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# Towards a Strengths Orientation in Child Welfare: Theory, Pedagogy and Practice

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Towards a Strengths Orientation in Child Welfare:

Theory, Pedagogy and Practice

by

Mary M. Kirk

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Social Work

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### Abstract

Underpinning social work education and social work practice are approaches that embrace strengths and resilience perspectives. Social work education aimed at students preparing for work in child welfare is no exception. This banded dissertation consists of three products that address linkages between strengths and resilience perspectives to social work education and practice with families involved in child welfare. The first paper is a conceptual article that discusses engaged pedagogy, transformative learning and reflective teaching pedagogies specific to child welfare-focused social work education. The paper explores the cogency of these pedagogies as powerful approaches for educating and preparing social work students for work in the child welfare field. As reflective practice is taught and modeled in the social work classroom, students learn to examine their own biases and attitudes about the child welfare-involved family. The second paper is a systematic literature review identifying current theoretical and practice themes in child welfare work with families. Using the Preferred Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) approach, the review examined the professional literature to identify theoretical and practice themes within the scope of the search. The criteria for inclusion in the systematic review focused on peer reviewed articles published in the last eleven years that were directed at strengths and resilience-focused work with families in child welfare. The third product of the banded dissertation was an annotated narrative of a peer-reviewed national conference presentation in which the author addressed effective pedagogy in child welfare-focused social work education. Engaged pedagogy, critical reflection and transformative learning were reviewed as methods that contribute to a learning environment that forwards a strengths perspective within social work's professional competencies.

*Keywords:* child welfare, social work education, strengths perspective, resilience, family-centered practice

### Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mother, Susan E. Behr. You took every one of my calls and kindly listened throughout the up's and down's of my doctoral journey. Your love and prayers were appreciated and needed. I am grateful and so happy to be your daughter. You helped me "carry the weight" and I can only imagine how relieved you must now feel. Thank you, Mom!

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I lovingly acknowledge my children, Sage and William. You two are my inspiration and being your mother is the joy of my life. Sage, friend, thank you for rooting me on from day one. I may have been the only student who received post mail during the first summer of residency, which was a sweet note of encouragement from you. William, thank you for being my office buddy. Nothing made me happier than to have you next to me as I worked-you reading in the wobbly yellow chair as I tapped away at the computer. I love you both dearly.

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## Towards a Strengths Orientation in Child Welfare: Theory, Pedagogy and Practice

“Hope is like the sun, which, as we journey toward it, casts the shadow of our burden behind us.”  
Samuel Smiles

The protection of children and the promotion of their health, development and well-being, all within the context of personhood, family and society requires fierce dedication and unfettering commitment. The onus for child well-being rests on the family and the community which surrounds the family. Assuredly, healthy communities create environments that support children and their families and ideological, ecological, cultural, educational, spiritual and personal factors, as well political and economic systems, foster or inhibit the communities in which children and their families live. This concept can be best understood through an ecological lens for social welfare education, research, practice and policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

In the United States, systems of public and private child welfare serve to provide a continuum of services to safeguard and protect children, support the families who care for them, promote their growth and development and provide programming for the prevention of child abuse and neglect. This continuum of care includes programmatic infrastructure which provides children, families and communities with a variety of education, intervention, treatment and prevention services (Child Welfare League of America, 1999). Within these systems, child welfare workers are charged with making complex and ethically-bound decisions that integrate or disseminate protection, safety, permanency, prevention and family preservation (Children’s Bureau, 2016). It is no wonder that the work in the child welfare field is demanding, and a skilled and knowledgeable workforce is of primary consideration and importance.

The Children's Bureau's has long supported the role of social work in child welfare and in turn, social work has been invested and committed to child welfare, resulting in an alignment between social work and child welfare practice (Perry & Ellett, 2008). The social work competencies in the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards may complement or defer to child welfare competencies as established through the various regional and state child welfare trainings and curriculum.

Studies show that a strengths-based approach to work with families involved in child welfare can positively influence child and family outcomes and ultimately keep children safe (Antonovsky, 1979; Hawley & DeHann, 1996). Fromm (2016) was instrumental in identifying family processes that build upon and augment strengths and resilience in families. Advocates for strengths-based work with families emphasize that through a positive theoretical framework opportunities for growth, healing and repair are bolstered.

Significantly, social work education prepares students to conceive the person, environment, and transactions in terms of resources and opportunities, rather than absences, pathologies, and disorders (Forte, 2014). While we know that the strengths perspective is fundamental for effective social work practice, less is known about theoretical and practice themes in the current literature that bridge the strengths perspective to education, preparation and practice with families involved in child welfare. The aim of this banded dissertation is to explore how child welfare-focused social work education can support students in learning how to identify and mobilize family strengths through core processes and relationships. Additionally, the banded dissertation seeks to understand what the current theoretical and practice themes are in the literature related to strengths focused work with families in child welfare.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for guiding this dissertation are strengths perspective and the resiliency framework. Over the last three decades, the strengths perspective in social work practice developed almost as a counter-movement to the pathology and deficits saturated field. (Teater, 2014) A strengths-based approach engages a different set of principles than problem-based practice. Not intended to deny or ignore pain, hardship, or injustice, the strengths perspective focuses instead on the power of human beings to overcome and surmount adversity (Saleebey, 2001). Saleebey defined strengths as assets, talent, capacities, knowledge, survival skills, personal virtues, or the environmental resources and cultural treasures such as healing rituals and celebrations of life transitions that a person might possess. Through what Saleebey described as insurrection and resurrection processes, individuals and families who are struggling, suffering and oppressed are able to tell their story, as well as rediscover and harness their capacities and resiliencies.

Saleebey identified the need for theoretical convergence between theory, research and practice towards developmental resilience, healing and wellness. He encouraged the social work profession to begin to more seriously consider and utilize the reality that personal strengths are frequently forged in client traumas, sickness, abuse and oppression, yet are seldom utilized by practitioners as sources of energy and direction in the helping relationships. Saleebey described that these very qualities exist within a wide variety of cultural variations and that a strengths-based approach is inherently a more culturally competent and relevant approach. The relevance of a strengths-based approach to child welfare work is once again compelling, because historically, pathology-based, rehabilitative interventions were the prevalent models of social work practice (Schatz & Flagler, 2004).

Moreover, resilience can be understood as an adaptation to extraordinary circumstances in the face of adversity. It is the ability to overcome and the capacity to navigate to resources that sustain wellbeing. As such, the study of resilience identifies a phenomenon that is within a two-dimensional construct that looks at the exposure to adversity and the positive adjustment outcomes of that adversity. Furthermore, resilience is dynamic in that it is a response to multiple influences-interacting with biological, psychological, social and other environmental influences. Indeed, resilience is significant because it is an unexpected adaptation to adverse circumstances that can often be identified as a contributing factor in the development of a kind of protection that can be applied to future circumstances and adjustments.

This banded dissertation assesses the strengths perspective and resilience framework for exploration of social work preparation and practice with families in the child welfare system. Historically deficits- and risks- based field, child welfare now focuses on strengths, resilience and protective factors. The dissertation explores the connections between theory, pedagogy and practice within child welfare. In other words, how do strengths and resilience-focused perspectives translate to social work education for child welfare practice in the professional literature? To explore this phenomenon, this banded dissertation contains a conceptual paper and a systematic review that traverse theoretical, pedagogical and practice approaches to inform social work education and child welfare work with families.

### **Summary of Banded Dissertation Products**

The first product of the dissertation explored engaged pedagogy, reflective teaching and transformative learning as useful approaches in the social work classroom focused on work within child welfare. The paper asserted that through engaged pedagogy, reflective teaching and transformative learning, instructors could support social work students as they discover their

biases and assumptions. Specifically, the use of reflection could support students as they understand themselves and their orientation to child welfare work.

The second product of the banded dissertation was a systematic review in which the author uncovered current theoretical and practice themes of literature directed at child welfare practice with families. The unit of analysis was peer reviewed articles; the total number of articles found upon first search was 1,931. After duplicates were removed, 929 articles' titles and abstracts were screened as determined by the inclusion and exclusion criteria. A majority of the articles did not meet the inclusion criteria. A total of 39 full text articles were selected for a more in-depth review. Inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in 15 articles reviewed in the final analysis.

The systematic review involved a search that followed the PRISMA protocol. The author extracted the theoretical and practice themes using content analysis and line-by-line coding. The overarching theoretical themes were feminist theory, the ecological model, Constructivist Theory, Narrative Theory, Relational Theory, Empathic Action, Social-Exchange Theory, and power and power difference. The overarching practical themes pointed to the importance of a strongly relationally based practice; one that instills hope and takes seriously the perspectives of the families involved. Practice themes also included the need to not only be relational, but also be responsive and empathically attuned.

The third product of this banded dissertation was a narrative of a paper presentation delivered on March 14, 2019, at the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Education (BPD) in Jacksonville, Florida. BPD is national, peer-reviewed conference and the 2019 theme was #socialworkeducation Embracing the Contemporary Call for Social Justice. The paper presentation was derived from product one, in which teaching pedagogies in social work

education were posited as having unique potential to engage students in self-awareness about their original perceptions of child welfare-involved children and families. Transformative learning engaged pedagogy and critical reflection were reviewed as methods that could contribute to a learning environment that forwards a strengths-perspective within social work professional competencies.

### **Discussion**

This banded dissertation brings unique contributions to the field of child welfare related social work education, as evidenced by the conceptual paper and the systematic review. First, based on the conceptual paper, practitioners will find useful, a parsimonious way of conceptualizing the development of the strengths-based practitioner. Helping students and practitioners to prepare for, identify and capitalize on family strengths are important dimensions of practice. The findings reinforce the need to continue to define and develop strategies for strengths-based and resilience-focused practice with families in child welfare.

Second, the systematic review shows distinct ways through which analyses could be focused on both the theoretical and practical aspects of child welfare-focused social work education. Findings from the systematic review show a trend of research in relational aspects of social work practice with child welfare-involved families. They also point to importance of the use of empathy and attunement with social work practice with families.

This banded dissertation adds benefit not only for professional scholarly purpose but is also helpful for the development of a foundation or base for this researcher's future scholarship (Crisp, 2015; Pickering & Byrne, 2014).

### **Implications for Social Work Education and Practice**

The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) provides development project support for child welfare agencies to attract, develop and retain a skilled and ready workforce. The child welfare workforce requires education and training to help prepare and sustain vital case-carrying direct practice work with families. To this end, the necessity to strengthen student education and preparation for child welfare work is at stake. Education and training typically include information about child and family development, substance abuse, mental health, communication and promotive processes and a host of other topics related to child welfare. As such, education on both ‘values’ and ‘skills’ components of practice should include approaching the work from a strengths perspective and in turn, develop skills in identifying promotive factors that foster and fortify protective factors in families (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Early & GlenyMaye, 2000; Saleeby, 2006).

