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The purpose of the study was to amplify voices of participants' understanding of the empowerment process as they experienced it in the Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program situated in a grassroots community-based family services agency. The study was created to explore the impact of the participants' educational experiences, the impact the program had on the way services were provided by the participants, changes in the participants' values from the inception of the program until its termination, and their experiences with peers while enrolled in the Social Work Paraprofessional Program.

An instrumental case study methodology was used to collect data. Data were gathered through (a) individual participant interviews, (b) participant observations among participants, (c) archival documents, and (d) researcher's field notes. A content level of analysis was conducted.

The results of the study indicated that four categories related to empowerment emerged from the analysis of data. They were: spiritual focus, self-transformation, skills acquisition, and values clarification. From these categories, four themes were generated. Implications for education and practice, along with implications for further research were recommended.

A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION ON A

DIVERSE GROUP OF ADULT LEARNERS WORKING IN A

GRASSROOTS, COMMUNITY-BASED

FAMILY SUPPORT AGENCY

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As of 2006 (Boyes-Watson), the Council on Social Work Education accredited 458 bachelor's programs in the United States. Although this number may appear impressive, many professional and pre-professional settings in human services continue to provide understaffed services (Leung, 2005). With a history of not producing an adequate amount of degreed social workers to fill the vast need in the United States, agencies were forced to employ and utilize paraprofessionals in various areas (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2002). Although the use of paraprofessionals in social work has been a long-standing practice, there continues to be a movement to professionalize human service workers. The *2008-2009 Edition of Occupational Outlook Handbook of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* notes that social work employment is projected to grow faster than average (2008). A bachelor's degree in social work is the most common minimum requirement to qualify for a job as a social worker. Along with work practices and philosophies, social work skills have been reformulated under the new lean models of service delivery (Abramovitz, 2005; Clarke & Newman, 1992; Fabricant & Burghardt, 1997).

As the employment of social workers is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through 2016 (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008), the utilization of workers without professional training in the field as "paraprofessionals" has

been encouraged by this shortage and by the need for a more efficient use of highly trained personnel (Rose, 2000). The influx of poverty programs and a mandate for consumer involvement have also helped to focus interest on the paraprofessional worker. Non-traditional program planning has often assumed that professionals lack experiential understanding necessary for helping clients in a complex and highly specialized society (Dewees, 2002). Paraprofessionals, therefore, are called to participate actively in the worker-client network. The expectation is that they will bring involvement and understanding from their position of liaison or expediter to the service encounter (Saleebey, 2006). The paraprofessional worker has sometimes found that it is not easy to correlate personal values with those of the professional helping system or with those of the client. Their work performance depends upon his ability to identify at an appropriate level with both their fellow helpers and the person in need. However, living in the area served and coming into daily contact with other helpers cannot be assumed sufficient qualifications for understanding and development of the attitudes necessary in a helping relationship. Regardless of the setting, there is a need for special training if the paraprofessional staff member is to be successful.

There are natural linkages between social work activities and education experiences. Consistent with social work's themes of empowerment and complimentary to Kliebard's (1999) third tenet of the American Curriculum Reform Movement (social meliorism) is the notion of "emancipatory adult learning" (p. 63). The goal of emancipatory learning is to free learners from the forces that limit their options and control over their lives. These are forces that they may have been taken for granted or

seen as beyond their control. Emancipatory learning results in transformations of learner

perspectives through critical reflection (Mezirow, 2007). The educator plays a role in

fostering critical reflection by challenging learners to consider why they hold certain

assumptions, values, and beliefs (Merriam & Caffarella, 2005). According to Mezirow

(2007), emancipatory learning, with its emphasis upon learner transformation, can take

place only in adulthood because "it is only in late adolescence and in adulthood that a

person can recognize being caught in his/her own history and reliving it" (p.134). In

adulthood,

> rather than merely adapting to changing circumstances by more diligently
> applying old ways of knowing . . . [individuals] discover a need to acquire new
> perspectives in order to gain a more complete understanding of changing events
> and a higher degree of control over their lives. The formative learning of
> childhood becomes transformative learning in adulthood. (Mezirow, 2007, p. 87)

As a result of the research and theory-building efforts of Mezirow fully described in

Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning (1991), emancipatory adult learning has

become more commonly known as transformative learning. What is clear from the

literature is that fostering transformative learning demands a different approach by the

educator.

