This is Exhibit " _K_ " referred to in the

affidavit of _Cheryl Regehr_

_____ sworn before me this

_30th_ day of _March_ 20_12_

[signature]

ELSEVIER

A qualitative study of 369 child welfare professionals' perspectives about factors contributing to employee retention and turnover

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Abstract

A statewide qualitative study of personal and organizational factors contributing to employees' decisions to either remain or leave employment in child welfare is described. Of particular interest was identifying factors related to *employee retention*. Professional staff ($n=369$) in a state public child welfare agency, representing all levels of the agency and regions of the state, participated in 58 focus group interviews comprising some 1200 person hours of data collection. Core findings of the results are presented and discussed in view of information from other recent child welfare workforce studies. Recommendations and implications of the results for policy and practice are described.
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1. Introduction

Historically, and throughout the United States, child welfare has been neither adequately funded nor adequately staffed. This situation has resulted in employing well-intentioned staff, many of whom have no formal social work education or requisite skills, to work with vulnerable

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children and families. Prior to the 1970s, most states, including Georgia, encouraged child welfare staff to return for the master of social work (MSW) degree through federally funded stipends that provided 80% salary to attend school full time. This move toward greater professionalization in child welfare changed rapidly when child welfare services were subsumed under the larger AFDC public assistance programs and with passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974) resulting in ballooning caseloads and turnover of experienced staff (Ellett & Leighninger, 2007).

The child welfare work context is perhaps the most complex in social work because employees are *legally mandated* to protect children who often are in families affected by substance abuse, mental illness, mental retardation, violence, adolescent parenthood, incarceration, homelessness, and poverty. Furthermore, many of these families continue multi-generational cycles of abuse and/or neglect. These problems do not lend themselves to quick resolutions. *Child welfare personnel are expected to serve growing numbers of children in foster care with increasingly complex needs* (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 1995; U.S. General Accounting Office [USGAO], 1995). Thus, the increasing need for competent child welfare (CW) professionals seems rather clear. Data released for 2003 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families (2004) document that there were 1,390,330 referrals of child abuse and neglect with 419,962 substantiated cases of child maltreatment. The number of child fatalities in 2003 was 1177.

This changing and deteriorating work context is exacerbated by child welfare staff regularly entering dangerous neighborhoods to make home visits and entering homes where violence has become a factor in living (drugs, domestic and gang violence). Unlike nearly every other public and private services agency, child welfare agencies serve *involuntary clients* and are perhaps the only agencies that serve clients almost exclusively in their homes (Horejsl, Garthewait, & Rolando, 1994). This requires another level of assessment for not only child safety, but also for child welfare worker safety. Working under duress complicates a worker's assessments of children's safety and the decisions to allow children to remain in the home or to reunify children with their families once they have been removed from the home.

Numerous child fatalities have been reported (and some sensationalized) in the media. This media attention and accompanying child welfare staff dismissals have created a work environment of public mistrust and negative views of child welfare staff and of public agencies. This situation makes it difficult to recruit and retain qualified child welfare professionals. Thus, the negative public perception of the environment in which child welfare staff work, the complex nature of work in child welfare, large and often unmanageable caseloads, years of low pay, lack of public and administrative support (Georgia Department of Human Resources, 2002; Ellett, 2000; Ellett & Leighninger, 2007; USGAO, 2003) are all believed to contribute to excessively high turnover of child welfare staff in Georgia, and in other states as well. For example, according to the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (2000), child welfare employee turnover rates in 1999 were 39% for child protective services (CPS) (which grew to 44% in 2000), and 41% among placement staff. National figures for this time frame show turnover rates of 19.9% for CPS and 19.4% for other direct services child welfare staff (Cyphers, 2001). Clearly, the high turnover of child welfare staff in Georgia and for other states as well, is a major public, professional, and policymaking concern.

Typically, it takes about 2 years for new child welfare employees to learn what needs to be done in their jobs and to develop the knowledge, skills, abilities and dispositions to work independently (Louisiana Office of Community Services Job Task Force, 2000). This professional development period represents a significant lag time for child welfare agencies to develop

new professional level staff. High turnover rates among child welfare staff are also quite costly in terms of recruitment costs, differential productivity between former and new employees, and lost resources invested in months of on-the-job training required for new employees. The majority of staff turnover occurs within the first 1 to 3 years of employment (Ellett, 1995; Cyphers, 2001; USGAO, 2003). Therefore, it seems of utmost importance to hire employees who have professional credentials and personal qualities that reflect the requisite knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions necessary to successfully carry out child welfare assignments and who can contribute to the organization's ability to carry out its mission and statutory mandates (e.g., the Adoption & Safe Families Act of 1997 which requires DFCS to recommend a permanency plan to the court within 12 months for every child who enters foster care).

Much has been written about the issues of employee burnout and turnover in CW over the years (Costin, Karger, & Stoesz, 1996; Drake & Yadama, 1996; Ellett & Ellett, 1997; Helfgott, 1991; Jayaratne & Chess, 1986; Kern, McFadden, Baumann, & Law, 1993; Lewandowsky, 2003; Midgley, Ellett, Noble, Bennett, & Livermore, 1994; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000; Russell & Hornby, 1987; Samantrai, 1992; Walkey & Green, 1992). While informative, this literature has not focused on the alternative perspective of *why CW staff choose to remain employed* in this difficult work context (Crolley-Simic & Ellett, 2003; Dickinson & Perry, 1998; Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Helfgott, 1991; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Landsman, 2001; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991).

