705, United States
[b] School of Social Work, Wayne State University, 4756 Cass Avenue, Detroit, MI 48202, United States
[c] University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-7400, United States

A B S T R A C T

This study examined the career paths of 415 Title IV-E MSW graduates in one state retrospectively over 180 months post-graduation to discover factors that could be important in affecting retention in public child welfare agencies. The Title IV-E educational program is designed to be a retention strategy at the same time as it is a professionalization strategy. We surmised that perceived organizational support (POS) contributes to retention by acknowledging the workers' needs for career development support. The median survival time for these child welfare social workers was 43 months for the first job and 168 months for the entire child welfare career. The initial analysis showed steep drops in retention occurred at 24–36 months post-graduation, approximately at the end of the Title IV-E work obligation. Upon further examination, Kaplan–Meier tests showed organizational factors relevant to workers' professional career development predicted retention. Having access to continuing education and agency-supported case-focused supervision for licensure were correlated with retention at the 24–36 month post-graduation mark. At 72 months post-graduation, promotion to supervisor was a significant factor found to encourage retention. Being a field instructor for MSW students and being promoted to a managerial position were not significantly related to retention.

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1. Introduction

Turnover of child welfare workers creates service discontinuities for children and families in the system and morale problems for remaining staff (United States Government Accounting Office, 2003). Child welfare worker turnover has been shown to negatively affect outcomes, specifically rates of foster child reunification (Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006). Likewise, Strolin, McCarthy, and Caringi's (2006) concern about worker turnover was for its effect on case continuity and thus for basic safety and permanency needs of clients. Turnover increases in-service training costs and the costs of re-establishing work teams. Furthermore it is more difficult to implement new programs, such as evidence-based practice models when turnover is high (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006). On the other hand, a positive organizational climate, defined as the workers' perceptions of the "psychological impact of their work environment on their own functioning" (Glisson & Green, 2011, p. 583), has been shown to positively affect youth outcomes in children's mental health services and supports worker retention

(Glisson & Green, 2011; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). Consequently, retention of public child welfare social workers is highly valued.

To improve retention rates, public child welfare agencies and schools of social work in the United States have developed Title IV-E pre-service social work graduate (MSW) and undergraduate (BSW) degree programs that recruit and prepare workers for practice in public child welfare services. The Title IV-E strategy is intended to increase retention and to professionalize child welfare services by educating social workers for this field (Bagdasaryan, 2012; Scannapieco, Hegar, & Connell-Carrick, 2012). These programs deliver special curricula, offer instructional support to agencies and universities, and provide stipends and/or tuition support to social work students. In return, graduates have post-graduate work obligations in public child welfare services that are at least equal to the length of time the support is received (United States Department of Health & Human Services, Title 45, Public Welfare, Code of Federal Regulations, § 235.63 (b) (5)). Title IV-E education is costly; thus it is important to understand the factors that will improve retention of these specially-trained child welfare social workers.

This study examined a retrospective non-random sample of 415 Title IV-E MSW graduates in California that had completed their work obligations and who were at least 5 years to 15 years post-graduation for factors that increased retention. Using survival analysis, the aims of this study were to examine 1) how long these specially trained public child welfare workers stayed in public child welfare over time, and 2) whether

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 510 642 9272.
E-mail addresses: sherrillclark@sbcglobal.net (S.J. Clark), smithrichardj@wayne.edu (R.J. Smith), kazumiuota@gmail.com (K. Uota).
[1] Tel.: +1 313 577 2262.

professional development opportunities provided by their organizations were correlated with tenure, i.e., length of time on the job.

1.1. Stayers and leavers

Because California is a state-supervised, county-administered state, leaving one county agency to work for another does not constitute leaving the public child welfare career. This is not true for other states which have only one public child welfare administration or for states that have privatized child welfare services.

In California's Title IV-E program and for this research, graduates were considered as retained or *stayers* if they remained working in public child welfare services, i.e., in a county, state or Tribal child welfare agency after graduation, even if they transferred between units in the same child welfare agency or left one county agency for another. Although leaving one unit for another and promotions are forms of turnover and create re-training implications, voluntary lateral transfers were not considered in this research. (In fact they can be considered in a positive light as employee job mobility, e.g., transferring from one child welfare service to another within the same agency rather than turnover per se if they are voluntary [Burns & Christie, 2013].) That discussion is important, but it is beyond the scope of this study.

Those who left and returned in four months or less (as in the case of maternity or sick leave) were also considered *stayers*. The precedent for this can be found in Jones (2002) retrospective study of new hires in one county including Title IV-E graduates from one school's program. He found that those IV-E graduates who were re-hired after leaving the agency were significantly more likely to stay.

On the other hand, those who remained in the public sector but transferred to adult services, mental health departments or probation were considered *leavers*. Those who left public child welfare for the private for-profit or nonprofit arena were also considered *leavers*.

1.2. Professional development opportunities and organizational commitment

This paper seeks to describe, at the level of the individual, the incentives that motivate well-educated and committed workers, such as professional development opportunities.

There are two systemic interventions for increasing organizational commitment in this field that are notable here. Glisson, Dukes, and Green (2006) employed the Availability, Responsiveness, and Continuity (ARC) organizational intervention strategy to decrease turnover among child welfare and juvenile justice employees by improving work environments for groups of workers. Caringi et al. (2008) created and tested a systemic intervention—design teams—focusing on improving the interactions among the supervisory, individual and organizational factors in the child welfare agency. ARC and design teams have been found to be successful by implementing large-scale changes at the agency level.

Few studies have shown evidence of ameliorative actions at the individual level that agencies can take to prevent turnover and to encourage retention by increasing workers' organizational commitment through the use of individual incentives. Henry (1990) in a study of public mental health workers and Smith (2005) in a child welfare staff study both suggested educational remedies for turnover, such as case-focused supervision or teaching pre-service students to anticipate organizational culture and climate factors.

Professional development opportunities are expected to contribute to feelings of job satisfaction and personal accomplishment. For example, Curry, McCarragher, and Dellman-Jenkins (2005) note that the provision of training and other opportunities for professional development communicates organizational support for staff careers. Chenot (2007) found that job satisfaction, organizational commitment and commitment to child welfare preceded the intentions to stay, but job satisfaction and retention were both moderated by organizational climate factors. Research about the specific relationships between organizational commitment and job satisfaction is inconclusive: For example, in one

study job satisfaction preceded worker commitment to an organization (Landsman, 2001). In another, organizational commitment preceded job satisfaction (Freund, 2005). Research on this population applying the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) has found that feelings of personal accomplishment have mitigated intentions to leave the agency (Drake & Yadama, 1996).