Social work educators are well-positioned to empower students to be able to meet the demands of the field. Student formation and the development of their “professional self” warrants a generous amount of reflectivity. Supervision and reflection help to uncover the students’ own personal attitudes and perceptions about risks, deficits, strengths, protective factors, wellness and resiliency of child welfare-involved children and families. Insight and awareness of one’s own personal attitudes and perceptions may better prepare students for child welfare work.

As the field of child welfare evolves, and federal legislation redirects dollars to fund services earmarked for prevention, strengths-based and resilience-focused work with families will be ever more important. Services such as mental health and substance abuse treatment,

parent training and counseling and kinship navigator programs are vital prevention programs that are well-suited for the implementation for strengths-based approaches.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Social work students who are participants in Title IV-E child welfare stipend programs need classroom and field education opportunities that put them in a position to get hired and make a positive impact on the child welfare field. The evaluation and rigor of the Title IV-E child welfare stipend programs can be strengthened to improve child welfare knowledge and practice by factoring in the kinds of findings represented in this review. Efforts to individualize and fortify the IV-E student's educational program needs to happen to ensure students are receiving both a strong curriculum and specific training opportunities that include evidence-based best practice in child welfare. Students in child welfare related field placements are uniquely situated to practice applying some of the practice principles identified in the study. Field seminars provide a venue for conversations about the intersection of personal and professional values- normalizing and nuancing their understanding of these dilemmas.

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Pedagogy and the Resiliency Framework in Child Welfare-focused Social Work Education

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### Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the cogency of critical reflective teaching and transformative learning pedagogies for child welfare-focused social work education. The exploration considers the unique potential these pedagogies have on promoting the social work student's self-awareness and transformation, particularly about his or her own attitudes and perceptions about children and families involved in child welfare. Critical reflective teaching and transformative learning theory are each reviewed as teaching methods that contribute to a dynamic learning environment that can foster student growth and capacity for human-based best practice approaches. The author argues that specific learning methods provide optimal teaching tools for students and future social workers who intend to work with child welfare-involved children and families. In this paper, the author argues that for these pedagogical-specific learning environments' potential impact on the social work student's attitudinal and perceptual position about the strengths, resiliency and protective factors of children and families.

*Key words:* pedagogy, strengths perspective, resiliency framework, child welfare, social work education

### Pedagogy and the Resiliency Framework in Child Welfare-focused Social Work Education

In this conceptual paper, the author explores two different, but related, teaching pedagogies used in social work education and their unique potential to promote the social work student's self-awareness, particularly about the student's own attitudes and perceptions about children and families involved in child welfare. Critically reflective teaching and transformative learning are each reviewed as methods that have an unequivocal ability to evolve a dynamic learning environment that encourages student development of a strengths-based and resiliency-informed approach to understanding the child and the family. The author proposes that these pedagogies have salience to uncover the students' own personal attitudes and perceptions about risks, deficits, strengths, protective factors, wellness and resiliency of child welfare-involved children and families. The development and awareness of personal attitudes and perceptions may better prepare students for child welfare work. Through metacognition, students understand themselves, which in turn, assists their ability to plan, monitor and assess their biases, assumptions and approach to work with child welfare-involved children and families (Magno, 2010).

The thrust of this conceptual paper is how pedagogy can shape personal values in a way that helps students embrace a resiliency framework and strengths perspective. Compelling teaching pedagogies are important for social work education because they have a powerful influence on preparing students for the social work field. Social work education is intended to shape the social work profession's future through the education of competent professionals, the generation of knowledge, the promotion of evidence-informed practice through scientific inquiry, and the exercise of leadership within the professional community (EPAS, 2015). The Council for Social Work Education's (CSWE) educational policy and accreditation standards

(EPAS) focus on student learning outcomes instead of specific areas of content. The desired outcomes of the EPAS competency-based approach means students learn how to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being (CSWE, 2015).

The significance of educating child welfare-focused students in the areas of strengths, resilience, and the identification of protective factors is important for a host of reasons, particularly because it is regarded as best practice for child and family well-being outcomes. Child welfare, as a system, has recognized the need to improve worker turnover rates, safeguard that fewer children are being removed from their home, ensure that fewer families re-enter the child welfare system once their case has been successfully closed, and promote overall child and family well-being outcomes. Advocates of strengths-based work with families emphasize that through a positive theoretical framework, social workers can conceive the person, environment, and transactions in terms of resources, opportunities rather than absences, pathologies, and disorders (Forte, 2014). This framework establishes aspects of hope for the family, as well as for the worker and the community. This positive theoretical framework creates partnerships, thus broadening the base of responsibility for the family and the worker.

In the past, child welfare work has focused largely on identifying risk factors, with researchers and policy makers placing greater importance on understanding the individual, family, social and community factors that commonly occurred in the lives of troubled children (Rutter, 1979, 1987). Child welfare work often emphasized family blame, with little acknowledgment of system responsibility. As modeled by public health, this effort worked to develop “risk-based” strategies to prevent childhood and adolescent problems (Hawkins, et al., 1992). Through decades of research, however, we have learned that a focus on strengths,

resilience and protective factors can lead to more effective prevention and intervention strategies and outcomes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Berg and Kelly (2000) demonstrated the benefits of identifying strengths in child welfare and developed techniques and training that focused on solutions and exceptions as avenues to discover family strengths and protective capacities. As such, it is of critical interest to child welfare-focused social work educators to identify pedagogies that inspire students to work from a framework of promise and hope and to design instruction which provides techniques for student to identify families' strengths rather than deficits (Title IV-E Child Welfare Education).

The author asserts that it is important to explore how social work educators, through specific instruction and methods, can impact and transform the social work students' *belief systems*, including attitudes and perceptions, about the child welfare-involved family. Critically reflective teaching, according to Brookfield (1995), focuses on three interrelated processes; 1) the process by which students question and then replace or reframe an assumption that has been uncritically accepted as representing commonsense wisdom, 2) the process through which adults take alternative perspectives on previously taken for granted ideas, actions, forms of reasoning and ideologies, and 3) the process by which adults come to recognize the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values (p. 2). Critically reflective teaching can help social work students unearth the ideas, attitudes and perceptions they have about the child-welfare involved child and family, as well as their philosophical and values-based orientation to child welfare work. This is particularly important in child welfare work because interactions with the family often occur in the midst of a crisis. Teaching critical reflection to child welfare social work students will establish tools for them to have hope for a family who is struggling and identify the working and protective aspects within the family unit.

Transformative learning changes the way students see themselves because it requires critical reflection. Transformative pedagogy can be understood through elements of constructivist and critical pedagogies and works to empower students to critically examine their beliefs, values and knowledge. O'Sullivan (2003) defined transformative learning as "learning that involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations" (p. 203).

In this paper, the author argues that these pedagogical-specific learning environments can significantly impact the students' attitudinal and perceptual position about resiliency and protective factors of child welfare-involved children and families. Pedagogies that influence powerful student transformations and classroom learning environments help secure future competencies in child welfare social work. Creating opportunities for critical reflection and for transformation, particularly around the student's own personal attitudes about the child welfare-involved family, is first needed to utilize a resilience framework that identifies strengths, assets and protective factors. The author believes that the student who has learned about reflective practice in child welfare work possesses necessary tools to implement best practice protocols with child welfare-involved children and families. In the next section the author will discuss the conceptual framework in order to situate the proposed pedagogies.

### **Conceptual Framework: Strengths-Perspective and Resiliency Framework**

#### **Strengths-Perspective**

The strengths perspective in social work practice has developed almost as a counter-movement to the pathology and deficits saturated field. A strengths-based approach engages a different set of principles than problem-based practice. Not intended to deny or ignore pain,

hardship, or injustice, the strengths perspective focuses instead on the power of human beings to overcome and surmount adversity (Saleebey, 2001). Saleebey defines strengths as assets, talent, capacities, knowledge, survival skills, personal virtues, or the environmental resources and cultural treasures such as healing rituals and celebrations of life transitions that a person might possess. Through what Saleebey describes as insurrection and resurrection processes, individuals and families who are struggling, suffering and oppressed are able to tell their story, as well as rediscover and harness their capacities and resiliencies.

Saleebey identified the need for theoretical convergence between theory, research and practice towards developmental resilience, healing and wellness. He encouraged the social work profession to begin to more seriously consider and utilize the reality that personal strengths are frequently forged in client traumas, sickness, abuse and oppression, yet are seldom utilized by practitioners as sources of energy and direction in the helping relationships. Saleebey described that these very qualities exist within a wide variety of cultural variations and that a strength-based approach is inherently a more culturally competent and relevant approach. The relevance of a strengths-based approach to child welfare work is once again compelling, because historically, pathology-based, rehabilitative were the prevalent models of social work practice (Schatz & Flagler, 2004).

Child welfare workers are sometimes misinformed or unsure how to use the strengths perspective when working with families who have abused or harmed children. The strengths perspective in child welfare does not mean that the worker does not address the concerns, safety and risk factors. But by using the strengths perspective and resilience framework, a worker can build upon already existing skills and knowledge and create meaningful change and healing with the family when addressing the concerns and safety.

An aspect of the strengths perspective is the identification of protective factors in child and family systems. A protective factor can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes” (O’Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009 p. xxvii). Some contemporary child welfare scholars and practitioners believe protective factors have more value than risk factors (Knight, 2007). Identifying protective factors and building on these strengths is a proven method to protect children, prevent child abuse and promote the healthy development and well-being of children.

### **Resiliency Framework**

Resilience can be understood as an adaptation to stressful circumstances. A resilient individual/family has the ability to cope with trauma or challenge and the capacity to navigate to resources that will encourage and sustain well-being (Unger, 2008). As such, the study of resilience identifies a phenomenon that is within a two-dimensional construct that looks at *the exposure to adversity* and the *positive adjustment outcomes* of that adversity (Luther & Cicchetti, 2000). Furthermore, resilience is dynamic in that it is a response to multiple influences- interacting with biological, psychological, social and other environmental influences.

The term “resilience” can be applied to groups or organizations; however, it is also used to describe individuals and for purposes of this paper, the resiliency focus is on the child and the family. A number of factors can be attributed to resilience including salutogenesis, a sense of coherence, thriving, hardiness, learned resourcefulness, self-efficacy, locus of control, potency, stamina and personal causation (Van Breda, 2001). For children, resilience is also closely tied to development (Glantz and Johnson, 1999). At any given point in time or development, a child’s

response, as characterized by resilient functioning, may change in the face of new developmental challenges, opportunities and/or differences in the environment (Fraser, Richman and Galinsky, 1999).

Family resilience is defined as the ability of the family, as a functional system, to withstand and rebound from adversity (Walsh, 2003). This complex and transactional process of family resilience, involving biological, psychological, and social factors, serves to challenge and mitigate the negative effects of stress and adversity. Going beyond the aspects of withstanding, rebounding or correcting family hardship, resilience also recognizes and utilizes what is going *right* in the family. Resilience is the family's ability to cultivate strengths to positively meet the challenges of life (National Network of Family Resiliency, 1995).