The social work profession has been committed to social justice, particularly on

behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals. This commitment is enumerated in the

Profession's *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2000) and its educational standards (Educational

Policy and Accreditation Standards, 2001). As vowed in the NASW policy statement

International Policy on Human Rights (NASW, 2003), "social workers must advocate for

the rights of vulnerable people" and work to eliminate practices "that put any person's human rights in grave jeopardy" (pp. 212-213). Social work's historical roots of social justice and empowerment in communities clearly support the tenets of emancipatory and transformative adult education perspectives. Social work educators who design programs grounded in emancipatory and transformative adult education tenets need to make sure that the tenets are being actualized in program delivery.

Conceptual Framework

Considered a theory, this study is guided by empowerment practice. Empowerment theory originally was proposed as a client-centered approach compatible with the harm reduction model, where the overriding purpose is to help the recipient reduce harm to himself/herself or others (Breton, 2004). The notion of empowerment-based social work that preceded strengths-based practice is the framework that was employed to examine the unique case of adult students employed in providing community-based services in a family support agency while enrolled in social work paraprofessional education. Empowerment is the "process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situation" (Saleebey, 2002, p. 145). The roots of empowerment lie in the political and philosophical foundations of our culture as "the concept of empowering citizens to participate in decisions affecting their welfare" (Kisthardt, 2002, p. 124). As Lee (2001) says, empowerment

> suggests both individual determination over one's own life and democratic participation in the life of one's community, often through mediating structures such as schools, neighborhoods, churches, and other voluntary organizations.

> Empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. It is a multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organizations and neighborhoods; it suggests the study of people in context. (p. 121)

As an outcome, empowerment defines the end state of achieving power. Empowerment refers to *a state of mind*, [*italics mine*] such as feeling worthy and competent or perceiving power and control; it also refers to a *reallocation of power [italics mine]* that results from modifying social structures (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003). In other words, empowerment involves subjective elements of perception as well as more objective elements of resources of power within social structures.

Presuming that people will be able to experience empowerment without having options simply makes a mockery of empowerment (Breton, 2004). Empowerment hinges on having access to resources. This means that people know about their choices and have opportunities to select their courses of action from among options. A major portion of the social work course work dealt with familiarizing students with resources and appropriate ways to make referrals on behalf of others.

> Empowerment implies that many competencies are already present or at least possible, given niches and opportunities . . . [and] that what you see as poor functioning is a result of social structure and lack of resources which make it possible for the existing competencies to operate. (Dewees, 2002, p. 78)

In other words, the personal, interpersonal, and political-structural dimensions of empowerment are interrelated (see Figure 1). Accessing resources in one dimension leads to developing resources in others.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework*

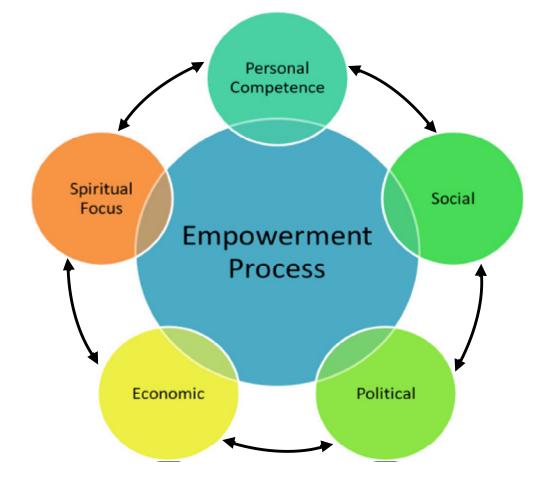DuBois and Miley (2002) provide the assumptions that underlie the process of empowerment in social work.

- Empowerment is a collaborative process, with clients and practitioners working together as partners.

- The empowering process views client systems as competent and capable, given access to resources and opportunities.