Weaver, Chang, Clark, and Rhee (2007) found that while MSWs expressed the intent to leave public child welfare more often than others, in actuality they did not leave at higher rates. Satisfaction with training was associated with intent to stay and on actual staying. The authors concluded that job satisfaction was the best predictor of staying in the public child welfare organization, but did not further investigate the role of career development in retention.

Benton's (2010) comprehensive and carefully constructed model of retention of Title IV-E MSWs 2 to 3 years post-graduation included worker characteristics, extrinsic and intrinsic factors, and responses to the job as independent variables: Being a county employee while in graduate school, higher salary, fewer hours, supervisory support and lower client-related stress showed significance with higher retention. However none of the intrinsic work factors increased the odds of retention in Benton's study. (Intrinsic factors are specific to the nature of the work, e.g. finding the work rewarding and/challenging, being able to help families and children, opportunities to learn. See Benton, 2010, Table 4.1, pp. 21–22, for more examples of intrinsic, as well as extrinsic factors).

This study differs from Benton's in that we have a sample of Title IV-E graduates who are further out from graduation—5 to 15 years. So we were able to study their careers over a longer period of time. In addition, we broke down the intrinsic job factor of professional development into specific opportunities. Because professional development is related to personal accomplishment, that it communicates organizational support for workers, and as such it is part of the rationale for having IV-E pre-service training in the first place, we based this study on the assumption that professional development opportunities provided by the agency to Title IV-E graduates on the job would increase retention. The specific professional development opportunities we chose to examine were: achieving promotions, access to training, case-focused supervision for licensure, and being a field instructor. Others have found these opportunities related to child welfare worker retention (e.g., Westbrook, Ellett, & Asberg, 2012).

1.2.1. Promotions

Smith (2005) found that those workers having a social work degree were more likely to leave if there were few opportunities for promotion. Thaden (2007) found that being a supervisor was positively associated with longer time on the job or tenure. Generally, supervisors have longer tenure than line workers (Clark, 2009).

Cahalane and Sites (2008) applied Glisson and Hemmelgarn's (1998) *Organizational Climate Survey* in a cross-sectional design with MSW Title IV-E graduates. They examined what organizational climate factors led graduates to stay or leave public child welfare or leave for practice in private agencies. Findings showed that those workers who had more total years in child welfare and who were promoted stayed in the public agency. Similar to Weaver et al., role conflict, a lack of personal accomplishment, and role ambiguity as well as fairness issues were problems stated by those who left. Although Cahalane & Sites also looked at promotions as a factor in staying, not everyone who stayed got a promotion.

1.2.2. Access to training

In a prospective longitudinal study of public child welfare workers in Texas, Scannapieco et al. (2012) found that social workers among the child welfare staff found the agency's educational offerings more satisfying than did other workers. To address retention concerns, Weaver et al. (2007) recommended the administrators' focus on improving the education and training of new hires and the role of supervision

with new workers to increase job satisfaction among child welfare social workers. Giddings, Cleveland, Smith, Collins-Camargo, and Russell (2008) recommend teaching supervisors to provide clinical supervision as a retention strategy for the workers they supervise. Dickinson and Perry (2002) make similar recommendations about access to training specifically for the Title IV-E prepared child welfare social workers.

1.2.3. Case-focused supervision for licensure

There are at least three distinct dimensions to supervision in social work: knowledge and task assistance, affective or supportive, and administrative or rule-based supervision (see Kadushin & Harkness, 2002, for examples of the first two). Case-focused supervision for licensure focuses on the first two dimensions. However child welfare managers often require that supervisors focus on the third dimension to ensure their supervisees understand the regulatory framework for child welfare and meet the requirements (Clark et al., 2008).

Precedents for choosing agency support for licensure as a variable were not found directly in the research literature on retention, perhaps because the licensure process differs from state to state. California requires at least two years of practice and specific continuing education requirements before a social worker can take the licensure test; the type of supervision allowed for licensure is clinical, case-focused, and includes social worker self-examination. It is not primarily focused on workload management or regulations. Clark et al.'s (2008) research supports this finding: Newly hired line child welfare workers rely on supportive supervisors for their expertise in the field and on their regular availability. More seasoned workers who may not have needed as frequent supervision still sought out consultation about cases and policy from their supervisors, but on an ad hoc basis. Support for choosing case-focused supervisory support also comes from Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, and Xie's (2009) meta-analysis of the impact that supervisory task assistance, social and emotional support, and interpersonal interaction have on positive worker outcomes, including worker retention. While these dimensions are not the same as *supervision for licensure*, one, worker task assistance—defined as "the supervisor's ability to provide tangible work-related, positive advice and guidance" (Mor Barak et al., 2009, p. 15)—comes close. Although all three dimensions show positive links, task assistance showed the largest effect on positive worker outcomes.

Weaver et al. (2007) considered the variable *supervision for licensure* among a sample of newly hired child welfare workers, but did not find it significantly associated with staying or leaving. They did find that role conflict e.g., being asked to perform tasks they felt were not social work, unnecessary tasks, or policies that were incompatible with their values, was significantly associated with the intent to leave.

Cahalane's & Sites' respondents identified features of a supportive organizational climate in which the organizational environment "encourages innovation, provides both tangible and intangible rewards, and offers supportive, individually oriented supervision" (Cahalane & Sites, 2008, p. 107). O'Donnell and Kirkner (2009) found that the "lack of professional development experiences" (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009, p. 76), e.g., lack of shared social work values and little opportunity to practice the skills they learned in graduate school was more frequently associated with leaving than high caseloads. Among the reasons for staying was being given hours for professional licenses, professional development opportunities, working in a "good unit". The most consistently influential variables for stayers were organizational commitment, job satisfaction indirectly, and supervisor support during the first year.

Scannapieco et al. (2012) found social workers perceived their relationship with supervisors differently than other child welfare workers; namely they were less reliant on their supervisors for workload management. In this study the authors found that social workers consistently stayed longer than others in child welfare, supporting previous research (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Fox, Miller, & Barbee, 2003; Jones, 2002; Rosenthal & Waters, 2006). One participant in Yoo's (2002) study eloquently stated

the type of case-focused supervision s/he needed: "What I need in clinical supervision is debriefing and emotionally rebalancing as a worker in the field, and getting the insight on how to deal with the case in a healthy way that is going to serve the family." (Yoo, 2002, p. 52).

1.2.4. Field instruction opportunities

Field education is considered the signature pedagogy of professional social work education (Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), 2008). As a field instructor, the child welfare social worker in the position of supervisor, applying the task assistance, knowledge, and supportive dimensions of supervision noted in the last section with a social work student. Motivations for being a field instructor include the enjoyment of teaching, contributing to the profession, gaining experience in preparation for promotion, relieving job boredom, connecting with the university, and sharpening one's own practice skills (Bogo & Power, 1992; Globerman & Bogo, 2008; Rosenfeld, 1989). The more rewarded field instructors felt, the more satisfied they were with their jobs (Peleg-Oren & Even-Zahav, 2004; Peleg-Oren, Macgowan, & Evan-Zahav, 2007). Since generally field instructors are volunteers, the rewards they receive in return can be seen as discretionary on the part of their agencies.

