From tenuous to tenacious: Strengthening social justice practice in child welfare

Anne Marie McLaughlin, Ph.D., RSW, Faculty of Social Work
University of Calgary, Canada

Erin Gray, Ph.D., RSW, School of Social Work,
MacEwan University, Edmonton, Canada

Maureen Wilson, Ph.D., RSW, Faculty of Social Work
University of Calgary, Canada
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

• This research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We are grateful for their assistance.
RESEARCH AIMS

• Front-line child welfare social workers: conceptualizations of social justice,
• Contextual issues that facilitate or impede the pursuit of social justice,
• Recommendations for integration of social justice and front-line CW practice.
CURRENT STUDY: PARTICIPANTS

• 25 qualitative interviews with social workers with front line child protection experience (Ontario and Alberta)
• Inclusion of rural and urban workers
• Range of child protection experience: 6 months to 27 years, average 9 years experience
• 6 workers < 2 years of experience, 6 had 2-5yrs of experience, and 13 had > 5 years of experience
• Grounded theory analysis strategies
MEANINGS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR CHILD PROTECTION SOCIAL WORKERS

• Two-fold meaning of social justice

1. Systemic issue of fairness and equity
   • Requires recognition that equity has a significant impact on clients’ ability to obtain success

2. Social justice as a relational concept that requires social workers to engage authentically with clients
   • Critical of their own practice, to reflect on personal bias, and to understand how their own use of power contributes to injustice
• Experienced workers tended to view social justice as an integral part of practice
Process through which study participants moved as their commitment to social justice practice increased over time
Experienced workers

- Work collaboratively with parents & communities
- Knowledge of systems
- Reflective practice
- Critical and structural thinking

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Novice workers

Focus on technical aspects (policy & legislation)

Struggled to find their voices

Less confident in their ability to incorporate social justice into practice
TENUOUS COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICE

• “When you’re immersed in education and you’re immersed in studies at university it’s certainly on your radar and then when you walk out the door, it decreases substantially, that blip on your radar called social justice”
“I felt as a young social worker just starting out, that I was being judged, so I’m telling parents how to parent these kids and I have no kids, I’m twenty-something years old, no experience, I have all this authority to remove children from a parent’s care when I have no concept of what it means to parent.”
LEARNING THEIR STATUARY ROLE

• “you’re bound by government rules, policies, and [are] often told not to bite the hand that feeds [you]”

• “I was so young, … I graduated and I was twenty-two … there are so many guidelines and rules and the Act which tells you, it dictates how you’re supposed to do your job and yet we know that what people are facing out there has hugely to do with systems issues, inequality, social injustice”.
TENUOUS COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE: OVERRELIANCE ON ENFORCING POLICY

“...I can remember just feeling like, ‘Okay, I have to prove myself here, I’m new at this, I have to...’ so ... what would happen is I would be quite aggressive in interviews with families and try to prove myself and that wasn’t me. ...it just became more about needing to prove something to others that I was competent ... it was more about this is the bottom line, ‘you can’t do this to your children’ and ‘that’s not healthy’.
TENUOUS COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE: OVERRELIANCE ON ENFORCING POLICY

• “... being a new worker, you know you’re **very task oriented** and you’re also kind of **just focused on what you have to do at that moment** and a lot of my work was emergency duty work so I was intervening at the point of crisis where, you know, is this child safe? **Yes or no** and then kind of **intervene from there** ...you’re not really focused on the bigger picture”.
TENUOUS TO TENACIOUS: FACILITATING SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICE

• Practice characterized by:
  • Knowledge of policy and systems
  • Reflective practice
  • Understanding of structural issues
  • Collaborative approaches
“You are working in what appears to be a pretty rigid system. This is the law, this is the policy, this is the procedure, and there’s a lot of pressure to conform. The boldness comes from knowing that even though there are these ‘pillars’, there is a little give here and a little give there, and when I’m at that place, that’s the time to push hard, the rest of the time, I just keep these little thoughts to myself and developing that kind of wisdom about when to raise a stink about something or just go with the flow”.
“Once you begin to raise your own consciousness level, you begin to liberate yourself and then you can actually become a genuine ally to somebody else. Without that knowledge base, you get stagnant and then you do get angry and then you do get upset because you start to internalize, ‘Oh that client is doing this because it’s me and they don’t like me and I don’t like them’. … [you] fail to see the systemic piece of it. They just take it so personally that I think, ‘This is not just about you’.”
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

• “The most important thing I’ve learned in this field is that the best way to ensure that there is that equality and that social justice, is to be open-minded and respectful and really look at the bigger picture”. 
“I really do believe that there is opportunity to build social justice into our work and an opportunity to equalize the playing field, ... we hold all the power, [yet] there’s a way in which to equalize that a little bit and to bring families to a place of being able to really fully contribute and be part of their own destiny”.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH
“[when] you’re working with other community resources, resource people, outreach people, I think you drift into more social justice type thinking, ‘cause if you’re making decisions in isolation, there’s really nobody to call you on it unless you get in front of a judge and the judge doesn’t agree. When you’re working collaboratively, there’s way more checks and balances so there’ll be somebody to say, ‘That’s not how things work [here], and you need to be more respectful about where they’re coming from- and that challenges us to think about what we’re doing”.
“But really, policies and procedures are just guidelines, they’re not the be all, and end all ....the legislation basically gives you guidelines of what you can do and what you can’t do and to just ensure the child is safe”.
CONCLUSIONS

- “it takes a long time to get that confidence; it takes a long time to find your own voice and to feel safe voicing it”.
IN CONCLUSION, COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICE CAN STRENGTHEN OVER TIME

Supportive induction period → Good access to supervision → Reduced caseload

Promoting self-efficacy, competence and confidence → Time to learn legislation & procedures
THANK YOU

• Erin Gray
  • graye24@macewan.ca
• Anne Marie McLaughlin
  • amclaugh@ucalgary.ca