As successful functioning is defined in the context of *high risk*, resilience examined in children and families transcends "surviving" misfortune. Resilience is significant because it is an *unexpected* adaption to adverse circumstances that can often be identified as a contributing factor in the development of a kind of protection that can be applied to future circumstances and adjustments. Indeed, Froma Walsh (2011b) suggested that "strengths based, resilience-oriented approaches are needed to shift focus from how families have failed to how they can succeed." (p. 43). In the context of child welfare-focused social work education, and in order for students to understand and authentically employ strengths-based work with families, students must first examine the origin and manifestation of their own conceptions, attitudes and perceptions about working with the child-welfare involved family.

An assumption is that resiliency has the potential to set a trajectory. Certainly, there are assumptions about success and what "overcoming adversity" looks like. A constructionist perspective purports jointly constructed understanding and shared assumptions. From an

ecological perspective, meaning lies within the “goodness of fit” between person and environment. Some identify that normative behaviors are indicators of overcoming adversity. To any measure, if resiliency and protective factors exist within the child’s sphere (including family), then there is a greater likelihood the child will overcome adverse circumstances or life events. Thus, social work students preparing to work in the child welfare field must be able to first understand *how* they “see” children and families; and second, develop attitudes and perceptions that recognize, respect and harness resiliency in them. Reflective teaching and transformative pedagogy can prepare students for this insight. It is important that this concept be introduced in the classroom because it is missing from child welfare code. The pedagogical approach can prepare students to address strengths in the midst of a crisis and help them develop assessment skills based on resiliency rather than deficits. This is important because student’s have an emotional response to the topic of abuse, it is difficult to hear the details of harm to a child or the struggle of the family. This pedagogy provides a framework for the student to deconstruct the events in the family to be able to identify concerns but also be able to identify and articulate strength and resilience.

In the following review of the literature, the author provides a brief history of child welfare in the U.S. as well as an examination of the literature on strengths-based perspective, protective factors and the resiliency model within child welfare work. The review will also include examples of current training and educational models of child welfare-focused social work education. Finally, the literature review appraises the pedagogical approaches the author proposes as effective strategies to bring to student learning and transformation so as to ensure best practice with children and families.

## **Literature Review**

### **History of Child Welfare and Social Work**

It is important to examine the history of child welfare services to understand the context, perspectives and current trends related to child welfare-focused social work education and preparation for work in the field. The beginning of formal child welfare services in the U.S. was initiated partially as a societal, but mostly as a religious, response to the scores of poor children (and families) living in the rapidly growing urban neighborhoods of the Northeast during the Industrialization period. As the rate of rural to urban migration and European immigration exploded in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, newcomers found housing in over-crowded, substandard dwellings in the cities. Living conditions were stark as sanitation municipalities could not keep pace with the population growth. Meager wages often meant all family members, including children, worked in the industrial factories and mills for necessary survival. These trying situations resulted in dire conditions for many children and families.

Beginning in 1854, the Children's Aid Society (CAS), rooted in Protestant religious charity and founded by Charles Loring Brace, created "orphan trains" as a solution for some beggared urban children. Children who were orphaned, had only one parent, or were in inadequate living circumstances were "rescued" by the CAS. From 1854-1929, an estimated 250,000 of these children were transported in "orphan trains" from large eastern cities to small towns in the Midwest to live with rural families, who were deemed to be more suitable for child rearing (O'Connor, 2001). Often these "child saving" efforts involved separating immigrant children from their families not because of maltreatment, but because of perceived defectiveness based on racial and ethnic minority status (Quam, 2013). A similar practice would follow in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in thousands of Native American children being removed

from their homes and placed in boarding schools to “unlearn” their Native culture and to assimilate, instead, to European-American culture, considered to be superior by the government.

Paradoxically, the social work profession is historically rooted in resilience. Settlement houses at the turn of the century emphasized mutual aid and the crucial role neighborhood and community played in the health and well-being of its constituents, with a special eye on its youngest inhabitants-children. (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Working within an ecological perspective, the protective factors of mutual aid and environmental supports in individual, family and community domains, were and are consistent with the key concepts of a resiliency perspective.

Meanwhile, the Progressive Era, generally considered to be from 1890-1920, marked a time of great social and political reform that responded to and addressed the social problems generated by rapid urbanization, widespread poverty and municipal corruption. Political activists, social workers, religious leaders and others began to meet and organize themselves to voice their concerns and make a public cry to help others, particularly children and families in need. The Progressive Era was recognized for its social activism and public call for both a state and national responsibility for the collective or common good, including the protection of the nation’s children. As a result, the first child labor laws were created to place safeguards and restrictions on industries to halt the exploitation of children and protect them from dangerous working conditions.

A theme that grew out of the Progressive Era was a ‘higher’ public consciousness and concern for the plight of the poor, and an emerging conceptualization of ‘child protection’ as a primary outcome. The welfare of children became a pressing concern of the social reformers at this time. A “scientific” sense of the importance of child well-being; including maternal and

child health, compulsory education, and opportunities for recreation and play resulted. The Progressive Era reformers recognized the systemic problems of urban poverty. Reformers influenced social attitudes about the sanctity of the family and advocated for support for families to be able to care for their children. The First White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children, in 1909, acknowledged that “home life is the highest and finest product of civilization” and called for action to prevent removing children from their families, and to prevent placing children in institutions (U.S. Children’s Bureau, 1967). As a result of the recommendations made at the 1909 conference, the U.S. Children’s Bureau was established in 1912 and became the first governmental agency to implement federal child welfare initiatives (Courtney, 2013).

Following social work’s early days, which were born from the socially conscious activism of the progressive era, the profession turned away somewhat from its resiliency roots to embrace a more pathogenic paradigm. The profession, attempting to establish itself as legitimate and scientific, pursued credibility through alignment with fields such as psychology, and this resulted in an over-emphasis on human pathology. In general terms, the profession honed a more micro, or clinical emphasis, while community social work took a back seat. Social work research focused on deficits and risks that explain maladaptation and suffering. However, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> and first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, social work has returned to its roots by embracing ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which understands individual, couple, family, organizational and community health and well-being in context of their environments and the transactions between and among these “systems”.

### **U.S. Child Welfare Legislation**

In the 1930’s and 40’s, “child rescue” modes continued to change and more rights to families emerged. In addition, the Social Security Act of 1935 created the Child Welfare

Services Program (Title V) which initiated funding through block grants for states to develop preventative and protective services for children. Federal legislative efforts evolved and several funding avenues, such as Titles IV-A, IV-B, IV-E, IX and XX, were established to support child welfare-related programs and services.

In the early 1960's, *Dr. C. Henry Kempe* wrote *The Battered Child Syndrome*, and as a result, the issue of child maltreatment was acknowledged by the medical community and it ignited widespread public awareness about child abuse and neglect. Kempe's work greatly influenced policy, laws and perceptions about child protection (Breines & Gordon, 1983).

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), enacted in 1974, secured a federal responsibility and commitment to child protection. CAPTA established state funding for child maltreatment prevention, identification, prosecution and treatment services. It also mandated federal responsibility for child welfare research, including data collection, evaluation and technical support. States eligible for funding had to establish mandatory reporting systems, designate agencies for investigating child maltreatment, immunity provisions for those making suspected abuse reports and processes for protecting confidentiality.

Enacted in 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was established after the revelation that state child welfare and private adoption agencies were separating many Native children from their families and tribal communities. Congressional testimony documented the devastating impact this was having upon Native children, families and tribes (National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2018). ICWA was written with the purpose "to protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families" (25 U.S.C §1902). The protections secured through ICWA exemplified best practice through resiliency and cultural

considerations and provided measures to keep Native children in relative care whenever safe and possible.

### **Child Welfare-Focused Social Work Education**

The formal relationship between child welfare and social work education can be traced back to early provisions of the Social Security Act of 1935, through the Children's Bureau, that encouraged the use of child welfare funds to provide staff with educational leaves for a social work degree (Zlotnik, 2002). In 1962, the Title IV-B Section 426 Discretionary Training Grant Program was created to provide funds to higher education institutions for child welfare training. This program was a major funding source to provide social work education for agency workers and for opportunities for students to pursue child welfare careers. The Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980 created funding for Title IV-E training for curriculum development, classroom instruction and field instruction for child welfare agency work. The federal funds were available for foster and adoptive parent training and worker training, including student preparation for public child welfare practice.

In the late 1980's, child welfare agencies experienced a staffing crisis with high turnover rates among workers. Agencies were facing problems with recruiting and retaining competent and committed staff (Zlotnik, 2002). Immediate action among stakeholders followed which included task forces, policy and programmatic initiatives, agency and university partnerships, training symposiums and other collaborative efforts to address training and preparation of a child welfare workforce. These efforts helped somewhat to address worker efficacy and retention rates however, concerns remained about best practice in child welfare service delivery.

### **Resiliency Research and Solutions-Oriented Model**

Research on resiliency in childhood is traced to three important studies: Garmezy's (1971) study of children of parents with schizophrenia, Rutter's (1979) study of children also of mentally ill parents and Werner's (1982) longitudinal study of children of Kauai, Hawaii. These historical studies, originating in the fields of psychopathology, traumatic stress and poverty, revealed several children who showed resilience despite experiences of severe and/or chronic stressors. The studies influenced a shift from emphasizing deficits and risk factors to looking at factors that supported children's adaptation and ability to overcome.

Garmezy was the first to suggest that "protective factors" could mitigate the negative effects of stressors and support positive development. In his 1971 study, Garmezy found that 90% of the children in his study who had a parent with diagnosis of schizophrenia did not develop the illness themselves, and instead revealed that these children showed positive peer relationships, academic success, a goal-orientation and early and successful work histories (Garmezy, 1971, p. 114). Rutter's (1979) study of children of mentally ill parents identified that approximately half of the children in the study showed positive developmental outcomes despite experiencing adverse conditions. Rutter's later studies identified positive school experiences as possible contributors to the development of protective factors in children. Finally, Werner and Smith's (1982) longitudinal study of "high-risk" children discovered a significant number, almost one-third, of the children in the study demonstrated good outcomes despite the identified risk factors in their life. Werner and Smith (1982) also determined that protective factors were both internal and external assets.

These studies signify a shift from more pathological, deficits and risks-based orientation to an orientation that identified strengths and protective factors in children who had experienced

adversity or were considered “high risk” because of stressors and categories that included race, class or status of poverty. The field of child welfare started to recognize cultural differences and the literature began to reflect a better understanding of diversity, including the impact and implications of poverty.

We must understand that the often-negative public view of child welfare is not only difficult for the social workers working at the public agency, but also for the families receiving services. Child Welfare is often tragic—stories of abuse and neglect are not easy for students or child welfare workers to immerse themselves in. A curriculum that helps students identify strengths and resiliency can teach students to find hope in child welfare and to combat common stereotypes that all families involved with the agency are beyond repair—in fact, many families never reenter the system and many families are reunited.