The primary focus of this study was to explore personal and organizational factors linked to child welfare employees' attractions to a public child welfare agency (Georgia Division of Family and Children Services [DFCS]) and the decisions of these employees to remain employed in child welfare. Understanding characteristics of those who leave employment in child welfare was also included in the study. However, the primary focus on employee retention in CW was considered a more valuable pursuit than the continued study of employee *burnout* and/or turnover (Crolley-Simic & Ellett, 2003).

2. Rationale for the study

The rationale for this study was framed by the well-documented, high rate of child welfare staff turnover in Georgia and in many other states. In Georgia, the rate of professional staff turnover was reported as 44% per year in 2000, which was twice the reported national average among states (Ellett et al., 2003). While there have been numerous studies and discussions of employee burnout and turnover in child welfare (Crolley-Simic & Ellett, 2003; Ellett et al., 2003), there are few studies of factors related to child welfare staffs' *intentions to remain employed in child welfare*. Only a few studies to date have been concerned with personal and organizational factors related to employee retention in child welfare (Ellett, 2000; Landsman, 2001; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; Zlotnik, DePnafillis, Daining, & Lane, 2005). This study was designed as an initial step in enriching this line of inquiry using qualitative methods.

3. Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to use qualitative (focus group interview) methods to collect information about, and broaden our understanding of, personal and organizational factors that contribute to turnover and retention of professional child welfare staff. A secondary purpose was to use this information to develop a set of empirically-grounded recommendations to Georgia DFCS to enhance the preparation, recruitment, selection, professional development, mentoring
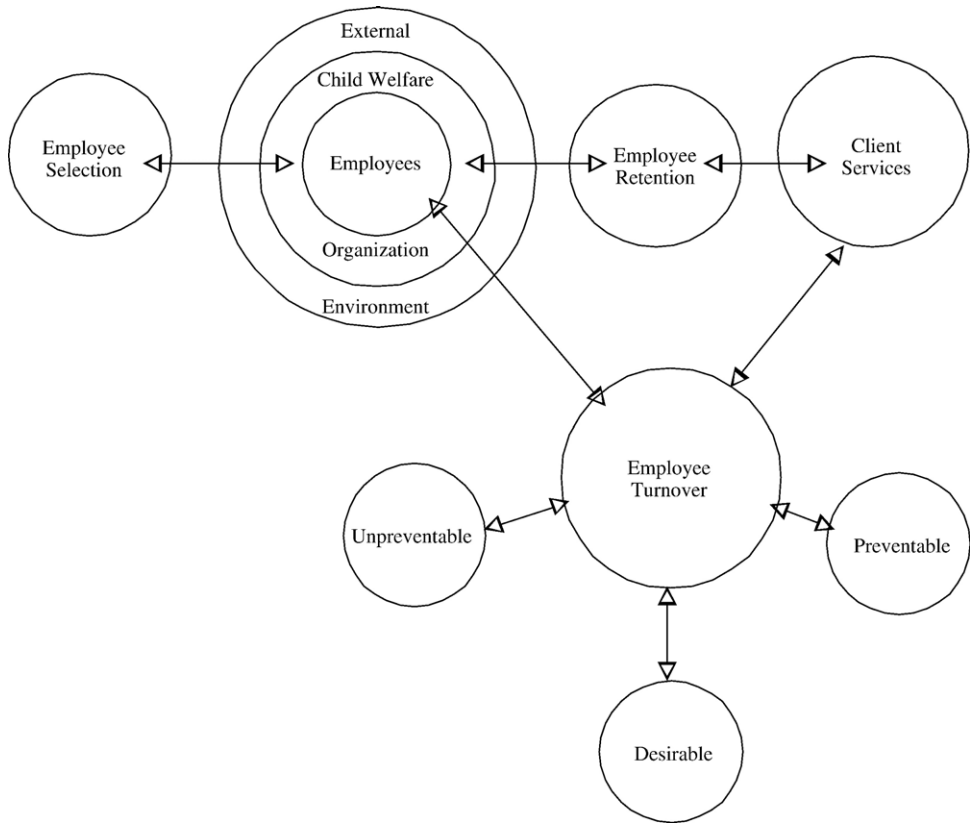
Fig. 1. Conceptual framework. Copyright © 2000 by Alberta Ellett, Ph.D.

and retention of child welfare professional staff in Georgia (Ellett et al., 2003). An additional purpose of the study was to integrate the study results with the emerging literature that documents the need to further professionalize child welfare nationally and the importance of attending to personal and organizational characteristics that enhance the holding power of the complex and difficult child welfare work context for child welfare staff.

