

WHEN ALL THINGS ARE NOT CONSIDERED: ETHICAL ISSUES IN A WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAM

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Abstract

Employing an ethical perspective to viewing problems as well as regard for participants' socio-cultural context will help providers apply a constructive approach to program planning, curriculum design, and in implementing welfare-to-work programs. 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 four areas were identified and discussed: (1) professional competence and accountability issues; (2) participant-provider relationships; (3) interagency issues and conflicts of interest; and (4) curriculum design issues. Actual and desired program outcomes were compared to identify gaps between them in terms of provider's ethical behavior. Findings revealed that providers lacked functional, behavioral, and ethical competence; and this contributed to participants feeling stereotyped, degraded, and unmotivated to complete the program.

The Problem

Ethical issues. Sounds trite and banal. For ages thinkers have written hundreds of books in an effort to understand, explain, categorize, and label moral, immoral, an 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 supportive, trustworthy, and fair in their work and dealings with each other. We expect from others and from ourselves behavior, which 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) interest. Codes of ethical behavior unanimously postulate that adoption of and adherence to a set of standards for work-related conduct require a personal commitment to act ethically and individual responsibility to aspire to the highest possible standards of conduct.

Ethical issues arise when harm to individuals is inflicted by incompetent and unscrupulous practitioners (Gordon, 2001) or customers, colleagues, participants, and stakeholders are not treated fairly or with integrity (Lawler, 2000). Ethical issues are inherent in much of what practitioners in the field of adult education do (Cervero & Wilson, 2001). Literature abounds with discussion of the ethics of practice in specific areas of adult education such as program planning, administration, advertising and marketing, counseling and advising, continuing education, and recently, web based adult education (Caffarella, 1998-1999; Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Holt, 1998; Lawler, 2000; Sork & Welock, 1992). 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.

The sensitivity of adult educators, practitioners, and service deliverers to ethical issues is essential for the success of any program but particularly in the welfare to work environment. 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 this is being 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. The development of employability skills became vital for the success of the welfare program, pushing education and training issues to the forefront of the welfare reform debate (Zargari, 1997). Various programs emerged to help former welfare recipients acquire job skills, reform their work attitudes, and find and retain employment. The achievement of this goal depends on the ability of welfare-to-work agencies to develop placement opportunities with public agencies, profit, and not for profit organizations, and on their ability to establish mutually beneficial relationships with those agencies and the welfare recipients. Evaluation reports on the welfare reform measure program impacts on employment and receipt of welfare benefits, counting as successful programs that moved recipients from welfare to work (Orr, 2001). Recent government reports, for example, state that the USA 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". However, literature to day 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, present emotions, and attributes such as race, class, and gender, or other aspects of their social world (Kilgore, 2001). Ignoring that behaviors are "acts-in-context" (Souders & Prescott, 1999) weakens our perception of the challenges that learners face in developing new attitudes, skills, and behaviors. This is a cue that current welfare-to-work practices are insensitive to fundamental ethical principles such as competence, integrity, professional responsibility, nondiscrimination and respect for others, and concern for others' welfare.

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, motivation, and the implications for program planning, curriculum design and implementation. The ethical issues to be discussed are divided into four areas: (1) Professional competence and accountability issues; (2) Participant-provider relationships; (3) Interagency issues and conflicts of interest; and (4) Curriculum design issues. The discussion is preceded by a philosophical review of the concept of ethics to underscore the importance of ethical thinking and decision making to professional conduct and to human welfare. A brief description of the program and the data collection method follows. Finally, the implications for program planning, curriculum design, and implementation are discussed.

Defining Ethics

Ethics or moral philosophy is the study of right and wrong conduct. Contemporary philosophers have divided ethics into three areas: metaethics, the study of the origin and meaning of ethical concepts; normative ethics, the search for ultimate criteria/moral standards that regulate proper behavior; and applied ethics, which examines controversial issues like euthanasia, animal rights, prenatal issues, environmental ethics, etc. The boundaries between these areas are not clearly delineated, and an ethical issue may be a topic of more than one area. The ethical issues that surfaced in our specific welfare-to-work program belong predominantly to the domain of normative ethics. Normative ethics is subdivided into virtue theory, nonconsequentialist theory, and consequentialist theory. The virtue theory emphasizes moral education and stresses the importance of developing good habits of character, such as, self-respect, honesty, wisdom, patience, courage, stamina, and generosity. The nonconsequentialist theory bases morality on principles of obligations and duties to ourselves and to others, and implies that consequences are

not as important as the moral nature of the deed. Duties to oneself, for example, include self-preservation, pursuing happiness, and self-development (Herdt, 2001). Duties to others involve benevolence, fidelity, not harming other individuals, improving the conditions of others, acknowledging other people's rights of life, freedom, and pursuit of happiness (Wood, 1999; Herdt, 2001). Political duties include observing the laws and social life (Wolfe, 1999). The consequentialist theory focuses on the consequences of our actions for us and/or for other people, measuring right and wrong actions by their favorable or unfavorable outcomes (Hatcher & Aragon, 2000). In the light of this, we will provide examples of how the basic principles of normative ethics were violated by program providers and how this affected welfare participants.