Research and innovative thinkers such as Dennis Saleebey, who forwarded the strengths-perspective and Insoo Kim Berg, who pioneered solution-focused brief therapy, contributed to current methodologies of direct practice within the social work field. Berg, a leader in the brief therapy tradition, helped influence the notion that human service professionals and families could work together in cooperation. In her book titled *Family-Based Services* (1994), Berg presented a solution-building position to child protection work. Berg’s approach was different from the traditional “scientific or “medical” approach that was derived from the problem-solving model. Berg asserted that solution-building meant diverting from a focus on deficits to a focus on resources, even small resources, in order to create change (DeJong & Berg, 1998, de Shazar, 1991).

A significant book specific to child welfare work, *Signs of Safety* (Turnell & Edwards, 1999) offers a solutions-oriented resource for child protection work that provides tools and

strategies inspired directly from solutions-focused therapy. The authors impart practice principals that are consistent with social work core values and with a resilience and strengths-based perspective. The book emphasizes relational tools, including the ability of the worker to listen to, connect with, and believe in the capacity of the family and to identify and draw upon the strengths and protective factors of the family.

A review of the literature shows that strengths-based models that utilize a resilience framework exist to a degree within child welfare-focused social work education and training. While the research on evidence-based practice in child welfare is in its early stages, strengths-based practice approaches have increased as a response to the identification of a need for worker-family engagement. Indeed, theoretical and research literature identifies the quality of the relationships between child welfare workers and families as crucial to the effectiveness of child welfare interventions (Buckley, Carr & Whelan, 2011; de Boer & Coady, 2007; Howe, 2010). However, very little is written about *how* the child-welfare-focused student examines their own attitudes to prepare for engagement and work with the child welfare-involved family. Social work education helps students understand themselves in relation to their attitudes and perceptions about the child-welfare involved family. How does social work education prepare students for child welfare work that utilizes a resiliency and strengths-based approach?

### **Pedagogy**

#### **Critical Reflection and Transformative Learning**

The pedagogical tools and strategies of critical reflection and transformative learning can help child welfare-focused social work students develop introspection and strengthen their critical consciousness. Pitner and Sakamoto (2016) developed the Critical Consciousness Conceptual Model (CCCM) to assist students to engage their cognitive, affective and behavior in

ways to help the student understand “where they are coming from”, in terms of their own attitudes, biases and perception, as well as how the student orients to child welfare work. Pitner and Sakamoto suggest that “the dynamics involved in raising one’s own level of crucial consciousness are lengthy and messy because we often encounter cognitive and affective roadblocks” (p. 1). Boyd and Fales (1983) describe this experience as “inner discomfort”, echoing Dewey’s (1933) elucidation that reflection is, “a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which [reflective] thinking originates” (p. 12).

Educators facilitate opportunities for students to construct knowledge about themselves, others and social norms. Transformative learning occurs when a student develops the capacity to move among worldviews, transcending identities while simultaneously honoring each of them (Zajonc, 2006). This type of learning happens within and between the rational and objective and the subjective and affective realms. The key is to understand how both realms play a role, including using feelings and emotions within critical reflection and as a means of reflection. Many definitions, interpretations and implementations of critical reflection are employed in educational settings (D’Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2006; White, Fook & Gardner, 2006). In essence, critical reflection goes beyond simple reflection because it requires an examination of assumptions. Assumptions are often personal, as they can give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do. In turn, discovering our assumptions can be uncomfortable because it can reveal a viewpoint that no longer makes sense (Brookfield, 1995).

Brookfield (1995) identifies three types of assumptions; a) paradigmatic, b) prescriptive and c) causal. Paradigmatic assumptions are the way we order the world both structurally and into fundamental categories. Brookfield suggests these assumptions can be quite difficult to uncover because they are perceived as objective, factual and reality-based. Paradigmatic

assumptions are met with resistance, and it can take a real effort to challenge and change the assumption. Prescriptive assumptions are extensions of paradigmatic assumptions. They are assumptions about what we think should be happening based on what we believe is fundamental. Causal assumptions are assumptions that are predictive, and Brookfield asserts they are the easiest to uncover.

Mezirow (1989) developed a taxonomy of reflective thought and transformation and leveled them into categories from non-reflective action to thoughtful action to reflective action. The category of reflective action is when the student considers deeply their own perceptions, thoughts, feelings and actions. This can lead to what Mezirow defined as “premise reflection.” Premise reflection is an awareness of the reasons behind one’s perceptions, thoughts, feelings and actions and is critical reflection.

Giles and Pocket (2013) describe challenges students may have with critical reflection. The first challenge is that the student needs to learn how to “step outside” of what they think they know and understand that their experiences shape what they think they know. Another challenge is that the student needs to recognize “their understanding about relationships of power within the narratives they had constructed to understand their experience” (p. 213). Giles and Pocket posit that students tend to focus on their own powerlessness instead of their ability or capacity to be powerful within their own story, and to “see” the story from other points of view. As students gain personal insight, an attitude that embraces strengths and resiliency is likely to be incorporated into their worldview.

### **Discussion**

In anticipation of work in child welfare, students must examine their assumptions, biases and orientation to the child and the family. Learning one’s orientation to the work, as child-centered or family-centered, is important. It is important to assess the orientating stance of the

student-do they consider work in child welfare is primarily to protect the child, or primarily to support the family so that the family can protect the child? The student's preliminary attitudes about the roles that authority, compassion, change and hope play influence what they perceive as child welfare work. Through introspection and critical reflection about questions such as these, the student can understand more about their prevailing belief system. As students bring into consciousness their own orientation or approach to child welfare work, they will be more likely to develop into practitioners who are able to mobilize family protective factors to safeguard their children's well-being. Worker self-insight and emotional intelligence has been associated with positive outcomes in social work, including enhanced professional judgement, better decision-making and problem solving, acumen in negotiating skills and greater confidence, cooperation and trust (George, 2000).

Social work statistics show that child welfare, as a system, does a poor job at raising kids. A family is where children learn of their culture, values, traditions and stories, and these important aspects of child development and family well-being are paramount. The child welfare system continues to struggle with how to support families while addressing the issues which put children at risk. The process of being removed, although it may be in the best interest of the children, is often very traumatic for both children and parents. We have to remember even in homes where abuse is taking place there can be love and care. A strengths perspective and resilience framework reinforce a conception that possibility and hope can exist within the child welfare system. A child welfare system that provides support and love to the family can better support and fortify the family's hope and aspirations they have for their own family.

Furthermore, students who can practice reflection in child welfare-focused social work education could likely build their own resiliency, which is an important factor for their own self-

care. A child welfare social worker must practice critical reflection to maintain a healthy worldview and to maintain a hopeful perspective. It can be overwhelming to come face to face with the details of child abuse for 40 hours a week. Through a practice of critical reflection, the child welfare worker can methodologically reassess their feelings and perceptions of the family. By doing so, the worker can preserve a healthy worldview through continuous identification of what happens within and between their experiences-in rational and objective and subjective and affective realms. This practice could provide self-insight and opportunity to re-orient oneself to a strengths perspective and resiliency framework within child welfare work.

### **Conclusion**

Critical reflective teaching and transformative learning theory are teaching methods that contribute to a dynamic learning environment that can foster student growth and capacity for human-based best practice approaches. The student should have an opportunity in the classroom to explore insight, reflection and learn how resilience framework is used. When the student understands their own attitudes and perceptions about children and families, they are more likely employ critical reflective practices with family that are strength-based and resiliency-oriented.

It is important that child welfare-focused social work education embrace the pedagogical approaches of critical reflection and transformative learning because educating the student merely on child welfare code, policy and history does not address the complexity of the work. These specific learning methods have the potential to provide optimal teaching tools for students and future social workers who intend to work with child welfare-involved children and families.

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**Attention to Strengths and Resilience in Child Welfare Work with Families: A Systematic  
Review**

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### Abstract

This systematic review explored current studies that examine strengths-based and resilience perspectives in child welfare practice with families, with the goal of helping students and practitioners to identify and capitalize on these perspectives as important dimensions of practice. This article provides findings from 15 studies that examined strengths-based and resilience perspectives in child welfare practice with families. The review included English language studies published between 2007 and 2018. Specifically, the following theoretical and practice themes emerged from the review: support, empathy, responsive and relational. Implications for theory and practice are addressed.

*Keywords:* child welfare; child welfare practice; strengths perspectives; resilience perspectives; families; systematic review

## **Attention to Strengths and Resilience in Child Welfare Work with Families: A Systematic Review**

The field of child welfare is a dynamic and challenging area of work. The protection of children from maltreatment has implications that cut across morality, legality, and ethics. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) establishes the right for children to be protected from all physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, negligent treatment or exploitation. It provides that in all action concerning the child, the best interests of the child shall be of primary consideration. Furthermore, the CRC declares that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community (UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3). The CRC provides a framework for the conceptualization and enforcement of the right of the child at the global level.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and presently, theorists attempt to define families by structure, typology and function. Definitions of the family are borrowed from disciplines such as anthropology and economics. To understand the family from a global perspective, theorists use frameworks that are informed by cross-cultural perspectives. In a seminar address, Asay and DeFrain (2012) propositioned that families, “in all their remarkable diversity, are the basic foundation of human cultures” (The International Family Strengths Model, World Congress of Families VI, 26 May 2012, p. 4). The authors further advanced that all families have strengths, that strengths develop over time and that they are often developed in response to challenges.

The field of resilience, and, family resilience, identifies crucial family processes that serve to mediate stressful conditions and to overcome adverse circumstances, often resulting in new coping and adaptable strengths (Walsh, 2003). The family resilience perspective is based in a fundamental belief that all families have the potential for resilience and growth, including families who have experienced significant stressors, trauma and adversity. Social work practice that utilizes the strengths and resilience of families who come to the attention of the child welfare authorities is the subject of exploration for this paper.

Historically, child welfare in the United States operated primarily within a risk- and deficits-based paradigm; however, current practice is more likely to employ a strengths-based and resilience perspective (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2006). Although public child welfare includes statutory conditions that complicate the supportive role, social work contributes a set of principles that emphasize family capacity for growth. While it is well-known that the child welfare field promotes strengths-based and resilience perspectives, less is known how these perspectives translate to case-carrying practice with families involved in child welfare.

Hence, through a systematic review, the author sought to uncover and synthesize current theoretical and practice principles regarding strengths-based and resilience perspectives within the professional literature related to child welfare practice with families. Although strengths-based and resilience perspectives are widely accepted as best practice in social work, a better understanding about the extent of their theoretical and practice presence within the current professional literature concerning child welfare work with families could lead to enhanced training and preparation for work in the field.

The paper includes implications ensued for social work education and training for child welfare caseworkers. Preparing child welfare workers to practice from a strengths-based and resilience perspective could better equip direct practice workers to effectively assist families in the identification and mobilization of promotive and protective factors, ultimately informing services toward positive child and family well-being outcomes within child welfare.

The research in the systematic review was guided by the questions: 1) In what way does the current professional literature related to practice with child welfare-involved families include information about strengths- and resilience-focused practice and 2) what current theories are used within the literature to link to practice principles? The exploration of the questions within this review sought to help identify theoretical trends in current practice that can be used to strengthen the overall work of child welfare.