4. Conceptual framework

Fig. 1 shows the conceptual framework guiding the study that was previously developed by Ellett (2000). The figure shows hypothesized linkages between the initial selection of child welfare employees, the work context in which employees are imbedded, and organizational outcomes (client services). The figure illustrates the important consideration that must be given to careful selection when hiring employees who can successfully function in this complex and difficult work context. The work context is imbedded within the complexities of the child welfare work environment and a variety of external environments as well (e.g., the policymaking context, judicial system). As shown in the figure, the ultimate outcome of the child welfare organization is the quality of services to children and families.

Given the nature of this study, employee retention and turnover are also included in Fig. 1 as outcomes important to the child welfare organization. Employee turnover is partitioned into three
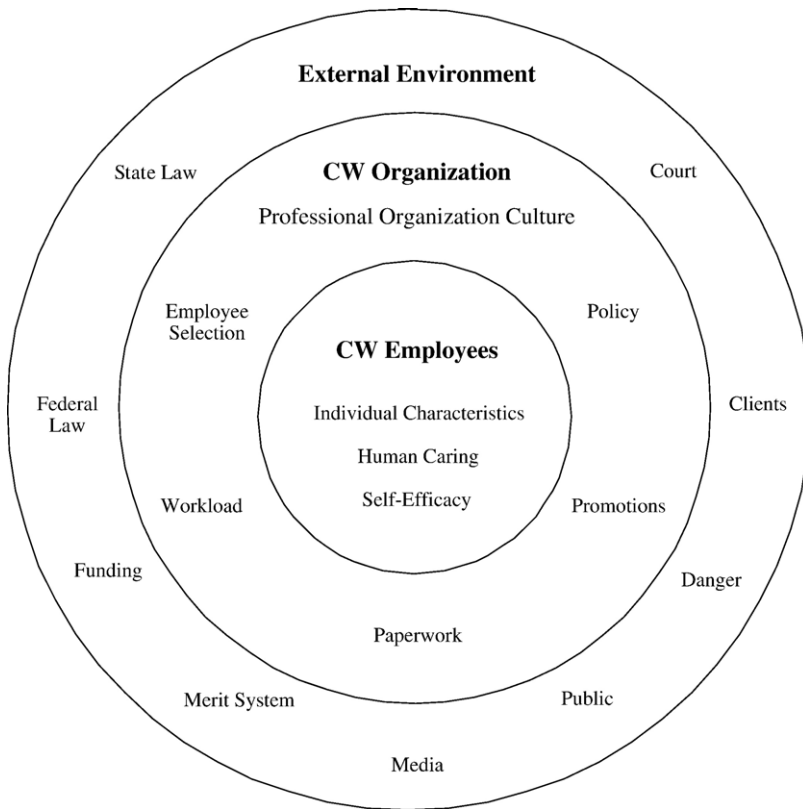
Fig. 2. Child welfare work context. Copyright © 2000 by Alberta Ellett, Ph.D.

types: (a) unpreventable turnover (e.g., illness, family move, retirement); (b) desirable turnover (e.g., incompetents, malcontents); and (c) undesirable turnover (competent employees who leave due to organizational factors such as low pay, lack of promotional opportunities, poor supervision, etc.). The figure is dynamic and reciprocal in that employee retention and turnover affect organizational outcomes (client services), and the quality of client services can in turn affect employee retention and turnover. One key goal of the healthy child welfare organization is to minimize preventable turnover and to maintain the *holding power of the organization* for employees (retention). This statewide study was designed to identify both personal and organizational factors considered important to attaining this key goal (Ellett et al., 2003).

Fig. 2 depicts the complexities of the child welfare context in which employees are imbedded. Personal characteristics (e.g., human caring, self-efficacy beliefs about work tasks) are at the core of the child welfare organization and these interact dynamically with many organizational features and ongoing demands represented by the middle circle. The outer circle in the figure shows examples of many of the other organizations, audiences and presses of the external environment in which the child welfare organization is imbedded. The outer circle implies that both child welfare employees and the larger child welfare organization are highly visible to the external environment, and demands from the external environment can ultimately affect (either positively or negatively) the quality of services to clients. Trying to better understand this complexity from multiple perspectives of child welfare employees was one goal of this study.

5. Brief overview of the study

This study was part of a larger statewide effort to collect information from professional child welfare staff in Georgia about their experiences in child welfare and their perceptions of personal characteristics and organizational factors that contribute to the decision to either remain employed or leave employment in child welfare (Ellett et al., 2003). A sample of 460 professional staff representing all geographical regions and all DFCS county offices in Georgia was systematically selected for focus group interviews. These interviews were completed in December 2002 and January 2003.

6. Methodology

6.1. Sample

The sampling design of the statewide focus group data collection used a combination of systematic proportional sampling and deliberate sampling. An existing, computer-generated list of all professional child welfare staff (County Directors, Supervisors, Case Managers) was obtained from the Georgia Department of Human Resources. This list provided numbers and names of all professional child welfare staff organized by County Office. Fifteen percent of all direct services staff (e.g., Child Protective Services [CPS], Ongoing CPS, Foster Care/Placement, Adoption, Resource Development and excluding individuals whose work assignments were only Adult Protective Services) were selected for interviews. The computer-generated list was used to select every 7th employee within each County Office within each geographical area of the state. *Since, in small counties, it was possible using this procedure, to select no employee to represent a county, and because participation from all counties was desired, a deliberate (random) selection of at least one individual was made for these counties.* A 33% sample of each of the DFCS County Directors and Supervisors was also selected using similar procedures. Thirteen Area Field Directors were opportunistically included as focus group participants since they were all attending a statewide meeting and could be conveniently interviewed in the same location. State Office personnel in senior positions were also invited to participate in a focus group interview. The final selection procedures yielded a total sample of 470 interviewees representing all levels of the child welfare organization. The sample included 331 Case Managers and 117 Supervisors representing all 159 Georgia DFCS county offices classified by all geographical areas of the state, 12 Area Field Directors, and 10 State Office personnel.