Merrill and Lutnick's (2012) study found that mentoring new MSW professionals and improving their own supervision and teaching skills were key factors motivating social workers to become field instructors. Additionally the majority felt that providing field instruction was part of their ethical duty as professional social workers. The chance to affiliate with the university, attend lectures, use the library, represent the agencies at job fairs, and to keep up with the latest practices and research were also motivators.

The intrinsic rewards noted above were also valued by the majority of field instructors in Bogo and Power (1992) and were related to professional development. For this study we posited that the Title IV-E graduate field instructors would have increased satisfaction with their jobs and see field instruction as a professional and career development opportunity; which in turn would increase retention.

1.3. Organizational factors, job satisfaction, and retention

A few researchers have focused on ameliorative actions that agencies can take to prevent job dissatisfaction before it leads to a turnover problem. Glisson and Green (2011) studied organizational climate and culture factors' effects on the workforce. Determining the order in which organizational factors influence retention is important for purposes of designing improvements. For example, poor relationships with supervisors precede stress and burnout, which precede job dissatisfaction. Job satisfaction, organizational and occupational attachments are distinct but related constructs that are influenced by structural features of the workplace, job stressors, and professional identification (Landsman, 2001). In a cross-sectional, regional study Chenot (2007) found that job satisfaction, organizational commitment and commitment to child welfare precede the intentions to stay, but job satisfaction and retention are both moderated by organizational climate factors. Job satisfaction has been found to precede worker commitment to an organization (Landsman, 2001) or sometimes the reverse is found: Organizational commitment precedes job satisfaction (Freund, 2005).

1.4. Gaps in the research

Strolin et al. (2006) critiqued research in this area as lacking theory that would define the inconsistencies, using non-standardized instruments, not connecting turnover to client outcomes, and not correlating workforce stability with educational degrees or outcomes.

In a systematic review of child welfare worker retention research from 1974 through 2004, DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008) found that 25 studies which used retention as the dependent variable; only nine, which were published between 1984 and 2005 and which used

multivariate statistics, were included in the authors' analysis. Five of these studies specifically identified retention as the dependent variable, whereas four others used turnover. None of these studies looked at the effects of support for licensure, promotions, access to training, or being a field instructor on retention specifically. Three of these studies specifically addressed Title IV-E education (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Jones, 2002).

DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008) noted that the field lacks a consistent standard or definition of a "reasonable" expectation for a child welfare social worker's length of service in an agency. The authors surmised that reasons for staying or leaving might differ at the short- mid- and long-term points in a worker's career. Yet most of the studies reviewed could not address this issue because the dependent variable, *retention*, was measured as a dichotomous variable in cross-sectional designs and only one study used a time-ordered cross-sectional design (Drake & Yadama, 1996). So they were unable to say whether workers have a differential response to incentives based on time-in-career. Most studies have not looked at retention for long enough periods of time to expect that the worker would be promoted or gain licensure Chenot, Benton & Kim's study (2009) is an exception: Using a cross-sectional design, they looked at subsamples of workers in their early (up to 3 years), mid- (4–10 years) and late careers (more than 11 years), finding that a passive–defensive organizational culture had the greatest effects on turnover of early career workers. Passive–defensive cultures are characterized by apathy and little interest in change or suppression of change (Glisson et al., 2008). Early careerists sought constructive organizational cultures which valued professionalism and collegiality.

Research has variously found that MSWs or social workers express the intent to leave more or less often than others: For example, Weaver et al. (2007) and Yankeelov, Barbee, Sullivan, and Antle (2009) found that MSWs stated their intentions to leave more often than other child welfare workers, but may not have actually done so. Whereas Rosenthal and Waters (2006) found that their specially-trained IV-E graduates had better retention than others. It may be the case that MSWs' intentions to leave are higher, when all other things are equal. However Smith (2005) points out that all other things are not equal, especially with regard to the educational preparation of the MSW workers. The question remains: If they were specially trained for this work and they like their client population (Benton, 2010; Morazes, Benton, Clark, & Jacquet, 2010), why would Title IV-E MSWs express a higher intent to leave? Since access to training, case-focused supervision for licensing, promotions, and being chosen as a field instructor are not required, but are discretionary actions on the part of the child welfare agency toward the worker, we chose to frame this study in theoretical terms of perceived organizational support (POS).

2. Social exchange theory and perceived organizational support

Unlike economic exchange which involves immediate reciprocity and assumes no ongoing relationship between the exchanging parties, classic social exchange theory is about reciprocity in human relations (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). In other words, when something is given, there is the expectation that the favor will be returned at some unspecified future point in time. Favors that are discretionary, i.e., not required to be given, are highly-valued. There are examples of the application of social exchange theory to the study of turnover and retention of child welfare workers (e.g., Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Smith, 2005; Strand & Dore, 2009; Strolin et al., 2006).

Perceived organizational support (POS) is a contemporary application of social exchange theory that involves the relationship between an employee and his or her organization (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). POS happens when the employee believes that an organization values his or her contributions (recognition) and cares about his or her well-being which leads to the employee feeling valued. The employee in turn then reciprocates to the organization (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber,

Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). POS can lessen emotional job strains (George et al., 1993). With respect to the workplace, treatment is discretionary if the exchange partner is not "formally rewarded nor contractually enforceable" to reciprocate (Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996, p. 219). Discretionary treatment by the organization, such as being chosen for a special training or special supervision for licensure leads to perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986). In an overview of the current knowledge about workforce turnover, Strolin et al. (2006) suggest applying POS to study how workers' views of organizational support affect their emotional ties to the organization or, their withdrawal (from the organization) behavior.

2.1. Antecedents and consequences of POS

For this study, we applied POS to demonstrate that certain discretionary professional development opportunities provided by an organization to individuals contribute to retention of workers in public child welfare agencies. Antecedents of POS include feeling valued and cared about, and trusting that the organization will fulfill its obligations to the employee. Trust is a necessary antecedent to POS. Consequences of POS are affective organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, higher performance ratings and lower intentions to quit (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997).

The more beneficial the employee perceives the organization to be to him or herself, the stronger the reciprocation from the employee will be to the organization. When developmental opportunities are available, perceived organizational support would be expected to increase. We surmise that this also leads to longer worker tenure with the organization.

