

# THE MCMASTER CHILD WELFARE PATHWAY

## PREPARING FOR CRITICAL PRACTICE IN CHILD WELFARE (PCPCW)



Rocco Gizzarelli, Executive Director of Hamilton Catholic Children's Aid Society, contacted the McMaster School of Social Work and asked "can you better prepare students" to do "child welfare well?"

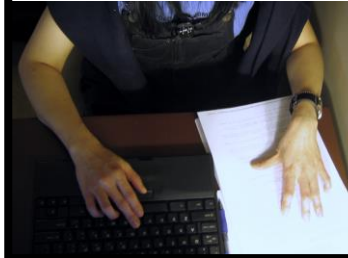
The field needs graduates who will become the leaders of tomorrow, who see child welfare as a long-term career option, and who come to the field better prepared with the knowledge, skills & attitudes needed for the complexities of this work.

McMaster and the agencies below explored what "better prepared," and "doing child welfare well," mean, and how this might be achieved. All committed time and resources, and the highlighted agencies funded a three-year pilot teaching and research project that attempts to make this "better preparedness" so.

- MCMASTER SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
- CATHOLIC CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY OF HAMILTON
- THE CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY OF HAMILTON
- BRANT FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES
- THE CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY OF HALDIMAND AND NORFOLK
- FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES NIAGARA
- FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OF THE WATERLOO REGION
- OGWADENI:DEO
- THE OACAS

### CURRICULUM RESEARCH

Doing "child welfare well" was defined through a literature review, by interviewing those working in the field, and by asking children, youth, parents, and communities who had received child welfare what they thought "doing child welfare well" meant – we also asked what they thought students needed to learn to be able to do this. An extensive array of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to undertake child welfare were identified – and these were built into the curriculum.



A curriculum was developed that does *not* replicate CAS in-service training, does *not* focus on procedures, protocols, or practice standards, but *instead* focuses on a deeper critical understanding of the practice imperatives that drive child welfare standards, with special emphasis placed on developing and refining the critical thinking and interpersonal skills needed to operationalise these.

The Pathway sets out to equip graduates with interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and an ability to reflect on what they are doing and why they are doing it—graduates with an ability to think in an analytic but fluid way, to work from an AOP perspective, and an ability to respect and collaborate with the children, youth and families they serve.

The intent is to better prepare students to work in the child welfare system, but to also better prepare them to think outside the system too.

## PATHWAY DESIGN & CURRICULUM COMPONENTS

### PATHWAY STEPS

1/ Third year non-child welfare (but child welfare related) placement

2/ Fourth level 3-unit introduction to child welfare class (SW4W03)

3/ Application to enter child welfare pathway (limit 12 students)

4/ Fourth year enhanced child welfare placement

5/ Fourth level 3-unit advanced child welfare class (part 1) SW 4SA3

6/ Fourth level 3-unit advanced child welfare class (part 2) SW 4SB3

7/ Final readiness evaluation

2/ Fourth level 3-unit introduction to child welfare class (SW4W03)



Gary Dumbrell teaches the pathway classes. Students examine the mandate of child welfare, explore ways to make sense of child abuse and neglect, as well as the harm colonization, poverty, and other social inequities cause children and families. With an emphasis on turning theory into action, students draw on Truth and Reconciliation recommendations, on One Vision One Voice equity practices, and on leading-edge international literature and research, to learn how to do child welfare well.

Students take a critical look at what child welfare is and how to do it from a critical, anti-oppressive and anti-racist perspective.

3 & 4/ Placements

After third-year non-child welfare placements, Pathway students enter a fourth-year enhanced child welfare placement where placement supervisors meet regularly with the School to co-ordinate and refine student development.



5/ Fourth level 3-unit advanced child welfare class (part 1) SW 4SA3

Students are coached by the instructor, practitioners, and service users, to develop advanced critical case analysis and interviewing skills.

6/ Fourth level 3-unit advanced child welfare class (part 2) SW 4SB3

The advanced class is continued for another semester with exposure to leading edge practice and emerging critical perspectives through field trips and inviting guests to class.



7/ Final readiness evaluation

The class culminates by CAS Directors evaluating students' readiness for the field. There is an effort to include service users in this final evaluation of students too.

## RESEARCH AND OUTCOMES

DESIRED OUTCOMES were set as students having the knowledge, skills and attitudes that our literature review and focus groups with service providers and service users said were needed to do child welfare well.

Pathway outcomes are being evaluated using a mix of interviews and questionnaires that measure students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Sampling occurs pre-pathway, on completion of the pathway, and 6-9 months post-BSW graduation. Pathway student outcomes will be compared with a non-pathway control group. Data is also being gathered from field placement instructors, and from those hiring and supervising pathway students after graduation.

So far 9 students have completed the advanced child welfare course, 6 of whom are currently employed in a child welfare setting. We anticipate up to 30 students will complete all pathway components (courses and field placements) by 2020.



STUDENTS & SOME OF THE INSTRUCTORS FROM COHORT 1

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS are positive. Pathway students are reporting an enhanced understanding and readiness for the field, and many field placement instructors report students being more advanced than comparable students at this stage of their education.

Post-graduation feedback seems to suggest that students are "better prepared" to "do child welfare well."



Caution is needed though—the research is not yet complete, and although pre-post measures along with a control group attempt to counter study design and sample biases, we cannot yet rule out students with a propensity to "do child welfare are" self-selecting into the pathway.

The Pathway raises questions about social work education

The advanced classes use a problem-based pedagogy with readings and content determined by students solving practice dilemmas. Students solve these problems by exploring the research, and by engaging with the field and service users to critically explore the ways these issues are conceptualized and addressed in practice. Students then, in partnership with the field and service users, think through the best ways to address these issues. Students report learning from service users through these processes as the most valuable part of their social work education. Pathway research findings suggest the need to reformulated social work education with service users at the centre.

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