6.2. Focus group interviewers, interview framework, and training of interviewers

Thirteen faculty and doctoral students participated in the focus group interviews in the study. Each of these individuals had extensive experiences in child welfare and/or in conducting focus group interviews. The interviewers were facilitated by six faculty and four doctoral students from the School of Social Work at the University of Georgia, two faculty members from other universities, and one other experienced child welfare qualitative researcher/interviewer.

When these focus group interviewers had been identified and participation agreements completed, a 4-hour in-service program was completed with all 13 interviewers to clarify the nature of the study, reasonably standardize the focus group interview process, and to begin scheduling teams of two interviewers to complete each planned interview. The structure of this in-

service session included topics and procedures for core elements of the interview process and data collection and analysis such as: (a) setting the interview context; (b) conducting the focus group interviews; (c) taking meaningful notes; (d) data analysis and reporting; and (e) secondary analyses and syntheses of the interview data.

An initial interview format was developed and explained in the in-service session as a semi-structured interview protocol (guide) for collecting and recording interview information. The core structure of this interview protocol included cross-tabulations of information about *organizational and personal characteristics of DFCS and DFCS staff* with issues pertinent to employee turnover, followed by issues pertinent to employee retention in 11 interview domains such as Promotional Opportunities and Remuneration, Public Perceptions, Organizational Support, Work Environment, Caseloads, Legal Liability, Courts, etc. Each of these interview domains was further explicated with sets of key questions to be used in a semi-structured interview format to collect information and to *guide* conversations between the interviewers and participants. The interview domains were derived from methodologies and core findings from previous large-scale studies of turnover and retention in child welfare (Ellett, 1995, 2000).

6.3. Pilot study of the focus group interview process and format

The semi-structured interview format was pilot tested with Case Managers, Supervisors, and County Directors from one Georgia DFCS area (consisting of multiple counties) before statewide data collection began. In this pilot, groups of Case Managers, Supervisors, and the County Directors were separately interviewed using the draft semi-structured interview protocol described above. When all pilot focus group interviews were completed, the four members of the interview team met to discuss observations and notes taken, and to cross check perspectives about interviewees' comments, examples, concerns, shared experiences, rationales for DFCS employee retention and turnover, and to estimate the amount of time initial analyses of interview information would require by an interview team.

6.4. Statewide focus group interview data collection procedures

As a result of the pilot test of the standardized focus group interview procedures, adjustments were made to the interview protocols so statewide interview data collection would be more targeted on the core goals of the study (understanding organizational and personal factors contributing to employee retention and turnover). Subsequently, a second 4-hour meeting was held with all 13 data collectors to review the revised interview protocol and to enhance common understanding of the protocol and its use as a guide for the statewide focus group interviews. The decision was made to simplify the structure of the interview protocol around a priority set of four key interview questions about: (a) *organizational factors* contributing to employee turnover in child welfare; (b) *personal factors* contributing to employee turnover in child welfare; (c) *organizational factors* contributing to employee retention in child welfare; and (d) *personal factors* contributing to employee retention in child welfare. Based upon their personal schedules, geographical proximity, and expertise, focus group interview teams were developed (two interviewers for each team) and assigned to collect interview data throughout all DFCS geographical regions in Georgia.

Area Directors were provided with a list of staff members who had been selected for participation in the focus group interviews and with copies of a memorandum explaining the

purpose of the statewide study to be provided to selected staff. The letter explained the purpose of the interviews, how individuals had been selected, that participation was voluntary, and that all data would be treated with confidentiality such that no individual participant, or DFCS office would be identifiable. If an individual chose not to participate in the study, the County Director was asked to select a replacement with the same job assignment (e.g., Foster Care).

With the exception of State Office staff (January 2003), all focus group data collection activities were completed in November and December 2002. The typical number of participants in each focus group was six to seven and a total of 58 focus groups were completed. Because of concerns about willingness to share information, all focus groups were interviewed by job type (Workers only, Supervisors only, etc.). *Each individual participating in the focus group interviews was asked to complete a consent form in compliance with University of Georgia Institutional Review Board regulations governing research with human subjects*. To document characteristics of the sample, each interview participant was also asked to complete a comprehensive demographic information form before the formal interview process began.