For example, Clark et al. (2008) found that new child welfare workers were more appreciative of hands-on regular meetings with supervisors who would listen to their work-related problems and who had knowledge of the particular child welfare services to which the new worker was assigned. Those line workers with more years of experience valued their autonomy and preferred a more voluntary approach with their supervisors. That is to say they preferred having the discretion to choose when to have supervision based on problems they identified. Both new and more experienced workers indicated they benefited from supportive supervision, but preferred different support conditions based on different points in their careers.

2.2. The relationship between POS and perceived supervisor support

Since many child welfare work retention studies have concluded that supervisor support is key to retention (see above) the relationship between supervisor support and perceived organization support is worthwhile to discuss here. Leader membership exchange (LMX) is a different but related construct than POS (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Settoon et al., 1996; Shore & Tetrick, 1991). Mor Barack et al. (2001) applied LMX in their metanalysis of the impact of supervision, stating that the supervisor is the leader that represents the most direct connection between the worker and his or her organization. Antecedents of leader membership exchange include mutual affinity or liking, future expectations and dyad tenure (Wayne et al., 1997). The positive consequences of leader membership exchange are performance quality, doing favors for one another, organizational citizenship behavior, and POS. Leader member exchange and perceived organizational support have reciprocal influence on each other, but the positive leader–member exchange leading to perceived organizational support direction is the stronger relationship (Wayne et al., 1997). That is to say that favorable regard of one's supervisor positively affects perceived organizational support, but perceived organizational support has a weaker effect on perceived supervisor support. Most relevant to the present study, Eisenberger et al. (2002) have suggested that perceived supervisorial support (PSS) leads to POS but that it is POS that sustains an employee when there is a negative relationship with the supervisor.

Yoo (2002) notes that unsatisfactory organizational leadership (beyond supervision) is a major source of job dissatisfaction for child welfare workers.

3. Research questions

This study contributes to the field by filling the aforementioned gap in the literature. Specifically, its objectives are twofold: (1) to document and understand the career patterns of specially-trained Title IV-E MSW child welfare workers over a period of 5 to 15 years, and (2) to identify specific personal development experiences that may influence these workers' perception of organizational support and thus their retention. We aimed to achieve these objectives by answering four questions: (1) How long do Title IV-E graduates stay in their first public child welfare jobs and, (2) in their public child welfare careers? (3) Are there differences in the survival curves between workers who have received specific incentives to stay (e.g., promotional opportunities, access to training, agency support for licensure, and the experience of becoming a field instructor) and those who have not? and 4) Are certain professional development experiences more influential at specific times in the graduates' careers? We hypothesized that the median survival times for both first jobs and child welfare careers would be relatively short, and that workers with and without specific professional development experiences would follow different survival projectiles because workers were expected to leave the public child welfare field at different times in their careers for various reasons. We hypothesized that access to training, promotions to supervisor or manager/administrator, case-focused supervision for licensure, and being a field instructor would be associated with longer retention.

4. Methods

4.1. Design

This study is a descriptive retrospective study of a non-random sample of Title IV-E graduates from one state. They were surveyed about their work histories from the point of graduation to the time of the survey, whether or not they were still working in their first jobs, in public child welfare, or as social workers; and about professional development opportunities available to them at their current or former public child welfare agencies. Survival analysis using life tables was applied to determine the effect of factors on long-term retention. Kaiser–Meier estimations were used to determine if professional development opportunities had any effect on workers' careers at different times.

4.2. Sample & survey procedures

The sample was drawn from a database of Title IV-E Program graduates (referred to as CSIS) governed by a contractual agreement with each participating university in the stipend/tuition program. The CSIS is updated quarterly to the central research unit by each participating university at least until the graduate has completed his or her work obligation. This database is maintained on a secured server in accordance with University confidentiality policy and the Family Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA) (see United States Department of Education, n.d.). In order to contact graduates who have been out of school much longer than their work obligation, we worked with participating university personnel to ensure that we had the most up-to-date contact information. To minimize any coercion, we familiarized other university personnel and study participants with the voluntary nature of the study using the University Office for the Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS) approved survey recruitment letters consents to participate in research, and instruments. Postcards notifying graduates of the research and asking them to expect a survey in the mail were sent to all eligible participants (Dillman, 2008). For those who preferred to take the survey online, a link to the online survey was included with an option for declining to participate (opting out). In addition to the postcard, we notified those with valid email addresses of the availability of online survey. When postcards were returned with new addresses, we mailed paper surveys to those eligible graduates.

There were 1890 eligible graduates. We could not locate 452 graduates either through their CSIS contact information or the university contacts. Nonetheless 497 responded, yielding an effective response rate of 34.6%. When the data were cleaned, 415 usable surveys remained (83.5%). Participants were identified by a constructed identification code which was linked to their CSIS identification code, maintained on the secure server to which only the first author and a data management specialist have access. The following personal information was then obtained from the CSIS database and linked to the study participants: Age, gender, ethnicity/race, county employment status during graduate school, primary language spoken on the job, school attended, and graduation year.

4.3. Dependent variables

The temporal unit used in the survival analysis for length of service (job tenure) was defined in calendar months beginning with their first job after graduation. The first dependent variable used the ending date when the respondents left their first job (analysis 1). The second dependent variable used the date when respondents left the child welfare career (analysis 2).

To be counted as having stayed in the child welfare career, we grouped those who stayed with the state, a Tribe, or one of the county public child welfare agencies as having *stayed* and all others (i.e., those who left, those who left and returned to the agency, and those who are not practicing) as *other*. However, for their first job, only those who stayed in the specific agency and at their initial position were counted as having *stayed*. If they changed positions (for example were promoted to supervisor) or units (for example went from emergency response to adoptions), this was counted as having left their first job. Consequently leaving the first job had to be examined more closely as to whether they left a particular unit or agency for another within public child welfare, the field of child welfare or the field of social work. Because the Title IV-E contract specifically requires the work obligation be made in a public agency, respondents were asked if they worked under public or private auspice. To obtain more information about the career path, they were asked: the number of jobs held, the setting of each job, the auspice of each job (public, private non-profit, for-profit, private practice), what services they provided at each job (*direct services* or *indirect services*), and the population served for each job. We calculated the type of last job they held from the dates respondents submitted for their jobs since graduation.

4.4. Independent variables

In addition to the basic demographics obtained from CSIS, the following independent variables were used as descriptive statistics or factors that could be important in affecting graduates' retention in public child welfare agencies serving disadvantaged families and children.

4.4.1. Promotions
In order to measure promotions within our sample, we asked each respondent about the first ten positions they held after receiving their MSW. For example, they were asked to check if the position's job responsibilities involved a) supervising unit/agency social workers, or b) administering or managing an agency or program(s) or unit (s) within an agency.

4.4.2. Access to training
In order to measure access to training, respondents were first asked, "Since you graduated, how often have you obtained additional training or education related to your social work career?" Choices were: a) *not at*

all b) *once or twice* c) *once or twice each year*, or d) *more than twice a year.* As a follow-up question, respondents were asked if their agency provided or required training.