- Clients must perceive themselves as causal agents, able to effect change.

- Competence is acquired or refined through life experiences, particularly experiences affirming efficacy, rather than from circumstances in which one is told what to do.

- Multiple factors contribute to any situation, and therefore effective solutions are necessarily diverse in their approach.

- Informal social networks are a significant source of support for mediating stress and increasing one's competence and sense of control.

- People must participate in their own empowerment; goals, means, and outcomes must be self-defined.

- Level of awareness is a key issue in empowerment; information is necessary for change to occur.

- Empowerment involves access to resources and the capacity to use those resources effectively.

- The empowering process is dynamic, synergistic, ever-changing, and evolutionary.

- Empowerment is achieved through the parallel structures of personal, political, and socioeconomic development. (p. 25)

Empowerment practice strives to develop within individuals, families, groups, or communities the ability to gain power. Research and practice on empowerment have identified a specific process that contributes to this change (Guitierrez & Alvarez, 2002). The literature has identified the following components as particularly significant:

1. *Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs.* Beliefs regarding self-efficacy-a sense of self that promotes action on one's behalf in self-worth, and a sense of control-affect the empowerment process. Psychology views these attitudes as the sole component and primary goal of empowerment. However, empowerment in our sense goes beyond developing feelings of individual control to affecting larger social systems.

2. *Validation through Collective Experience.* In collective experience, the self and others recognize shared experience i.e., that some of one's perceptions about oneself and the surrounding world are indeed valid and therefore legitimate to voice. This recognition contributes to a collective view that reduces self-blame, increases the tendency to look beyond personal failure as the cause of the problem at hand, brings about a sense of shared fate, and raises consciousness. Collective experience can motivate one to seek change beyond the individual level toward other systems, such as the family or community.

3. *Knowledge and Skills for Critical Thinking and Action.* Through mutual sharing and support, individuals can think critically about the internal and external aspects of a problem. They can identify macro-level structures and their impact as well as explore how they have acquired their values, beliefs, and attitudes and how these affect the problem. Increasing power includes learning to think critically, learning how to access information and take action, actually taking action, and assessing the outcome. The process of

placing problems in a sociopolitical context reduces self blame and helps individuals see the roots of their problems in society. Through consciousness raising, people come to see how their problems are similar to those of others. They also begin to notice common experiences that help them collectively to understand and take action.

4. *Action.* Through reflective action (praxis), individuals can develop action strategies and cultivate the resources, knowledge, and skills necessary to influence internal and external structures. Psychologically, they learn to assume responsibility for their actions. Behaviorally, they become willing and able to act with others to attain common goals and social change, as well as reflect on and learn from those actions (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001, pp. 92-93).

Though these four components are necessary for empowerment, no linear relationship among them is assumed and none is considered more important than any other as a place to begin work. In empowerment practice, as in any other context, one must start where the client system is to define its needs and goals.

As a practice model, empowerment involves a value base, sanctions for intervention, the theory base that guides practice, guidelines for the client-worker relationship, and a framework for organizing helping activities. The primary social work roles assumed in empowerment practice are teacher/trainer, resource consultant, and sensitizer (awareness raiser) (Lee, 2001). Themes of education and training come up often between worker and client. Other important roles for social workers include leading

groups and helping clients develop group leadership skills. Consequently, the goal of intervention becomes twofold: (a) to achieve results relative to the immediate situation and (b) to teach clients the knowledge and skills necessary to perform these interventions for themselves and others (Lee, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to amplify the voices of the participants' understanding of the empowerment process as they experienced it in the Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided my study:

1. How do the adult learners at Crossroads Family Services view the collective experience of being enrolled in Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program?

2. How are the values, attitudes and beliefs of the adult learners impacted by their participation in the Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program?

3. How has the Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program provided social work knowledge and skills for adult learners?

4. How are the dispositions of the adult learners influenced by the collective experience of the empowerment process?

Definition of Terms

Empowerment—the "process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situation" (Gutierrez, 2001, p. 202).