In completing each interview, data collection team members used the semi-structured interview format and open-ended questioning and probing strategies suggested by Patton (1990) as a guide for asking questions, soliciting examples, clarifying responses, and taking interview notes. In order to establish immediate rapport with interview participants, *organizational issues and factors related to employee turnover* were addressed first in each interview. The general strategy was to encourage participants to share their views of how, and in what ways, elements of the work context and the larger DFCS organization contribute to employee's decisions to leave employment in public child welfare. Subsequently, interviewers used the semi-structured interview framework to collect information about worker *personal characteristics* that contribute to employee turnover. Next, organizational and personal factors related to *employee retention* were discussed among members of the focus group. When the focus group interviews had been completed in a particular DFCS Region Office, the two members of each data collection team reviewed, synthesized, discussed, and integrated their written notes. *These activities were completed as soon as possible after each interview and before the interview team began a subsequent interview.*

The interviews typically required 2 hours to complete, with some interviews lasting as long as 4 hours. *A total of approximately 1200 person hours (interviewer and participants' time) were included in the total data collection process.*

6.5. Data analysis and synthesis

A four-level data analysis and synthesis strategy was used to derive meaning from, and to interpret the vast amount of interview data. The *primary concern at each level* was to identify core, common themes, concerns, examples, attestations, assertions, dispositions, metaphors, etc., from the recorded comments of interviewees. Although our study was exploratory and not specifically designed to generate theory, the data were analyzed inductively by each of four categories comprising the semi-structured interview format (Organizational Factors/Turnover, Personal Factors/Turnover, Organizational Factors/Retention, Personal Factors/Retention), first by each researcher, then by each interview team, and subsequently across teams, using the constant comparative method suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The first level of analysis was for each individual data collector to develop a brief, written analysis and synthesis of personal interview notes. The second level of data analysis and synthesis required each of the two interview team members to compare and contrast their core findings and to develop a common set of written findings.

Each interview team was responsible for preparing a written synthesis of information collected and analyzed from the interviews of each group of interviewees (e.g., Workers, Supervisors, County Directors) completed in a given DFCS Area of Georgia. These syntheses were reported in written format for each focus group interview completed by each interview team using the semi-structured interview protocol as a framework. When all interviews were completed and written summaries were prepared by each team of interviewers, a third level overall synthesis (across the various groups interviewed) was prepared for discussion by each team for each area interviewed. Subsequently, all focus group interview teams were asked to do a secondary review of their interview notes, make syntheses and summaries (relative to elements of the interview protocol), and to prepare for a large group meeting to share focus group interview findings.

After these more detailed analyses, an additional 4-hour meeting was held with all focus group interviewers ($n = 13$) to synthesize the information across various groups of interviewees (e.g., Worker, Supervisors, County Directors). The purpose of this meeting was to cross check the interview data collection and interpretative perspectives of all of those who collected the interview information (the fourth level of analysis and synthesis). The goal of this meeting was to arrive at a general consensus about the most important, core information provided by DFCS professional child welfare staff through the focus group interviews representing multiple perspectives of the DFCS organization (Worker, Supervisor, County Director, Area Field Director, State Office Staff). The section that follows includes a description of the core findings from the synthesis of the statewide focus group interviews with Georgia DFCS professional CW staff included in the study as well as findings from the interviews with DFCS Area Directors and State Office Administrators.

7. Results

7.1. Characteristics of interview participants

Fifty-eight focus group interviews were completed in this statewide study with a total of 369 DFCS professional staff representing all levels of the agency and all job assignments in child welfare. The 369 participants represented 78.5% of the 470 participants initially selected. Given that: (a) participation was voluntary; (b) some participants who decided not to participate were not replaced by County Directors; (c) last minute personal and job-related interferences prevented some from attending the interviews; and (d) some participants had to travel 25–30 miles one way to Region offices for interviews, the percentage of participation of the initial sample selected is considered quite robust.

The group of Workers identified their job assignments as CPS ($n = 85$), Ongoing CPS ($n = 49$), Foster Care ($n = 71$), and Adoptions (7). Eighty-two participants identified their current work assignment as Multiple Programs. The percentage or interviewees with 5 years or less work experience was 45.5% and the percentage of interviewees with 2 years or less work experience was 30.6%. Fifty-three interview participants (14.4%) were male and 316 (85.6%) were female. One hundred and thirty-eight participants identified their race as African American, and 227 identified their race as Caucasian. Eighty of those interviewed possessed a Master's degree, 232 possessed a baccalaureate degree, and 14 had a High School education or a GED. Fifty-five interviewees had a degree in sociology, 50 had a degree in social work, 33 had a degree in psychology, 24 had a degree in business, and 17 had a degree in criminal justice. There was a very large number of other degrees (more than 100) identified by the study participants (e.g., theology,

physical education, humanities, political science, engineering, chemistry, botany, music, drafting, vocational education, sports medicine).

Eighteen interview participants said they were currently a student in, or a graduate of a IV-E program and 20 participants stated they were currently working toward the MSW degree. Only 14.9% (*n*=52) indicated they had participated in an internship as part of obtaining their college degree. A rather large percentage of those interviewed (44.6%) indicated that they planned to remain employed in DFCS for 5 years or less. When asked if they planned to retire within the next 10 years, 234 (63.4%) indicated *Yes*. For those who stated that they planned to retire within the next 10 years, 13.7% (*n*=32) indicated they were going to retire in 2 years or less, and 24.8% (*n*=58) indicated they were going to retire within 5 years or less.