4.4.3. Support for licensing

Because acquisition of the Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) credential is required for career advancement for many social work positions in the state (although not for public child welfare as of this writing) respondents were asked, "Did your public child welfare agency help you obtain the license?" (1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*). And "did the agency provide, allow, or pay for supervision hours for you toward your license?" In addition they were asked if they had a private practice or held private practice as a future goal. Parenthetically, the common wisdom among agency directors said that if agencies provide support for licensure, the workers will leave, reducing retention. We posited that support for a clinical license would be perceived as professional development and a career enhancement and not necessarily an exit strategy.

4.4.4. Field instruction

We asked whether they had been a social work student field instructor (1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*), for what level of student (*undergraduate*, *graduate*, or *both*). Using four open-ended questions we asked them to tell us what they liked, did not like, whether and in what ways their agencies supported their efforts to be field instructors, and how they would improve field instruction. Their open-ended responses are not included here but were analyzed separately as part of an internal report (Clark, 2009).

4.5. Statistical analyses

Frequencies and descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample. Chi square statistics were used to determine if and how the sample varied from the entire sampling frame of individuals eligible for the study. The survival analyses followed Selvin (2008) and were based on the life table method to estimate the "survival" of workers across a 14 year period in 1) in their first position with the public child welfare agency (n = 239); and 2) in the field of public child welfare (n = 287). Both survival times were measured in months, beginning with their first jobs after graduation. The end of survival times was defined as the date when the respondents left their first jobs (1), left the child welfare profession (2), or completed this survey between March 2008 and February 2009 if either of the first two events had not happened (right-censored cases) (Selvin, 2008). The two survival functions were plotted and compared with each other. The hazard rates and the cumulative proportions surviving at the end of each interval were examined to determine possible critical periods. We also conducted a series of Kaplan–Meier analyses to compare the survival curves between workers with organizational incentives to stay (e.g., promotional opportunities, access to training) and those without them.

Life tables do not use the usual formula for computing a 95% confidence interval using an estimated parameter and the normal distribution estimate of ± 1.96 × SE(estimate) (Selvin, 2008). Consequently, employing the usual formula for the estimates within one standard error of the cumulative proportion surviving, which do not have a normal-like distribution, often produces intervals outside the valid range of 0 to 1. Thus, to improve the accuracy of a confidence interval for life tables, it is recommended that the confidence bounds of the estimated parameter be calculated using a function of a parameter, such as log [−log (estimated parameter)], and the confidence bounds of such function (for details of this approach, see Selvin, 2008).

5. Results

Based on a comparison of the population of 1993–2003 Title IV-E graduates from the CSIS (n = 1890) this sample represented the population with respect to gender, bilingual capability, and prior county employment, with four exceptions: Graduates from all the schools did not respond at the same rate. There were more Caucasian responders than the population; proportionately fewer Asian Americans responded. Responses were more frequent the closer in time the respondent graduated. Except for 1998, those from 1997 forward responded more than their representation in the population.

5.1. Descriptive statistics: Demographics

This non-random sample (n = 415) included graduates from all 16 accredited MSW programs in the state, including one distance education program. Regarding ethnicity, 39.2% were Caucasian; 27.5% Hispanic, 18.5% African American, 7.5% Asian American, 3.9% American Indian/Native American, and 3.79% "other". Nearly eighty-five (84.9) percent were female. More than forty (41.6) percent were bilingual, mostly Spanish-speaking. Nearly thirty-seven (36.7) percent were county employees while in graduate school. Graduates reported working in 44 counties in California or for the state department of social services. More than three percent reported working out of state after their first job. For 97.4%, the MSW is their highest level of education achieved. Only four respondents went on to get PhDs or other doctorates.

Almost all (95.4%) respondents' first jobs were in public child welfare, per their work obligation fulfillment for the Title IV-E stipend.[2] Overall, 63.4% of the graduates responding had stayed in public child welfare throughout their careers as of the time of the survey administration. Another 4.2% left but then returned to public child welfare. Next, 18.6% left public child welfare and did not return. Finally, 13.5% reported that they were not currently practicing social work. The most frequently cited reason for not practicing social work was taking a break from social work to parent (n = 18), followed by those who plan to return to the profession in the future (n = 16),[3] working in a non-social work job (n = 16), in full or part time private practice (n = 12,), retired (n = 5), or unemployed but seeking a social work job (n = 2).

More than seventy-two percent, (72.5%) of these graduates obtained additional training and/or continuing education more than twice a year. Ninety-nine percent had training at least once or twice a year since graduation. Obtaining a clinical license was a stated goal for 49.6% of the graduates. Among those respondents who already had their licenses or who were in the process of obtaining one, 55.6% stated that their public child welfare agency helped them obtain licensure by providing group supervision and subsidizing individual supervision. Among those who received support for licensure, 66.9% stayed in public child welfare.

Employment characteristics were also studied descriptively. Most graduates reported 5 or fewer different jobs. Thirty-three percent (33.5%, n = 134) reported that their last job title was supervisor and another 9.9% (n = 40) reported having held at least one supervisory position in their careers from the first to the fourth job reported. Nearly thirty-eight percent reported having management or administrative responsibilities in their last job (n = 156, 37.6%). The mean length of respondents' first jobs was slightly over four years (51 months; range 1 to 162 months); for the second job 39.4 months (range 0 to 150 months). Setting: Over half of the jobs reported by Title IV-E graduates (54.4%) were in child welfare.

Mental health garnered 8.7% as the second-most frequently cited setting. One person worked in a Tribal social services setting. Eighty-six percent of the respondents' jobs were in the public sector. Those in

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[2] Fewer than 5% of graduates received waivers for medical or legal reasons to either work in nonprofit child welfare or were waived from work entirely; 2.4% of the surveys were missing this information.

[3] This question allowed respondents to check any choice that was applicable. So those who are taking a break from social work to raise families may be the same persons who plan to return in the future.