### **Background**

Securing child and family well-being in the United States means safeguarding conditions that ensure safety, health, and family efficacy. In the U.S. and in other countries, child welfare systems typically consist of a continuum of services that are designed to promote and assure child safety and well-being as well as provide supports for families who care for them. Child welfare services generally include child protection, permanency planning, family-centered services, foster care, kinship care, adoption and prevention (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

In the last several decades, child welfare, as a system, has recognized the need to mitigate worker turnover rates, reduce the number of children being removed from their homes, ensure that fewer families re-entered the child welfare system once their case had been successfully closed, and to promote overall child and family well-being outcomes (Commission to Eliminate

Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, 2016). In the final report by the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect, commissioners offered findings and recommendations to the White House and Congress for ending child maltreatment in the United States, within the context of a new child welfare system. The commissioners proposed an integrated approach to child safety that included systemic efforts bringing together organizations and communities to partner with vulnerable families.

Although social workers have played a central role in the delivery of child welfare services, other educational backgrounds such as criminal justice, sociology and psychology have also been part of the child welfare workforce. Social work has been widely recognized as a central form of training for child welfare work; yet, because child welfare services are administered through states and counties, there are variations in educational and experience requirements for case-carrying child welfare workers (Children's Bureau, 2012). Nonetheless, social workers in the child welfare field have been the forerunners and safeguards of child welfare trends and initiatives (Wattenberg, 2000).

Historically, the approach to child welfare work was primarily deficit-based. The child welfare field tended to focus on the problems experienced by children and families with the earnest intention of helping to avoid risks associated with negative outcomes (Skodol, 2010). As modeled by public health, this effort worked to develop "risk-based" strategies to prevent childhood and adolescent problems (Hawkins, et al., 1992). Through decades of research, however, evidence shows that a focus on strengths, resilience and protective factors can lead to more effective prevention and intervention strategies and outcomes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014).

Research shows that a strengths-based approach with children and families can positively influence child and family outcomes and keep children safe (Antonovsky, 1979; Benard, 1994; Hawley & DeHann, 1996). Advocates for strengths-based work with families emphasize that through a positive theoretical framework, social workers are able to conceive the person, environment, and transactions in terms of resources and opportunities rather than absences, pathologies, and disorders (Forte, 2014). This framework establishes aspects of hope for the family, as well as for the worker and the community. This positive theoretical framework creates partnerships, thus broadening the base of responsibility for the family and the worker.

### **Child Welfare**

Child welfare is the government-sanctioned continuum of support services designed to protect children and ensure the necessary supports that families need to care for their children. The services can include investigation of reported child abuse and neglect, placements and treatment services within foster and kinship care, arrangements in adoption services and efforts for prevention services. Its dimensions reach across disciplines and ideological premises.

Children who come to the attention of child welfare are either at-risk of or are victims of child maltreatment. Child maltreatment includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect, including a failure to protect a child from harm. In the United States, the governmental agency to respond to child abuse and neglect is called Child Protective Services (CPS). CPS is typically responsible for the intake and screening of reports of maltreatment, investigating and assessing the allegations, deciding the case, mandating case-management and treatment services, providing post-permanency services and closing the case.

Child welfare is managed through states, tribal and county jurisdictions. States can vary what definitions are used for maltreatment, how timelines are determined and how case plans

enforced. Generally speaking and across jurisdictions, the principal goals of the child welfare system are safety, permanency, family support and child well-being. Minnesota's Child Welfare Practice Model affirms an understanding that better results are achieved when parents are engaged as partners with the child welfare system. Furthermore, families are best served by interventions that engage their protective capacities, recognize and employ family strengths, maintain community and cultural connections and address immediate safety concerns and on-going risks of child maltreatment (Minnesota's Child Welfare Competency Model, 2017).

### **Family Strengths**

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) defines the family as “two or more persons who assume obligations and responsibilities generally conducive to family life (NASW, 2007). Also defined as a group of individuals who share a primary purpose of family, which is, according to Paris and DeVoe (2013), to support the growth and development of its members throughout the life course. Child welfare workers typically engage with families during critical times. For this reason, workers must have the knowledge, skills and values to identify and leverage those factors that build protective capacities in families whilst mitigating factors that lead to child maltreatment.

Family strengths can be defined as a set of relationships and processes that support and protect families and family members. This concept is especially salient during times of adversity, hardship and change. In their research brief, Moore, Chalk, Scarpa & Vandivere (2002) defined family strengths as the “set of relationships and processes that support and protect families and family members, especially during times of adversity and change” (p. 3). Core processes and relationships serve as coping mechanisms and resources for families regardless of their

socioeconomic circumstances or cultural background. Ultimately, resilience points to connectedness and a belief in the potential of family.

The strengths perspective is situated well within the social work field; however, not all child welfare workers have a social work education. Depending on the jurisdiction, child welfare workers in direct practice may have different educational backgrounds including a variety of disciplines such as psychology, sociology and criminology. Just as there is variation among child welfare workers across state, county and local jurisdictions, there is also variation among child welfare practice models across jurisdiction sites. Interestingly, not all social workers practice from a strengths perspective (Douglas, McCarthy & Serino, 2014).

### **Family Resilience**

A family's ability to cope and even thrive in the face of difficult circumstances describes a function known as family resilience. Defined as the important family processes which serve to mediate stressful conditions (Walsh, 1998, 2003), family resilience can enable families to prevail over crisis and hardship. Research on resiliency in childhood is traced to three important studies: Garmezy's (1971) study of children of parents with schizophrenia, Rutter's (1979) study of children also of mentally ill parents, and Werner's (1982) longitudinal study of children of Kauai, Hawaii. These historical studies, originating from the fields of developmental psychopathology along with traumatic stress and poverty, revealed several children who showed resilience despite experiences of severe and/or chronic stressors. The studies influenced a shift from emphasizing deficits and risk factors to looking at factors that supported children's adaptation and ability to overcome.

Garmezy was the first to suggest that "protective factors" could mitigate the negative effects of stressors and support positive development. In the 1971 study, Garmezy found that

ninety percent of the children in his study who had a parent with a diagnosis of schizophrenia did not develop the illness themselves; rather these children showed positive peer relationships, academic success, a goal-orientation and early and successful work histories (Garmezy, 1971, p. 114).

Similarly, Rutter's (1979) study of children of mentally ill parents identified that approximately half of the children in the study showed positive developmental outcomes despite experiencing adverse conditions. Rutter's subsequent studies identified positive school experiences as possible contributors to the development of protective factors in children.

Additionally, Werner and Smith's (1982) longitudinal study of "high-risk" children discovered a significant number, almost one-third, of the children in the study demonstrated good outcomes despite the identified risk factors in their life. Werner and Smith (1982) also determined that protective factors took the form of both internal and external assets.

The aforementioned studies focused largely on an individual child's ability to cope. In the 1980s, however, Dr. Froma Walsh (1998, 2003) shifted the focus from individual to more systemic positive coping and resilience by studying patterns of adaptation in families (Hadfield, K., & Ungar, M., 2018). Research began to point to the positive impact of attachments as well as the opportunities found within the family and community that created resilience.

McCubbin and McCubbin (1993) identified four potential areas of family function and resilience in a study examining family adaptation or maladjustment to illness. The family functions included: 1) vulnerability to increased stresses; 2) problem-solving capacities; 3) meaning ascribed to the stress and 4) supportive resources. Other research and models of family resilience followed, influencing the development of framework or conceptual map (Walsh, 2003, 2012a) that identified nine key processes in family resilience.

Organized within three domains, Walsh (2002) described the key family-based processes that can reduce stress and vulnerability in difficult circumstances, foster healing and growth and support families to cope with and overcome adverse conditions. Belief systems, organizational processes and communication processes are the domains, and each of the domains embody three processes. The *belief systems* domain identifies the key resilience processes of meaning-making, positive outlook-hope and transcendence-spirituality. The *organizational processes* domain include flexibility to adapt, connectedness and mutual support, and kin, social and economic resources. The *communication processes* domain involves clear communication, emotional sharing and collaborative problem-solving/proactiveness (Walsh, 2002, p. 132).

The resilience framework is applicable as interventions focus on family strengths under stress, as opposed to a focus on deficits. The approach allows for flexibility as functioning is assessed in context, considering the family's values, structure, resources and life challenges. Furthermore, a strengths-based and resilience approach acknowledges the variations and evolutions in family life. In other words, the "up's and down's" of family life are expected and this author would argue, an opportunity for the development of processes that can serve to strengthen families and their potential to cope with future stressors.

## **Method**

### **Study Design**

In conducting this systematic review of the current literature, the author utilized the guideline Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist (Moher, Liberatic, Tetzlaff & Altman, 2009). The purpose of the review was to examine the current themes and trends within the professional literature regarding resilience-focused and strengths approaches in child welfare practice with families to contribute to the

social work knowledge base. Systematic reviews have benefit not only for professional scholarly purpose but can also be especially helpful for higher degree research students (Crisp, 2015; Pickering & Byrne, 2014).

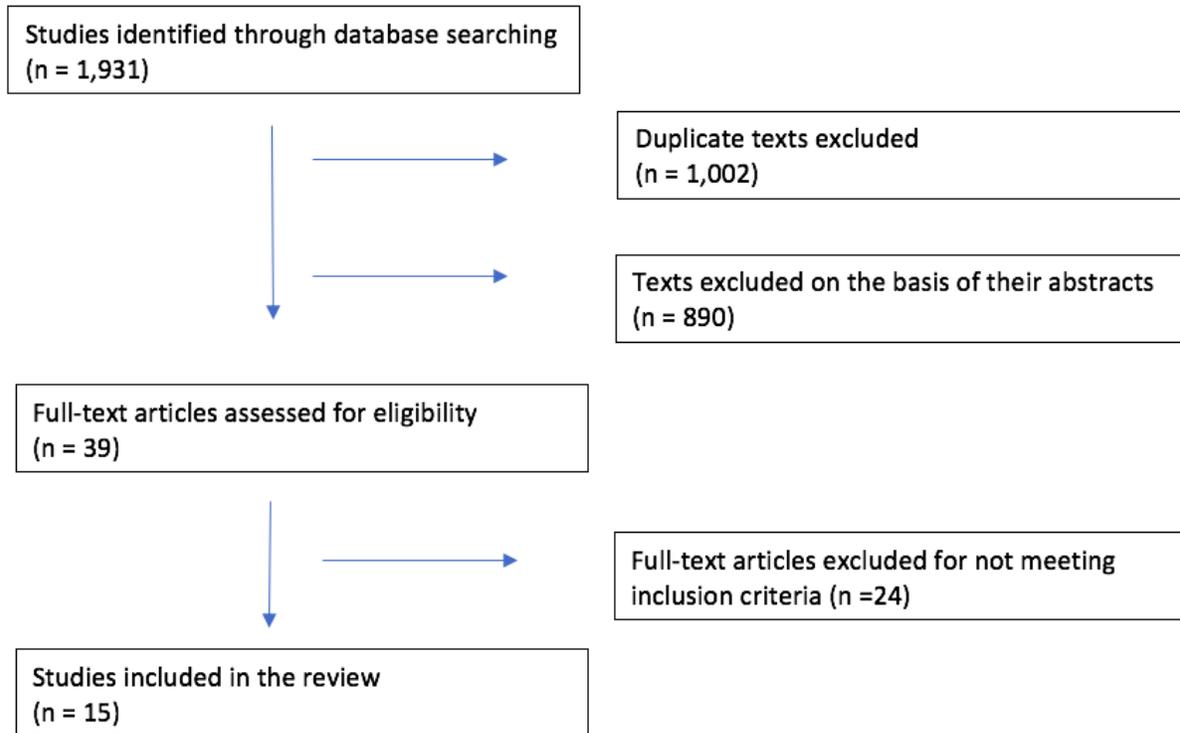
### **Eligibility Criteria**

Studies published in the last ten years (between 2007 and 2018) that were specific to strengths-based and resilience-focused practice with families involved in some aspect of child welfare were included in the study. These studies were identified through electronic searches of peer reviewed journals in online databases.