The range in caseloads for Case Managers (Workers) was from 0 to 76, and 113 Case Managers (41.1%) indicated caseloads of between 20 and 30 cases. For the Supervisor group, the number of employees supervised ranged from 0 to 287. This latter number was likely an administrator's response that considered all the employees for whom the administrator was responsible. Eighty percent of the Supervisors supervised 18 or fewer workers, and 59.2% supervised 8 or fewer workers. Fifty-six (15.1%) of those participating in the interviews indicated that they had previously resigned from DFCS and subsequently returned to DFCS as a child welfare employee.

7.2. Core findings from the focus group interviews

A synthesis of the core findings as developed by the team of 13 focus group data collectors is presented below. *We were somewhat surprised by the strong commonality and agreement in information shared by participants and in the core findings that emerged from the interviews regardless of job level, geographical area of the state, or interview team*. Therefore, the most frequently occurring and generic (cross-cutting) perspectives of the total sample of focus group interview participants (*all job assignments/classifications*) are reflected in the following bulleted statements for *both organizational and personal factors contributing to turnover and retention*. The results are presented first for Turnover and then for Retention. Each of these categories of results is further separated into Organizational Factors and Personal Factors identified by the focus group interview participants as contributing to child welfare employee turnover and retention. Only a few summary statements and examples that typify the *most pervasive and generalizable results* of the study are included here. The factors that were given greater emphasis across interview groups are shown earlier in each list, though the order in each list is not exact. A more extensive and detailed listing of findings from the interviews, many highlighted by specific examples and comments, classified by the various groups interviewed can be found in Ellett et al. (2003).

7.2.1. Organizational factors contributing to employee turnover
- extremely large case/workloads resulting in front line workers and supervisors working 50–60 hours per week (in some cases more than 70 hours per week)
- an atmosphere and organizational culture of tension and fear (e.g., most employees are hired into *unclassified* positions without Merit System protections; criticism from the media, courts, public, other professionals, and clients; second guessing case decisions of child safety; fear for personal safety; fear of dismissal and of criminal and civil liability for doing their jobs)
- salaries are not competitive with other social and human service agencies, and comparable professions (e.g., teaching, nursing), few promotional opportunities (i.e. no clear career path within DFCS child welfare)
- employees are not valued by DFCS, policy makers, or the general public

- inadequate client resources (particularly inadequate numbers of foster and adoptive families for children in DFCS custody)
- inadequate selection and hiring processes (too many staff are hired for child welfare positions without the requisite knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions to be successful with this population)
- the court system creates many impediments to child welfare (e.g., great variety in the quality of working relationships with judges and attorneys)
- communication structure in DFCS is problematic, especially around policy development and interpretation
- too much paperwork (50–75% of work time)
- training provided to new hires was of mixed quality, and mentoring and professional development opportunities were insufficient
- unstable central leadership in DFCS with leadership changes driven by adverse publicity and politics.

7.2.2. Personal factors contributing to employee turnover
- intrusion of DFCS work responsibilities into one's family and personal life (many staff were on call 24/7)
- fear and anxiety related to legal liabilities and ruining one's personal and professional reputation and career in high profile cases
- lack of fundamental knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions for the job
- inflexible thinking and behavior and inability to adapt to frequent, unanticipated changes
- lack of personal interest in and professional commitment to child welfare
- feeling personally or professionally undervalued by the organization.

7.2.3. Organizational factors contributing to employee retention
- job benefits including retirement if an employee works long enough to become vested in the retirement system
- flexibility in work hours to attend to personal emergencies, unexpected events, etc. (colleagues are allowed to work cooperatively with one another in these situations)
- exciting, challenging, unpredictable, constantly changing work environment
- important and meaningful work
- supportive, quality supervision, consultation, mentoring, and leadership that values employees (not in all offices).

7.2.4. Personal factors contributing to employee retention
- requisite knowledge, skills, abilities, self-efficacy, and dispositions for child welfare work
- personal and professional commitment to child welfare and clients, and a desire to make a difference
- realistic rather than idealistic about the work, open-minded, non-judgmental, flexible and adaptable
- good organizational and time management skills
- do not take things personally
- have a sense of humor
- IV-E program or internship experiences or an internship before employment in DFCS
- willingness to listen and learn from others
- good professional judgment and self-reflective learning.

As a general note, these interviewees were able to more easily identify many more organizational and personal factors related to employee turnover than to employee retention. After our discussions of factors related to employee turnover, we were rather struck by the pause, silence, and time for reflection needed by these interviewees to identify factors related to employee retention. This was particularly the case when identifying and discussing organizational factors related to retention.

8. Discussion

While there have been many studies focused on child welfare client interventions, it is only recently that studies have begun to address employee retention, turnover, pre-employment preparation, and related workforce issues. *Researchers and child welfare leaders are beginning to recognize that the workforce may be the most important variable over which agencies and policy makers may have some control.* Concern for workforce issues in child welfare has been recently highlighted by national foundations (e.g., see Casey, 2003), and recent research findings show that worker turnover rates in child welfare are negatively related to achieving permanency for children (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005). The agency has little control over the nature of clients served, and even less control over the external environment in which the agency is embedded (see Fig. 2). However, the agency does have an important role to play in increasing the holding power of the organization for employees. Thus, an agency focus on the careful selection, subsequent mentoring and support, and retention of child welfare staff is a particularly important concern during the early years of employment where employee turnover rates are typically the highest. Considered collectively, our findings support the importance of an agency focus on workforce issues related to employee retention and turnover in child welfare, and as well, they add to a continuing line of inquiry documenting the importance of child welfare workforce issues and concerns.