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

Variable	Description		
Gender	84.9% (n = 349) were female		
Cohort	The numbers of respondents by graduation year ranged from 13 in 1994 to 62 in 2001		
County employee	36.7% (n = 151) were county employees prior to or during school		
Race/ethnicity		n	%
	African American	74	18.0
	American Indian	16	3.9
	Asian/Pacific Islander	31	7.5
	Caucasian	161	39.2
	Hispanic/Latino(a)	113	27.5
	Multicultural	16	3.9
Used another language besides English on the job	41.6% (n = 171) were bilingual; primarily Spanish-speaking		
Licensure	49.6% had or were in the process of obtaining a clinical license		
Number of child welfare jobs	73.7% held 1 or 2 child welfare jobs:		
	no child welfare jobs	7	
	1 child welfare job	196	
	2 child welfare jobs	110	
	8 child welfare jobs	3	
Student field instruction	49.9% (205) had been field instructors:		
	8.8% (18) supervised undergraduates		
	63.4% (130) supervised graduate students 27.8% (57) supervised both undergraduates and graduates		
Frequency of additional training during "the past year"	5.1% have had training once or twice		
	20.2% have had training once or twice a year		
	72.3% had had training more than twice a year		
Promotion	One third of the survey respondents (n = 134) have held a supervisor position at least once		

the nonprofit sector were 10.4% and in the for-profit sector, 2.8%. All demographics are summarized in Table 1 below.

5.2. Life tables

Fig. 1 displays the survival curves of Title IV-E graduates both in their first job and in the child welfare career. Fig. 2 shows the corresponding hazard rates for the same survival experiences. The median survival time is 43.0 months for the first job and 168.0 months for the entire child welfare career (see Fig. 1). In both survival curves, there is a sharp drop between 24 and 36 months. The cumulative proportion surviving falls from 74.1% to 55.3% for the first job, and from 98.5% to 84.9% for the child welfare career. The hazard rates during this time interval are 0.0242 and 0.0123 respectively. The drop is greater in the survival in the first job. At the 6 year marker, the cumulative proportion surviving is 35.3% for the first job and 69.4% for the child welfare career. The hazard rates in the 6–7 year interval are 0.0053 and 0.0035. At the 10 year marker, the cumulative proportion surviving is 25.8% for the first job and 61.3% for the child welfare career. The hazard rates in the 10–11 year interval are 0.0104 and 0.0024. Finally, the survival curve for the child welfare
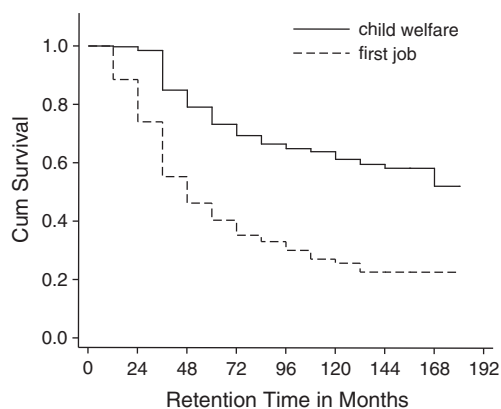
career has another noticeable drop between 156 and 168 months: from 58.3% to 52.2% with the hazard rate 0.0093. However, note that the lengths of the confidence intervals for these estimates are rather large (see Table 2). This is primarily due to the fact that the remaining sample size, which is called *the number exposed to risk*, becomes smaller as the survival time increases, namely from 399 in the 0–12 month interval to 1.5 in the 168–180 month interval (Selvin, 2008).

The usual formula for computing a 95% confidence interval using an estimated parameter and assuming a normal distribution is: estimate ($\pm 1.96 \times \sqrt{}$(variance (estimate))) (Selvin, 2008). However, applying this procedure to the estimates of cumulative proportion surviving, which have asymmetric distributions, often produces intervals outside the valid range of 0 to 1. Thus, to improve the accuracy of confidence intervals, we followed Selvin's (2008) recommendation and calculated confidence bounds by performing the log–log transformation of the estimated parameters (see Table 2).

5.3. Kaplan–Meier estimations

Kaplan–Meier estimations were conducted on the independent retention factors over the respondents' time in their child welfare careers: having at least one promotion to supervisor, manager or administrator,
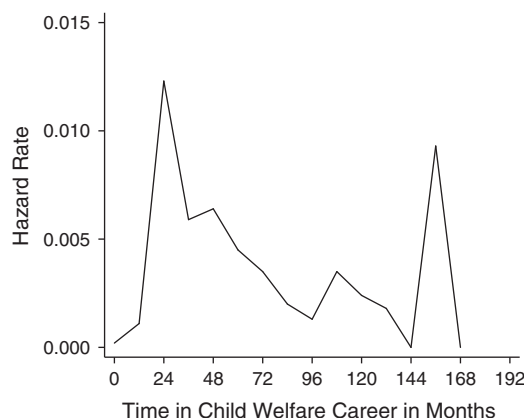

Fig. 1. Cumulative survival of Title IV-E graduates in their child welfare career and at their first job.

Fig. 2. Hazard rates for Title IV-E graduates over their child welfare career.

Table 2
95% confidence intervals for cumulative proportions surviving in life tables.

Time (month)	First job			Child welfare career		
	Lower	Point estimate	Upper	Lower	Point estimate	Upper
24	69.5	74.1	78.1	96.7	98.5	99.3
36	50.3	55.3	60.0	81.0	84.9	88.1
72	30.6	35.3	40.0	64.6	69.4	73.7
120	21.0	25.8	30.8	55.7	61.3	66.5
156		n/a		51.9	58.3	64.2
168		n/a		38.9	52.2	63.9

amount of training received, case-focused supervision for licensure, and being a field instructor against the dependent variable, retention.

Having at least one supervisory position is associated with longer retention, using a Breslow[4] test (Breslow = 7.384, p = .007). However, holding an administrative or managerial position is not (Breslow = .643, p = .423) (Figs. 3 & 4). Having access to training more than twice a year is associated with longer retention, (Breslow = 4.981, p = .026) and getting agency-supported case-focused supervision for licensure is also associated with longer retention, (Breslow = 4.090, p = .043) (Figs. 5 & 6). Becoming a field instructor did not show differences between those who stayed and those who left (Breslow = .470, p = .493) (Fig. 7). Upon further examination, Kaplan–Meier tests showed organizational factors relevant to workers' professional career development predicted retention at different points in the workers' careers. At 72 months post-graduation, promotion to supervisor was a significant factor associated with longer retention (Fig. 3). Access to continuing education and agency-supported case-focused supervision for licensure encouraged retention at the 24–36 month post-graduation mark (Figs. 5 & 6).

6. Discussion and conclusion

The major finding of this study is that specially-trained Title IV-E MSW child welfare social workers stay working in public child welfare over the long term. It is clear that this group of Title IV-E graduates has remained with the population they intended to serve while in graduate school. Not surprisingly, the length of service is longer in the child welfare career than in the first position. The median survival time for this group of Title IV-E MSWs was 43 months for the first position in public child welfare and 168 months for the child welfare career, including a number of respondents who left public child welfare for jobs in the nonprofit sector only to return at a later date. The workers leave their first jobs sooner than they leave the field of public child welfare.

Some of our hypotheses were supported: Promotion to supervisor, access to training more than twice per year, and having cased-focused supervision for licensure are significantly and positively associated with retention. However, promotion to manager or administrator and being a field instructor do not. Based on perceived organizational support, workers can be encouraged to stay at their jobs based on professional development experiences their organizations offer them at different times in their careers.