### **Search Strategy**

Ten electronic databases and two online information service resources were chosen based on their relevance to the topic area. The databases accessed were: EBSCO, ERIC, Family Studies Abstracts, Google Scholar, PILOTS, ProQuest, PsycINFO, Scopus, Social Work Abstracts, socINDEX. The online information service resources accessed were the Child Welfare Information Gateway and the National Child Welfare Workforce Development Institute (NCWWI), both of which are funded and developed through the U.S. Children's Bureau, Administration of Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services.

The search included articles written in English and published between 2007 and 2018. The articles were limited to peer-reviewed publications that were available on electronic databases. The search terms used were: child welfare, child protection, child welfare practice, child care (British term for child welfare), strengths, strengths perspective, strengths-based practice, family-centered practice, resilience, resilience framework, family resilience. The search terms were linked together through the Boolean operators AND and/or OR.



*Figure 1.* Search strategy for the current systematic review. Using this method, the search returned a total of 1,931 articles. After duplicates were removed, 929 articles' titles and abstracts were screened as determined by the inclusion and exclusion criteria. A majority of the articles did not meet the inclusion criteria. A total of 39 full text articles were selected for a more in-depth review.

### **Study Selection**

The author read the 39 full text articles in their entirety to further identify final articles selected for the systematic review. The selected articles included evidence of strengths-based perspectives and/or resilience perspectives that were bridged to direct casework with families involved in child welfare. Articles that were excluded may not have linked theory to practice or were directed at practice with children only, and not to practice with families. Some articles

accepted had mixed study samples that included families and other stakeholders. After the in-depth review, 15 articles were selected for the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The articles were first reviewed using open coding to identify theoretical and practice – related themes, meaning I reviewed the articles to see what they had to say in these two categories, on their own terms. The second review of the data entailed more detail through a line by line coding of the text. This coding identified text that represented key family resilience themes (Walsh, 2006) and strengths-based concepts (Resiliency Initiatives, 2012). The nine key resilience coding themes used for practice with families were 1) meaning making, 2) positive outlook, 3) transcendence/spirituality, 4) flexibility, 5) connectedness, 6) social and community resources, 7) clear information, 8) emotional sharing, and 9) problem-solving/prevention. The coding used for strengths-based concepts for practice with families included the following terms: at-potential, collaborative, community, capacity building, core competencies-skills, abilities and knowledge, developmental strengths, empathy, empower, engagement, inclusiveness, influence, participatory approach, persistent, person-centered, process focused, protective factors and relationship- based. The coding sheet served as a guide to use to extract the data and was iteratively revised as the articles were reviewed again.

### **Results**

The aim of this systematic review was to examine the current research related to strengths-based and resiliency-focused perspectives within child welfare practice with families. The systematic review was focused on research articles published in the past decade, between 2007 - 2018. The author looked for the theoretical and practice themes present in articles that

address social work practice with families involved in child welfare. The following section provides an overview of the themes that emerged (Table 1).

Table 1.

Reviewed studies by their characteristics ( $n=15$ )

Study	Title	Objective	Type of Methodology	Sample	Themes
Burns-Jager (2011)	Calculating All of Our Losses: Writing Real-World Therapy Experiences in Child Welfare	Examines child and parent systems' importance while aligning with caseworker goals	Autoethnographic Study	Authors ( $n = 3$ )	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Feminist Theory; Strengths-based perspectives</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b> Professionals (in this case, feminist family therapists) who work with families in the child welfare system, need to have 1) a high level of self-reflection; 2) an understanding that when the court moves towards terminating parental rights there is not a clear-cut process having specific implications for types of interventions and therapy and it is often up to the therapists' discretion for continuation of services</p>
Devaney (2017)	Early Implementation of a Family-Centered Model in Child Welfare: Findings from an Irish Case Study	Highlights the process by which intervention focused on support and prevention using a strengths perspective translates the key messages to practice	Mixed methods Case Study	Focus groups using Meitheal model Child protection and welfare ( $n=56$ ) External agencies working with	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Ecological Model</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b> Meitheal Model (an old Irish term that describes how neighbors would come together to help in the saving of crops or other tasks) Supporting families to be involved in identifying their own needs- promotes a sense of engagement and joint working with a focus on their strengths</p>

				children and families in community and volunteer sector ( <i>n</i> =51)	Offers a framework for determining thresholds in a services continuum within two orientations: support and protection
Douglas (2014)	Does a Social Work Degree Predict Practice Orientation? Measuring Strengths-Based Practice (SBP) Among Child Welfare Workers with the SBP Inventory-Provider Version	To measure SBP with a provider-based SBPI-P and examine whether a social work degree is associated with a higher level of SBP	Quantitative Study	Child welfare workers CWW ( <i>n</i> =453)	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Constructivist Theory, Narrative Theory</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b> Identified three practice orientation factors with comprehensive measures for reliability for SBP practice behaviors/techniques: 1) Empowerment; 2) Community-Culture and 3) Sensitivity-Knowledge A fourth orientation factor to practice: Relationship-Support scale did not produce a measure of reliability and warrants examination, particularly because of CWW dual roles of supporting and policing This study produced findings that a receipt of a social work degree is not associated with SBP</p>
Eve (2014)	What is Good Parenting? The Perspectives of Different Professionals	Explored the convergence and divergence of different professional groups' opinions on good parenting	Mixed Methods Study	Lawyers, judges, psychologists, social workers ( <i>n</i> = 19)	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Model for professionals' opinions on 'good parenting'</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b> Identified categories of good parenting 1) Insight; 2) Willingness + ability; 3) Day-to-day versus complex/long-term needs; 4) Child's needs before own; 5) Fostering attachment and 6) Consistency versus flexibility Study contributes practice considerations for identifying parental strengths for inclusion in</p>

					parenting capacity assessments, as opposed to the current focus on parental weaknesses. Study acknowledges, however, that individual values may affect decision-making rather than professional standards
Hughes (2016)	“Act Like My Friend” Mothers’ Recommendations to Improve Relationships with Their Canadian Child Welfare Workers	Study situates mother’s recommendations into best practice literature and discusses possibilities and challenges of developing stronger relationships between parents and child welfare worker	Qualitative Study	$n = 64$	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Relational Theory</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b> Study identified child welfare worker qualities that mirror those commonly thought of as descriptors for a good friend, such as listening, being supportive, encouraging, offering hope, expressing empathy, positive reinforcement, support, non-judgment and encouragement. Study participants also emphasized that CWW should listen to mothers, have empathy for the difficulties they experience, and then, out of this empathy, respond to their needs as women.</p>
Lietz (2007)	Uncovering Stories of Family Resilience: A Mixed Methods Study of Resilient Families, Part 2	Tests the relationships between the variables of risk, family strengths and family functioning	Mixed Methods Study	Qualitative  Qualitative Subsample ( $n=6$ )	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Resilience, Family Systems</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b> Added to the literature by 1) expanding the family strength/protective factor of social support to include <i>internal</i> family support and 2) including additional stage of ‘helping others’ Changed titles of two protective factors to better represent meaning: 1) <i>independence</i> renamed to <i>boundary setting</i> and 2) <i>initiative</i> changed to <i>taking charge</i></p>

					An additional family strength was uncovered: communication
Lietz (2011)	Empathic Action and Family Resilience: A Narrative Examination of the Benefits of Helping Others	Examines the narratives of 20 resilient families who maintained family functioning despite experiencing multitude of risk factors	Qualitative Study	Snowball sampling (n=20)	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Thematic analysis identified two categories that illustrate families' 1) reasons for engaging in altruistic behaviors, and b) ways their own experience better sensitized them to the needs of others, thus increasing empathic accuracy. Utilizes Gerdes and Segal's (2009) conception of empathic action Theoretical Implications: Empathic action based in empathic accuracy Explores empathy as a protective factor and findings suggest families developed increased compassion for others as a result of their own experiences with loss, trauma or stress Also discusses how helping others increased their ability to cope with the challenges they faced.</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b> Strengths-based practice in social services should seek to identify and support efforts in prosocial behavior i.e. strengths-based assessment that ask about altruistic intention and behavior</p>
Lietz (2011)	Theoretical Adherence to Family Centered Practice: Are Strengths-Based	Examines theoretical adherence to FCP by analyzing families' perceptions of services	Qualitative	Families (n = 44)	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Strengths Perspective <b>Practice Themes</b> Findings suggest that for participants, families' descriptions of intensive in-home</p>

	<p>Principles Illustrated in Families' Descriptions of Child Welfare Services?</p>				<p>services offered mixed illustrations of family-centered practice (FCP) principals. Some services, as perceived by families, were described as respectful, empowering, responsive and relational. Other services (not adhering to principles of FCP) were described as not responsive to family wishes and cultural practices. Efforts are needed to evaluate, monitor and improve adherence to Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFPS) model of practice</p>
<p>Rice (2014)</p>	<p>Engaging Families, Building Relationships: Strategies for Working Across Systems from a Social Exchange Perspective</p>	<p>Explores interactions among parents and professionals in dependency court hearings</p>	<p>Qualitative Ethnographic</p>	<p>Focus groups: judges, guardian ad litem, caseworkers, foster parents, youths (n=5 different focus groups)</p>	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b>                  Social exchange theory                  Power and power differences that examine potential loss and gain, perceived rewards and their distribution, the influence of norms and reciprocity across exchanges  <b>Practice Themes</b>                  Child-centered approach that marginalized families of origin and reflected tension across collaborating agencies reflected in an "In-group" and "out-group"                  Training and education that include intervention strategies that are strengths-based and centered on family engagement and worker-family collaboration                  Cross-system training about the realities of system pressures                  Advocacy skills that navigate what may appear to be contradictory goals- protecting children and maintaining families                  Training that highlights power imbalances</p>