The Local Program and Method

The welfare to work program we evaluated 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 GED, successful completion of the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE test), 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, two males and 14 females of Hispanic and/or African 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.

Method

A case study method was used to collect data (Yin, 1993). Data was collected through observation of learners and instructors in the learning context, and of learners and program planners outside the learner context. Structured interviews were conducted with the majority of the learners. Data analysis was conducted through review of transcripts, reflections on field notes, and discussions that occurred regularly between the researchers.

Discussion

To discuss the ethical issues we compared actual with desired program outcomes to identify gaps between them in terms of provider's ethical behavior, and to suggest some directions for welfare to work program planning.

Professional competence and accountability issues

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. The ethical issues that we identified in professional competence fall under the category of functional competence, behavioral competence, and ethical competence. For instance, partners were not in time for their appointments. When they were late they were disruptive. Providers constantly promoted professional behavior and a dress code as a must for success on behalf of the welfare participants, while violating the same norms, which resulted in their failure to model the desired behavior and attitude. Providers often took participants from their classes for administrative and organizational reasons while insisting that attendance and participation was vital for success. This interfered with participants' learning and devalued the learning and training process.

Participant-provider relationships

Administrative practices of welfare agencies have a powerful impact on welfare clients (Anderson, 2001). The success of welfare reform depends on the ability of the 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 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. This stereotypical view of participants' environment, life-style, 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. Dirx (2001) expressed concern that adult educators in their practice often ignore the personal or emotional issues adults bring to the educational setting. They consider these emotions and issues as "baggage" or "barriers" to learning. The powerful role that emotions and feelings can play in ordinary adult learning experiences is often lost. Dirx (2001) argues that personally significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded in and is derived from the adult's emotional, imaginative connection with the self and with the broader social world. The broader social world for welfare recipients is the one created by program providers. This is the world where the powerful and privileged are partnered to serve a marginalized population that they are unacquainted with. 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.

Interagency issues and conflicts of interest

The effective operation of programs for welfare recipients depends on coordinated activities of interorganizational networks and the motivation and commitment of their personnel (Jennings & Krane, 1998). It 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 not communicating directly with the firm decision makers. This did not detour the service provider from publicly stating that internships did exist. Often there were issues with paying participants on time, securing bus passes, and in 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 at the expense of the participants: one participant became homeless, one dropped out of the program, two were labeled as problems, and a lot of 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.

Curriculum design issues

Biased perceptions from planners about what welfare recipients are caused the program design to be lower level, and decreased participant motivation for participation. Participants felt stereotyped, degraded, and lost trust in the program resulting in less active engagement with the materials. For example, data (results of the TABE tests and focus group discussion) was collected on the pretense that it would be used (but was not used) to inform design decisions. Most of the participants had some college and employment experience and they felt that the curriculum did not challenge them and was not directly useful in their future placement in a law firm. One participant had previously begun a legal studies program in a local college. Another had completed an internship with a local bar association, and a third one had an associate degree in paralegal studies. The majority of participants conversed about the uselessness of the grammar book given to them and their disdain for having to participate in a mandatory literacy class. Several participants stated the curriculum was “stupid and time wasting”, and that the staff treated them as “retards”. Participants agreed that the program was unorganized at more than one time during the 16 weeks. When asked how to improve the program, some participants felt if the planning committee should have included previous welfare recipients so that more of their concerns would have been addressed and there would have been a better understanding of the issues that complicate a transitioning welfare recipient’s life.

Implications and Recommendations

Employing an ethical perspective to viewing problems could offer a more constructive approach to the planning, design, and delivery of welfare to work programs. A clear understanding of the occurring ethical problems could ensure that important issues are not overlooked. This could help providers accomplish their goal of creating self-disciplined, self-directed, and self-sufficient participants.

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 their policy. If they are to succeed, providers must be attentive and responsive to participants’ needs and concerns. 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.

Regard for the learner’s socio-cultural context is vital to ensuring effective pedagogical techniques and program delivery methods. Omitting these contexts is a reflection of the narrow lens used by the privileged and powerful program planners. From a person-centered perspective on welfare-to-work services, Lent (2001) argues that if potential clients are invited to planning sessions, if they are asked for input on the design and implementation of welfare programs, this will lead to a highly successful environment for learning and risk taking. Getting to know their clients 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 its turn could foster self-esteem and pride in the welfare participants. Finally, the teaching styles of educators who teach the courses should be assessed and appropriate professional preparation based on the identified needs and gaps should be provided. Banal and trite it may sound but 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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