The results from this study refute the fear that social workers are leaving public social services for private practice, as argued in Specht and Courtney (1994). Conversely, and importantly, the notion that delivering social services to a disadvantaged population of families does not call for advanced social work skills or clinical expertise is not the case. The Title IV-E MSWs surveyed in this study seek to improve their clinical skills and they stay working in public social services. These are not mutually exclusive.

The result that being a field instructor did not contribute to *staying* is disappointing. However the open-ended responses we have received in
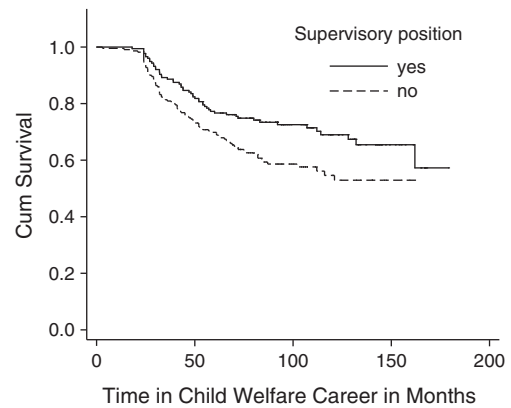
[4] Generalized Wilcoxon test.

Fig. 3. Cumulative survival of Title IV-E graduates by having held at least one supervisory position.

our Career Path surveys of graduates 3 and 5 years post-graduation indicate that there are various reasons for this (Clark, 2009). Agencies may appoint workers to be field instructors, rather than ask them to volunteer. Other factors may be that field instructors are not given compensatory time or a reduced caseload to take on a student. In fact having a student may be regarded by the agency as having extra help, when in fact it is extra work if the field instructor is focused his or her own caseload as well as on the student's learning experiences. So although being a field instructor could be seen as an opportunity, the lack of perceived organizational support from the agency creates ambivalence about being a field instructor.

Why did promotion to supervisor show a positive correlation with retention, while promotions to administrator and manager did not? It may be that case-focused supervision employs a similar skill set as providing direct services, while administration requires additional but different skills. Being a supervisor also keeps a worker closer to the population of clients s/he intended to serve, while that relationship is more distant when one is a manager or administrator. The clues for this result come from our previous study of what managers thought supervisors should be trained to do (Clark et al., 2008), as stated earlier in this article.

6.1. Limitations

This study sample was non-random and included only specially-prepared Title IV-E graduate MSWs in one state. The results may not be applicable to other states or to child welfare workers with different educational preparation. Consequently the professional development opportunities explored in this study may not have universal applicability to those with other types of educational preparation.
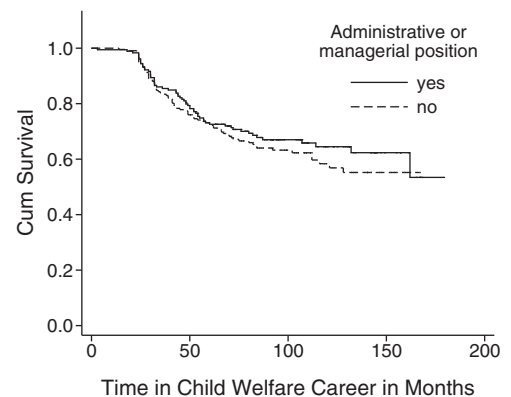

Fig. 4. Cumulative survival of Title IV-E graduates by having held at least one administrative or managerial position.
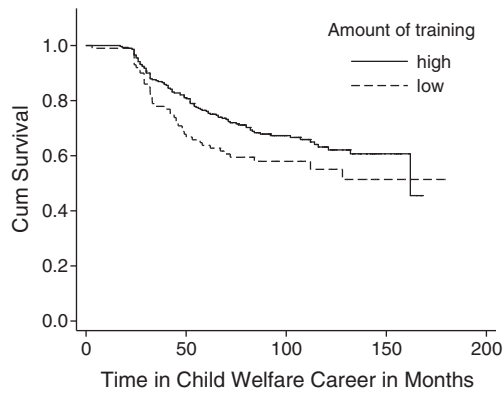
Fig. 5. Cumulative survival of Title IV-E graduates by amount of training received.

Fig. 7. Cumulative survival of Title IV-E graduates by having been a field instructor.

Also important is because California is a state-supervised, county administered public child welfare system, our definitions of retention may differ from other states and are important to consider. In this state, leaving one county agency for another was deemed to be retention in the field of public child welfare. The definitions of *stayers* and *leavers* used in this study may be unique to California's state-supervised, county-administered child welfare services.

6.2. Perceived organizational support: Retention incentives

6.2.1. Retention incentives: Promotions

Currently the promotional structure is not consistently tied to advanced training and education in this state. Related to advanced training, a lateral move (job mobility) could be an incentive to stay on the job. Job mobility within the agency that involves working with special populations of interest (for example grandmothers providing foster care to grandchildren) or applying a new practice method (such as group work) could also be seen as a retention incentive and, most importantly, as recognition for a worker's special area expertise and professionalism.

Benton (2010) found increased odds of retention due to higher salary; salary may act as a proxy for promotions. We did not collect data on salary, whereas Benton did not collect data on type of position (supervisor/line worker/manager/administrator). It should be noted that the sample in Benton's study were 2–3 years post-graduation, whereas the participants in this study are 5–15 years out. Two to three years post-graduation may not be long enough for workers to be promoted to supervisor or above positions.

6.2.2. Retention incentives: Access to training

In difficult economic times, when increasing salaries is not feasible, there are many non-salary benefits that can motivate workers to stay
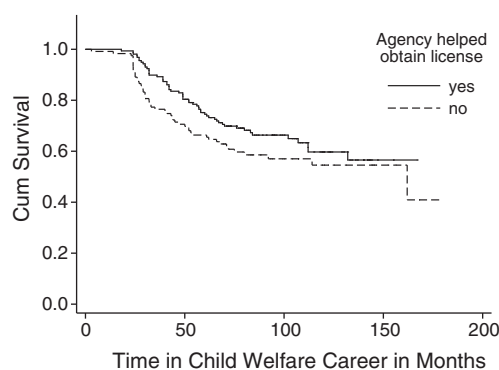

Fig. 6. Cumulative survival of Title IV-E graduates by agency support for licensure.
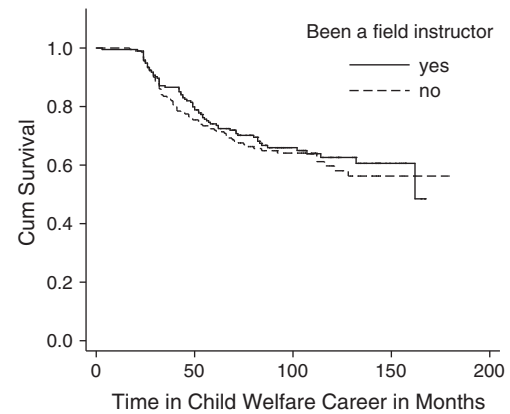
(Henry, 1990). From the results of this research, different retention strategies can be employed for new and experienced workers in order to address workers' professional developmental needs. For example, the finding that access to training is an incentive confirms what Henry (1990) found were retention incentives for public mental health workers. The desire and need for advanced training could be followed more closely and studied relative to job tenure.