Rijbroek (2017)	Implementation of a Solution Based Approach for Child Protection: A Professional's Perspective	Evaluates a multilevel implementation process modeled after a Signs of Safety (SoS) approach, Safe Together Step by Step (STSS)	Quantitative	Four experimental teams ( $n = 64$ ) Four control teams ( $n = 74$ )	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Chain of Action- contextual, organizational, and team level factors influence professionals' behaviors</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b> Need to be deliberate about practice principles Efforts should be made to evaluate both procedural and theoretical adherence to practice principles Increase supervision Provide further training in strengths-based practice</p>
Saint-Jacques (2009)	Adopting a Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice with Families in Difficulty: From Theory to Practice	Examines the interventions of practitioners	Mixed Methods Study	Qualitative data: Practitioners ( $n = 30$ ) Quantitative data: practitioners ( $n=77$ )	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b> Ecological Perspective</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b> Qualitative findings suggest strategies that stem for a strengths-based approach: 1) consider the client as the expert; 2) evaluate the intervention based on the client's opinion; and 3) focus on resources Quantitative findings identify a theme of keywords mentioned by practitioners to describe their clients</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. love, warmth, safety (axis of strengths 28% &amp; personal factors 94%)</li> <li>2. working with resources, good support network (axis of strengths 28% &amp; environmental factors 6%)</li> <li>3. marital conflicts, parental immaturity, mental health problems (axis of weaknesses 72% &amp; personal factors 94%)</li> </ol>

					4. dependence, mistrust, poverty (axis of weaknesses 72% & environmental factors 6%)
Strength (2011)	Stories of Successful Reunification: A Narrative Study of Family Resilience in Child Welfare	Study looks at the resilience of 15 families whose children were removed due to child maltreatment	Qualitative Study	Families involved in child welfare (n=15)	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b></p> <p>Family resilience          Uncovers 10 protective factors/strengths evaluated by families as influential and links to the process of family resilience through five stages; stage 1-survival; stage 2-Adaptation; stage 3-Acceptance; stage 4-Growing stronger and stage 5-Helping Others</p> <p>Identifies common factors that attributed to family strengths: 1) appraisal, or the meaning families attach to difficulties; 2) spirituality, or a belief system that provides comfort, meaning and direction; 3) communication about the difficulties families face; 4) flexibility as exhibited by a family's ability to adapt and find solutions to manage adversity.</p> <p>Reliance on a positive social support network          Added one more strength: "family commitment"</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b></p> <p>"raise family voice"</p> <p>See family resilience as a <i>process</i></p> <p>Knowledge of 10 family strengths helps sensitize child welfare practitioners to internal and external resources</p> <p>Knowledge of protective factors may bring about successful reunification may lead to more effective case planning</p>

					Acknowledging strengths may also lend hope to families Family involvement in decision-making Use of parent mentors and advocates may empower families
Toros (2015)	Assessment of Children in Need in a Post-Soviet Context: Reflections of Child Protective Workers in Estonia	Explores the perspectives and principles that Estonian child protective workers utilize to inform their assessments	Qualitative	Child Protective Workers (n=20)	<b>Theoretical Themes</b> Philosophies that informed policies during Soviet occupation in Estonia <b>Practice Themes</b> 1) over-reliance on experts; 2) incomplete ecological perspective; 3) emphasis on failures and deficits; 4) worker attitude of “I know what is best.”; 5) need for training; 6) workers who reported establishing a trusting relationship with families were also those who indicated more positive outcomes
Toros (2018)	Estonian Child Protection Workers’ Assessment Perspectives: The Need for Competence and Confidence	Examines Estonian child protection workers’ perspectives about child welfare work and assessment	Quantitative	Child welfare workers (n=101)	<b>Theoretical Themes</b> Child Welfare Perspective, Strengths-based Approach and Confidence in Skills/Knowledge and Self-reflection <b>Practice Themes</b> Self-reflection to continually explore personal belief systems, which influence perceptions of clients Views were contradictory re: strengths-based approach-CWW recognized that identifying and building upon strengths and resources of individuals could help strengthen client—worker relationships and elicit positive changes, yet they did not strongly perceive the client as having either the capabilities and resources or expertise about their own situation

					<p>Not all workers saw their role as ensuring child safety</p> <p>CWW did not always see inclusion of the child as necessary and did not consistently or adequately understand the idea of what was in the best interests of the child</p>
Zegarac (2017)	Caseworkers' Perceptions of the Strengths of the Child Family and Community	Examines the perceptions of caseworkers of new strengths-oriented assessment used in child welfare in Serbia	Quantitative	Caseworkers (n=346)	<p><b>Theoretical Themes</b></p> <p>Social Welfare system reforms in Serbia</p> <p>New model considers strengths of the child, family and community</p> <p><b>Practice Themes</b></p> <p>In early stages of reform in Serbia, data indicates workers make decisions based on their own idea of what is best for the child rather than placing the strengths in the context of child-oriented practice</p> <p>Caseworkers' actions are shaped and directed by their values and prejudices and by the competence they have developed in identifying a client's resources</p> <p>Proper supervision needed for developing professional competence to identify and engage the strengths of child and their families</p>

### **Theoretical Themes Discovered**

The systematic review identified the following theoretical frameworks in the current literature: feminist theory, the ecological model, Constructivist Theory, Narrative Theory, Relational Theory, Empathic Action, Social-Exchange Theory, power and power difference, and even an adaptation of a solution-focused approach. Several of these theoretical themes were particularly salient across the fifteen articles addressing work with families involved in child welfare. A central stance was support, and collectively the articles pointed to the importance of empathy and relationship while conceptualizing work with child welfare-involved families.

The Hughes, Chau & Roche (2016) qualitative study drew upon relational theory to research the quality of the child welfare worker relationship with mothers who were involved in the Canadian child welfare system. In the study, the authors translated the mothers' recommendations to best practice, identifying both possibilities and challenges within the relationship. Rice & Girvin (2104) used a social exchange framework to explore interactions between parents and professionals. The study found that without reciprocity within the relationship between the professional and child welfare involved family, collaboration was difficult and support and assistance for the family was compromised.

An ecological framework was utilized in the Devaney, McGregor & Cassidy (2017) research on the Meitheal model, and strengths-based practice model used with families involved in the child protection system in Ireland. The study mapped "the interactions between individual systems of the family and from within the wider neighborhood as the Meitheal model became embedded (Devaney, McGregor & Cassidy, 2017, p. 341). Specifically, the study examined the networks within micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-levels of practice.

Several articles focused on protective factors as actors of strength and resilience. For example, in the Lietz & Strength (2011) study, the authors uncovered not only ten strengths but also five stages or processes that link protective factors to family resilience. This qualitative study also added a strength, *commitment*, to the list of commonly understood protective factors, defining commitment as “each family’s undeniable desire to keep their family together and strong.” (Lietz & Strength, 2011, p. 209).

In an earlier mixed methods study by Lietz (2007), the findings added nuance to the concept of social support by differentiating *internal* social support from external social support. In the qualitative part of the study, families named primary support as coming from *within* the family, extending the concept of social support to include both outside social support and more significantly, inside social support. Additionally, the study added *communication* as a family strength and renamed two protective factors to better represent meaning.

### **Practice Themes Discovered**

Across these studies, several general practice principles emerge. The studies, broadly, point to resilience and strengths-focused practice as one that is genuine and relationally embedded. Strength (2011) describes this form of practice as one that is “responsive and relational” (quotes mine). Furthermore, a strong, recurring practice theme is, again, that of support. In one study (Devaney, 2017), support was paired with prevention. While support was often framed as something the social worker provides, it was also discussed as a latent capacity (or external source of resilience) that could be activated in creative ways by even neighbors and neighborhoods (Devaney, 2017) and by “parental mentors” (Strength, 2011).

A number of these papers spoke to the importance of taking parents’ perspectives seriously. This was evident in (Hughes, 2016; Lietz, 2007; Strength, 2011), which spoke to the

importance of parents having meaningful participation in and a sense of ownership in plans, for culturally responsive practice, and to the need for workers to rethink language related to “*independence*,” framing this idea instead as “*boundary setting*”.

Support was also discussed as something that happened within a strong working alliance. This was particularly striking in the article by Hughes, Chau & Rocke (2016), which spoke to the professional relationship modeling empathic attunement, in a way that could offer a sort of parallel process, where parents could be nurtured in increasing their own capacity for attunement to their child. This proposed model of practice is consistent with existing practice models such as “mother-infant” programs offered in pediatric settings in hospitals such as Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC) and programs such as Circles of Security.

Using an interesting application of a solution-focused approach, Rijbroek, Strating & Huijsman (2017) employed a multilevel strategy called Cretin’s chain of action (Cretin, Shortell & Keeler, 2004) to evaluate the systemic interventions of a version of Signs of Safety (SoS) called Safe Together Step by Step (STSS), currently implemented in the Netherlands. The practice implications in this study pointed to both the need to be deliberate in training for the model and to the importance of peer consultation and opportunity for feedback for workers using the strengths-based STSS method with families involved in child welfare.

Practice considerations in the Zegarac & Burgund (2017) study were similar to those in the Rijbroek, Strating & Huijsman (2017) study. The authors examined caseworker perceptions of a new strengths-oriented approach implemented in the Serbian social welfare system. The findings demonstrated challenges in the shift from a problem-oriented approach to a strengths approach and suggested that “proper supervision could help in furthering professional

competence to identify and engage the strengths of children in care as well as the strengths of their families” (Zegarac & Burgund, 2017, p. 49).

### **Discussion**

This systematic review provides an overview of the current literature related to strengths-based and resilience-focused practice with families involved in child welfare. The purpose of the review was to identify current theoretical and practice themes within the current literature in order to contribute to professional social work knowledge, as well as establish a foundation for further research by the author. The author believes that exploring current research related to the theoretical and practice approaches in child welfare will help build a spring board for further scholarly inquiry.

These fifteen articles, though carefully chosen, represent a variety of practice settings and represent attempts to answer related, but distinct questions. In this sense, it is likely too ambitious to suggest they offer a single, coherent model of practice. In considering the systematically reviewed articles as a whole, a few findings stand out, however, and are worth highlighting. One such finding brings to the fore the importance of both “support and prevention” elements in the child welfare system (Devaney, McGregor & Cassidy, 2017). The Meitheal model, currently implemented in Ireland, is a strengths-based, family-centered model which seeks to identify early on the needs and strengths of children and their families. Meitheal is an approach to working with families that is applied within programs and services that range from community-based and volunteer to statutory. The use of neighbors/neighborhoods are sources of support in this model, which is powerful example of protective factors. This approach precedes a punitive approach and attempts to re-orientate child welfare practice through early intervention and prevention.

Lietz (2007) offered another perspective in the second part of a two-part study that tested the relationships between the variables of risk, family strengths and family functioning. The study drew out the importance of language by changing two titles for protective factors to better represent meaning. The concept of *independence* was renamed to *boundary setting*, and *initiative* was renamed *taking charge*. By paying attention to the language used within social work and child welfare, including even our program titles, can connote constructive, strengths-based approach versus a punitive approach.

Similarly, the relational approach as described in Hughes, Chau and Rocke (2016) asserts that to “counter punitive and authoritarian child welfare workers, mothers recommended that child welfare workers have the qualities of a good friend: listening, being supportive and encouraging, offering hope, and expressing empathy” (Hughes, Chau & Rocke, 2016, p. 67). This reinforces an instillation of hope and hope is a common curative factor in psychotherapy research. Child welfare not only serves to protect, it also serves to prevent, repair and build healthy and safe families for children to grow.