Core personal and organizational factors that child welfare staff identified in this study as contributing to employee turnover and retention in public child welfare in Georgia are described in this article. We believe it is important to reference findings from other workforce research in child welfare that places the current study in a larger context that will further inform child welfare leaders, policy makers, and professional level staff. Findings from some of the most important and/or recent of these studies document the following issues and concerns.

Large caseloads, duties associated with cases, and accountability paperwork overwhelm many new and unprepared workers in child welfare (APHSA, 2005; Cyphers, 2001; USGAO, 2003; Samantrai, 1992; Winefield & Barlow, 1994).

- Turnover rates are high among child welfare staff, especially in the first 3 years of employment (Cyphers, 2001; Ellett, 1995; USGAO, 2003).
- The strongest correlates of child welfare employee turnover in Texas are inadequate supervision and *bureaucratic distractions* (Kern et al., 1993).
- States that minimally require a BSW or MSW degree, experience far lower turnover and vacancy rates than other states (Russell & Hornby, 1987).
- MSW professionals who were mentored or served as mentors have higher salaries, career success, and satisfaction than MSW professionals without these mentoring experience(s) (Collins, 1994).
- It takes approximately 2 years for new workers to learn their job, policy, law, and resources to be able to work somewhat independently (Louisiana OCS Job Task Force, 2000).

- MSWs require less training and supervision than other child welfare staff and for this reason requiring the MSW for practice is cost effective (Abramczyk, 1994).
- Individuals with degrees in social work are better prepared than others for work in child welfare (Albers, Reilly, & Rittner, 1993; Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1990; Leiberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988; Pecora, Briar, & Zlotnik, 1989).
- "Overall performance of MSWs was significantly higher than non-MSWs, and education, specifically holding the MSW, appears to be the best predictor for overall performance in child welfare work" (Booze-Allen & Hamilton, Inc. 1987, p. iii).
- Higher ratings on the Coping Strategies Inventory are associated with intent to remain even in the presence of high levels of emotional exhaustion (Anderson, 1994).
- Individuals with commitment, investment, and sense of mission are more likely to stay employed in child welfare than others (Bernotavicz, 1997; Ellett et al., 2003; Ellis, 2005; Harrison, 1995; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994).
- Working conditions, organizational support, and administrative policies are rated the lowest of all factors related to job satisfaction (Midgley et al., 1994; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991).
- IV-E students scored significantly higher on competency measures (than other CW employees) (Fox, Burnham, Barbee, & Yankeelov, 2000; Jones, 2002).
- Graduates of IV-E programs have higher levels of skills, confidence, and sensitivity to clients (than other CW employees) (Hopkins, Mudrick, & Rudolph, 1999).
- Graduates of IV-E programs are more likely to remain employed in child welfare than other employees (Harrison, 1995; Jones, 2002; Robin & Hollister, 2002) and are more satisfied (Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991).
- "Job satisfaction and organizational and occupational attachment are distinct but related constructs that are influenced by structural features of the workplace, job stressors, and professional identification" (Landsman, 2001).
- Public agency staffing problems impact the safety and permanency of children and families (Cohen, 2003; USGAO, 2003).
- Most turnover among child welfare workers and supervisors is *preventable*, i.e. for reasons other than retirement, death/health, spouse transferred, marriage/parenting, return to school (Cyphers, 2001).

Findings from these studies and the current study well document the complexity and importance of a host of personal and organizational factors that contribute to child welfare employee retention and turnover and to the quality and equity of services provided to clients as well.

Recently, the U.S. Children's Bureau's Children and Family Service Review in Georgia showed that workers were unable to maintain sufficient direct contact with parents to achieve goals in their DFCS case plans, were unable to meet policy time frames to respond to maltreatment reports, and were delayed in finalizing adoptions. These findings can be largely attributed to the assignment of large, unmanageable caseloads. For example, in the recent compilation of child maltreatment statistics for the year 2000 by the Children's Bureau, Georgia had the highest ratio of children per investigation worker (1 worker to 299 children) of all states in the country. This highest ratio can be compared to the lowest ratio (1 worker to 26 children) in another state and the national average ratio (1 worker to 130). The Georgia DFCS Child Protective Services Workload Study (1999) also determined that case/workloads were too high. In this qualitative study, the percentage of DFCS Case Managers (Workers) reporting caseloads that exceeded the standards recommended by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)

(2003) ranged from 75.8% to 87.4% across various focus groups and different work assignments. For the supervisors we interviewed, 62% reported supervising more workers than recommended by the CWLA. These disheartening statistical findings for Georgia (and for many other states as well) reflect important professional issues and concerns about the quality and equity of services being provided to children and families in need, and for work equity among child welfare employees as well. The findings from our study corroborate many of the findings from prior research and identify a host of dynamic factors that interact in complex ways to influence the decisions of child welfare staff to either remain or leave employment in child welfare. Our findings suggest that *there is no elixir or quick fix* that will resolve the many work context and personal factors that contribute to retention and turnover of staff in child welfare. In a national child welfare workforce study, Cyphers (2001) acknowledges that there is not a single solution (to the problems of staff retention and turnover for child welfare agencies), but rather a number of strategies that need to be applied to the particular needs of the organization. As an example of the complexity of the problem of employee turnover in child welfare, and as noted elsewhere, "attrition of experienced workers is especially devastating to a field in which clinical competence appears to come from years of experience" (Fryer, Poland, Bross & Krugman, 1988, p. 486).