The timing, frequency and availability of advanced training, including support for seeking educational degrees, tap into views of positive organizational support and the discretionary reward system. Various aspects of the training system are important to take into account: The amount and availability of agency-based training, how workers are chosen to attend training, whether or not the agency will pay for training or for school for further education, whether there is a clear connection between training and promotion. This begs the question of whether training for supervisors would serve as retention incentives for themselves. Regardless of the workers' lengths of time in their careers, they sought positive case-focused supervision.

6.2.3. Retention incentives: Case-focused supervision

Since many studies have found that competent supervisor communication and support is important to long term job tenure, supervisor training and advanced case-focused supervisor training are good investments as well, not viewing supervision as only for communicating policy or managing a workload (Clark et al., 2008; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Jacquet, Clark, Morazes, & Withers, 2007; Landsman, 2001; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992). The results of this study indicate that Title IV-E graduates have high interest in licensure, yet a small minority actually has private practices. Obtaining case-focused supervision and training for licensure may work as non-salary incentives for retention, especially among Title IV-E graduates. Case-focused supervision may also be seen as a type of advanced training.

6.2.4. Retention incentives: Being a field instructor

Field instruction which affords social workers the opportunity to connect with their universities and mentor the next generation of professionals, did not show a positive influence on retention. Although field instruction is the signature pedagogy of social work, support for field instruction is inconsistent (CSWE, 2008). When we looked at the open-ended responses about field instruction, many respondents reported that their agencies did not support them to be field instructors, i.e., they were chosen involuntarily, their caseloads were not reduced when they had a student, and/or they felt there was not enough support from the university, among other reasons. More attention needs to be drawn to field instruction as a retention strategy. Adequately supported field instruction may offer opportunities for workers to test their

supervisory skills (case-focused or otherwise) and for the mentoring experience necessary for promotion to a supervisory position. Since more information came out from the open-ended questions about field-work, mixed method research in which the reasons for leaving the child welfare career at specific times will be inquired through qualitative methods (Clark, 2009).

6.3. Recommendations for further research

6.3.1. Choosing the dependent variable

There is no consensus in the field defining how long a worker must stay on the job in order to be classified as retained. In a county-administered state-supervised system such as this one, does one worker leaving a county agency to work in another public child welfare agency count as turnover or retention? If one is evaluating the effects of a Title IV-E program then this event may be counted as retention. If one is evaluating the need for on-the-job training, this may be counted as turnover. Another issue is, in the literature as well as in this study, retention and turnover are viewed as measures of a dichotomous variable: Either workers stayed or left. More research is called for to determine under what conditions workers stay and for how long and retention could be measured as a continuous variable, allowing for more complex analysis.

On the other hand, if staying with the vulnerable child and family population is the retention goal, leaving the public child welfare agency for a non-profit job is not counted as leaving. Furthermore, the universities and agencies may hold different concepts of what retention is and this causes some tension. Using tenure as a measure would lead to more robust analyses of the retention phenomenon (Hendrix & Robbins, 1998).

To learn more about retention factors, additional longitudinal research is recommended that would encompass education and training and apply to workers' careers over time. Title IV-E has the existing structure and instruments that could be modified to make the connections between pre-service education and in-service training. Comparisons with non-Title IV-E prepared MSWs and other child welfare workers are also needed. In this case a randomized trial or rigorous quasi-experiment with matching would also help determine the causal impact of specific training programs on retention.

6.3.2. Independent factors

Job mobility, in the form of lateral moves or promotions within the child welfare agency, was not counted by agencies as turnover in this study but has repercussions for casework continuity and for conducting new and re-training. Job mobility, although often positive for workers should probably be voluntary to count as a retention strategy. It is also realistic to note that lateral transfers occur for organizational re-grouping reasons and cannot always be voluntary. Even if job mobility is voluntary and viewed positively by workers, it should be acknowledged that it comes with implications for re-training, perhaps with additional supervisor burden and on case continuity and family outcomes. Job mobility may be preferred by workers who do not want to become supervisors, but prefer gaining expertise in a particular child welfare specialty as "master social workers". Further research on job mobility needs to be tied into what is known about retention and turnover. Research on field instruction could be done by more closely examining the presence or absence of field instructor supports both from the agency and university. It would be important to determine whether being a field instructor or a "master social worker" counted as experience when promotions are being considered.

Conducting focus groups or administering surveys can inform management about unmet training needs and employee learning interests and could show that the organization is interested in supporting employees.

6.4. Practice recommendations

This study gives some guidance to agencies seeking to increase perceived organizational support and in turn to increase retention of child welfare workers. In California, counties have expressed preferences for hiring supervisors from within the agency; so one strategy to increase perceived organizational support would be to make supervisor training available to current line workers. Another option might be to offer opportunities for those who think they may want to be supervisors to mentor new workers or provide field instruction for social work students and formally count that experience toward the requirements for a promotion. Since being a field instructor was not significantly correlated to retention in this study, an examination of the types of support necessary to unambiguously encourage experienced workers to become field instructors is important.

Again, some child welfare social workers may not want to become supervisors or a part of management, the option of being recognized as a "master social worker" who is an expert in a particular field or with a particular population, is a viable alternative to leaving the agency. In this case surveying the employees or conducting focus groups about desired training and education to find out what the individual workers want and need in the way of continuing education to improve their skills would convey interest in workers' well-being.

Participation in case-focused supervision for licensing and obtaining a license could be rewarded and recognized through higher pay or another incentive such as agency-supported additional training or case-focused supervision either individually or in a group of like-minded workers. Universities could play a role in the provision of case-focused supervision and training.

Beyond the expectation that these Title IV-E MSW graduates will complete their work obligations, there is no normative conception of what "good" retention is. It may be that the concept of retention is a very locally-defined construct. However if the concept is to be meaningful, the field needs to examine it at the local level. This may present opportunities for researcher–administrator collaboration. Holding individual public child welfare agency, regional, or statewide discussions that could determine acceptable tenure would be a first step for managers and administrators seeking to increase retention. When a definition is agreed upon, professional development experiences and incentives can be considered that would help retain professional child welfare workers.

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