Strength (2011) study explored resilience in families who experienced stressful circumstances. The narrative study produced findings that suggested that families developed increased compassion for others as a result of their own experiences, and that through helping others the propensity to cope with on-going or new challenges the families faced increased. This study reinforces the role and utility of empathy as a protective factor for families experiencing adversity.

Relationship and support emerge again in the Douglas (2014) article, which using Constructivist Theory as a conceptual map, described four practice orientations for strength-based practice behaviors. Three of the orientations; empowerment, community-culture and

sensitivity-knowledge, measured as reliable for provider-based strengths-based practice.

Interestingly, a fourth practice orientation: relationship-support, did not produce a measure of reliability. This is likely because of the dual roles of supporting and policing that child welfare workers play. Furthermore, additional findings in the study showed that higher levels of strengths-based practices were not associated with having a social work degree. This serves as a reminder that a social work degree does not ensure strengths-focused practice.

The Devaney et. al (2017) case study also illustrated the strengths orientation to practice within a continuum of support services. The study offered a framework for thresholds of support within the continuum, with support on one end of the continuum and protection on other. The findings provided evidence for a structural shift in a system that is “broadening its support function while keeping strong its protective and risk management system.” (Devaney et. al, 2017, p. 342).

Helping students and practitioners to prepare for, identify and capitalize on family strengths are important dimensions of practice. The findings reinforce the need to continue to define and develop strategies for strengths-based and resilience-focused practice with child welfare involved families. As the field of child welfare evolves, and federal legislation redirects dollars to fund services earmarked for prevention, strengths-based and resilience-focused work with families will be ever more important. Services such as mental health and substance abuse treatment, parent training and counseling and kinship navigator programs are vital prevention programs that are well-suited for the implementation for strengths-based approaches.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Strengths of this systematic review are that it included articles not only from the U.S., but also international publications from Estonia, post-soviet Russia, Ireland and the Netherlands.

Prominent journals were accessed, a large initial number of articles were sampled, and a variety of methods were represented among the articles. Additionally, the initial search was broad and included not only academic articles but also professional resources that helped to focus the research question. Several articles were very specific to the research question, and some dominant themes emerged with a number of clear potential implications for both direct practice and education. The articles were current, specifically published within the last ten years.

Limitations include the potential for bias in a systematic review, as well the possibility of missing relevant articles in the initial searches. Biases and error can occur when deciding which studies to include and exclude, and when extracting and coding information. The author was the only person involved in the search for articles in the review. While protocol for finding, selecting and analyzing data was established and followed, rigor could be enhanced by including a second researcher. In terms of error, little or no evidence about the reliability of data extraction exist in qualitative syntheses.

### **Implications for Education, Training and Practice**

The fifteen sources represented in this review remind readers that approaching practice with families involved in child welfare requires levels of preparation, from education to supervision to on-going skills development and renewal of strengths orientation to the work. Across methods, a number of the studies spoke to the complexity inherent in practitioners' own personal values intersecting with professional values. Articles such as Toros (2018), Zegarac (2017) and Saint-Jacques (2009) noted that practitioners sometimes made decisions based on their own values, apart from professional practice behaviors and the Code of Ethics. This reminds social work educators of the importance of both (1) giving attention to ethical considerations and of (2) taking seriously the competing allegiances or "pulls" students often feel.

Social work educators are well-positioned to empower students to be able to meet the demands of the field. Student formation and the development of their “professional self” warrants a generous amount of reflectivity. Supervision and reflection help to uncover the students’ own personal attitudes and perceptions about risks, deficits, strengths, protective factors, wellness and resiliency of child welfare-involved children and families. Insight and awareness of one’s own personal attitudes and perceptions may better prepare students for child welfare work.

The articles reviewed suggest that child welfare curriculum needs to include best practice principles for child welfare work. The studies reviewed, broadly, point to the importance of a strongly relationally based practice: one that instills hope and takes seriously the perspectives of the families involved. “Support” emerged as a defining feature of good practice in this practice arena. Support was defined as something that came not only from the direct practice worker, but potentially, even latent forms of support were suggested as available to be activated, including from neighbors and neighborhoods (Devaney, 2017) and potentially the use of peer mentors. These recommendations remind educators and practitioners to take seriously informal as well as formal supports. The importance of informal support is an idea consistent with Werner & Smith’s study referenced in the literature review, that speaks to how resilient youth often made use of informal or “natural” supports more than professional supports. This, if nothing else, invites a degree of humility among social work practitioners and is a reminder to think broadly about who can be of help.

Social work students who are participants in Title IV-E child welfare stipend programs need classroom and field education opportunities that put them in a position to get hired and make a positive impact on the child welfare field. The evaluation and rigor of the Title IV-E

child welfare stipend programs can be strengthened to improve child welfare knowledge and practice by factoring in the kinds of findings represented in this review. Efforts to individualize and fortify the IV-E student's educational program needs to happen to ensure students are receiving both a strong curriculum and specific training opportunities that include evidence-based best practice in child welfare. Students in child welfare related field placements are uniquely situated to practice applying some of the practice principles identified in the study. Field seminars provide a venue for conversations about the intersection of personal and professional values- normalizing and nuancing their understanding of these dilemmas.

The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) provides development project support for child welfare agencies to attract, develop and retain a skilled and ready workforce. The child welfare workforce requires education and training to help prepare and sustain vital case-carrying direct practice work with families. To this end, the necessity to strengthen student education and preparation for child welfare work is at stake. Education and training typically include information about child and family development, substance abuse, mental health, communication and promotive processes and a host of other topics related to child welfare. As such, education on both 'values' and 'skills' components of practice should include approaching the work from a strengths perspective and in turn, develop skills in identifying promotive factors that foster and fortify protective factors in families (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Early & GlenyMaye, 2000; Saleeby, 2006).

Advocates for strengths-based work with families emphasize that through a positive theoretical framework, social workers are able to conceive the person, environment, and transactions in terms of resources, opportunities rather than absences, pathologies, and disorders (Chovanec, 2016). This framework establishes aspects of hope for the family, as well as for the

worker and the community. This positive theoretical framework creates partnerships characterized by relationship and mutuality, thus broadening the base of responsibility for the family and the worker.

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Teaching Self-Awareness: Pedagogy in Child Welfare-focused Social Work Education  
Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD) Annual Conference 2019  
#socialworkeducation: Embracing the Contemporary Call for Social Justice

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## Abstract

Teaching pedagogies in social work education have unique potential to engage students in self-awareness about their original perceptions of child welfare-involved children and families. Engaged pedagogy, critical reflection and transformative learning are reviewed as methods that contribute to a learning environment that forwards a strengths perspective within social work's professional competencies. The following is a summary of a paper presentation, *Teaching Self-Awareness: Pedagogy in Child Welfare-focused Social Work Education*, delivered at the annual conference of the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD) 2019 on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019 in Jacksonville, Florida. The conference paper presentation provided highlights of Product One of this Banded Dissertation, specifically introducing engaged pedagogy, critical reflection and transformative learning, as meaningful and applicable pedagogies for child-welfare-focused social work education. The presentation invited a conversation with attendees, who were primarily social work educators, about the formation and preparation of the social work student who intends to work in child welfare. A brief critical analysis concludes the summary, addressing how the presentation relates to the purpose of the Banded Dissertation and how it is an important component of scholarly work.

*Key words:* social work education, engaged pedagogy, critical reflection, transformative learning, resilience, strengths-based practice, child welfare

### Pedagogy and the Resiliency Framework in Child Welfare-focused Social Work Education

In the United States, systems of public and private child welfare serve to provide a continuum of services to safeguard and protect children, support the families who care for them, promote child and family development and well-being and provide programming and services for the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Within baccalaureate and master level social work education, educators are summoned to prepare child welfare-focused social work students for complex and ethically bound decisions that integrate or disseminate family strengths and resiliency for protection, safety, preservation, permanency and prevention (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2016). The contemporary education of a skilled, knowledgeable and self-aware workforce is of primary importance.

A competency area in the Council for Social Work Education's (CWSE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) identifies the necessity for engaging diversity and difference in practice, specifying that social workers should be able to apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies (CWSE, 2015). The utilization of engaged pedagogy, critical reflection and transformative learning is significant for the child welfare-focused student in order to unearth personal biases and assumptions about children and families. Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions (O'Sullivan, 2003). Mezirow (1997) defined it as the "process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world..." (p. 167).

The conference paper presentation at BPD 2019 offered both a conceptual framework of strengths and resilience perspectives and an application of engaged pedagogy, critical reflection and transformative learning in the social work classroom that could serve to support the adoption of a strengths-based and resilience approach to work with families involved in child welfare. To bolster self-awareness regarding the child welfare-focused social work student's own attitude, perception and/or orientation to the child welfare-involved family, aspects of reflection and transformation are important. Adopting a practice of critical reflection as a student can translate to critical reflection as consequent for practice in the field.

Worker bias in child welfare is an area that warrants exploration. Employing engaged pedagogy and transformative learning as tenets in the child welfare-focused social work classroom, educators can co-experience a critical examination of personal biases, model reflection and challenge any original perceptions of the family, working towards a transformation that discards former attitudes and embraces new ones. These pedagogies inform the development of student self-awareness that will, in turn, prepare students to engage in strengths-based and resilience-focused work with children and families towards best outcomes.

The call for submissions for the BPD Annual Conference required written excerpts for the following categories: abstract, context for the presentation, purpose of the presentation, how the presentation contributes to a body of knowledge, process and talking points, application steps, references, and learning objectives. The process was peer-reviewed, and the submission was accepted for a paired paper presentation in the "social work values/ethics" track, which was intended to reinforce the teaching/learning of social work values/ethics with undergraduate students and/or faculty. The presentation included the following learning objectives: objective 1; participants will be able to identify a strengths-based approach and aspects of a resilience

perspective and their relevance to child welfare-focused social work education, objective 2; participants will be able to differentiate the use of critical reflection, engaged pedagogy and transformative learning and identify how they relate to one another, and objective 3; participants will be able to describe social work classroom environments that develop and transform student values and attitudes that see strengths and resilience factors in families.

The information was presented using several PowerPoint slides to focus the attendees. The presentation also engaged participants in a conversation to address aspects of applicability in both the social work classroom as well as social work practice in child welfare. Anecdotal information was provided as well as elicited from participants to illustrate strategies for engaged pedagogy, assignments for critical reflection and examples of transformative learning experiences. The presentation proved an important component of this banded dissertation because it created an opportunity for the dissemination of the scholarly work. Feedback received from conference participants highlighted the value of engaging the audience in an active discussion about the development of social work values within the social work student as well as the realities and necessity of strengths-based work in child welfare practice. No formal session evaluations were collected but after the presentation several participants shared that the conversation with the attendees was a strength and highlight of the presentation. This feedback was particularly salient, as it reinforced the notion of engagement, engaged pedagogy and a parallel process among the presenter and the participants.