Corroborating the results of Cyphers' study and his observations, our findings continue to document a complex set of organizational and personal factors that contribute to the decision of employees to either remain or leave employment in child welfare. Those we interviewed, particularly front line workers, believed they were overworked and underpaid, felt greatly unappreciated by the agency and the general public, and believed they were employed in rather "dead end" jobs. When integrated with the extant literature pertaining to important child welfare organizational and professional issues cited above, our interview findings clearly show that much needs to be done to better prepare, credential, select, mentor and support child welfare professionals and to build child welfare organizations that can attract and retain employees. The results of our study did support a number of recommendations we made to the Georgia DFCS and others to enhance the retention of child welfare staff in Georgia and to move child welfare in Georgia toward greater professionalization (Ellett et al., 2003). We believe the findings from this study and the recommendations made can be generalized to most public child welfare agencies in other states.

When our findings are integrated with the findings and recommendations from other research studies and the knowledge base in which our study was grounded, a variety of important recommendations for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of professional child welfare policy, practice, and services to clients are apparent. Most immediately, we believe these include increasing both national and state efforts to:

- make child welfare a national priority by providing better funding to prepare and retain professional staff;
- provide adequate funding to greatly reduce staff caseloads and worker/supervisor ratios to current standards recommended by the CWLA;
- redesign the child welfare profession through the development of a professional career model that includes vertical and horizontal work options, credentials-based and performance-based pay, and clear, differentiated qualifications for different work tasks and responsibilities (e.g., BSW vs. MSW);
- revise higher education curricula and field experiences in view of the core knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions needed to more adequately prepare child welfare professionals to adapt to the difficulties of this important work;

- develop and implement better employee selection protocols that focus on important personal characteristics identified through research that can enhance employee retention (e.g., a degree in social work, professional commitment to child welfare, strong self-efficacy beliefs about capabilities to accomplish child welfare work tasks, individual persistence and resilience, a strong sense of caring about others);
- identify and utilize high profile individuals and groups that will *champion* the importance of child welfare and help explain the difficulties of child welfare work to the media, the general public, and particularly to policymakers (we call these individuals *strategic champions*);
- clearly explain policies, procedures, and legal liabilities and protections to child welfare staff (particularly direct services staff) to reduce the constant personal and professional fear and anxiety that permeate critical decisions that must be made when working with vulnerable children and families;
- develop strong mentoring and support programs for new employees, particularly during the first 2 years of employment, that include reduced and gradually increasing caseloads;
- increase the *holding power* of the child welfare organization and work environment for staff by strengthening elements of *professional culture*; and
- clarify roles and responsibilities and better coordinate work with other agencies (e.g., law enforcement, mental health, juvenile justice, the courts) to *develop a sense of professional community* to better meet the needs and strengthen the quality of services for children and families.

The study reported here is the largest known, statewide, qualitative study of child welfare employees' views of personal and organizational factors that contribute to employee turnover and retention. The study was grounded in current literature pertaining to important workforce issues in child welfare and a conceptual model designed to link employee selection, organizational resources, professional credentialing and support, and personal characteristics (e.g., self-efficacy beliefs, human caring), to organizational outcomes of employee retention and the enhanced quality and equity of services to children and families (Ellett, 2000). We believe the high employee turnover rate in child welfare throughout the country is a strong indicator of the larger national problem of a lack of culturally-embedded commitment to providing high quality, equitable services to children and families in greatest need. This study provides some understanding of the most important personal and organizational factors contributing to child welfare employee's decisions to either remain or leave employment in public child welfare.

We concluded our study and this article with the following general statements that reflect our impressions of the current status of the child welfare work context, the important problem of child welfare employee retention and turnover, the core results of this study and other studies, and the resultant impact of employee turnover on the quality and equity of services to vulnerable children and families. *Those that choose to remain employed in child welfare are individuals who*: (a) are professionally committed to child welfare, are efficacious in their beliefs about work, and demonstrate deep-seated *caring about* others; (b) believe the larger organization cares about them *as both employees and individuals*; (c) find personal challenge and meaning in the work; (d) function best in a professional organizational culture of collegiality and strong supervisory, leadership and administrative support; and (e) believe the external environment (policy makers, general public, courts) care about them and the children and families they serve. Alternatively, our core findings strongly suggest that deficits in any of these factors are predictors of child welfare employee's decisions to leave employment in public child welfare, a decision clearly not in the best interest of children and families we serve.

Acknowledgement

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