Social work—the professional activity of helping individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and to create societal conditions favorable to their goals. The profession of social work is distinct from other helping professions because it has the responsibility and mandate to provide social services. It is particularly concerned with social justice (National Association of Social Workers, 2000).

Paraprofessional—a person trained to assist another professional but not licensed to practice in the profession (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997)

Delimitations and Limitations

The purpose of an instrumental case study is to identify factors that serve to influence the central phenomenon of the study (Stake, 1995). This instrumental case study identified the impact of social work paraprofessional education on nine grassroots community-based workers. The study had limitations. First, the scope was limited in that the researcher only examined the impact of social work education on paraprofessionals in a particular grass roots agency; subsequently, the findings may not be generalizable to all social work paraprofessionals. Lastly, as Creswell asserted, in qualitative studies, "the findings could be subject to other interpretations" (Creswell, 2003, p. 149).

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study and its potential results can influence several areas of research and practice. These areas include the impact of empowerment practice on paraprofessionals, the perception of empowerment as interpreted by men and women, and the utilization of empowerment strategies in social work education. Findings of the study that support previous research can lead to additional evaluations of the impact of empowerment activities with various populations. This would be useful as social workers apply empowerment strategies to various settings and client groups. Consequently, the study may lend itself to the review of adult education as a vehicle for examining empowerment. Second, the study supports the utilization of paraprofessional workers in an industry where degreed professionals are not graduating at a sufficient enough rate to meet the demands of the job market. O'Neal (2002) wrote that paraprofessionals and social workers have always worked side by side in community building and empowerment initiatives and in many other fields, especially since the War on Poverty and the rise of associate degree programs in social services beginning in the 1960's and 1970's. What is new, stated Briar-Lawson (2002), is the recognition that "there will never be enough professionals to meet the care crisis of the 21st century" (p. 76). So, we must be more strategic in the use of professional and paraprofessional social workers, who may play a much great consultative and collaborative role together. Third, the study explored and revealed how workers in a grassroots community-based organization developed professional identity by gaining personal knowledge and being allowed reflective opportunities. Managers and directors may become more aware of the group process and

how it may lead to team building. Furthermore, educational activities that are long-term may have desirable impacts that were unintended on the cohort. Last, the study revealed the relationship between practice and continuing professional development.

Empowerment as an underlying assumption of social work practice and as an intended outcome of social work interventions will be described through the eyes of the participants (Gould & Shaw, 2001). The strength of this work will lie in a demonstration of providing insight about the path that a unique group of grassroots human service providers traveled as they positioned themselves to become competent, capable, and empowered workers in their communities.

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the research study. The statement of the problem, research questions, the purpose of the study, and conceptual framework were presented. Key concepts and terms were defined.

Chapter II contains a discussion of the literature related to this research study. It covers the following topics: empowerment practice, strengths perspective, critical education model, community based empowerment, and community based social work practice.

Chapter III details the methodology of the study. Included in this chapter is an explanation of the settings and participants, methods of data collection, and data analysis. Issues of trustworthiness or credibility of the study are also discussed.

Chapter IV provides results from an analysis of the data. Chapter IV also connects the results to the research questions as well as provides implications for educational practices and recommendations for future research.

Chapter V provides a review of the results of the study and relates the findings to the research literature. Implications for social work educational practice and further research are discussed.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature related to this study. The first section defines empowerment and explores its value and processes in the practice of social work. The second section discusses the historical roots of empowerment practice. The third section highlights the conceptual framework for this study. Next is Freire's empowerment education model and social meliorism followed by grassroots community initiatives. Finally, in the fifth section, empowerment and its impact on education are discussed.

Defining Empowerment: Its Value and Process

Scholars and practitioners of social work have defined the empowerment process in a number of ways. The term "empowerment" was coined in the U. S. As written by Barbara Levy Simon, the history of empowerment starts as early as 1890 in the U. S., although the term itself only was coined in 1976 by Barbara Solomon in her book *Black Empowerment*. As noted by Levy Simon, the concept of empowerment developed out of a range of political approaches. Among them are the Black liberation movement, the feminist movement, Paulo Freire's literacy campaigns, anarchism, marxism, Jefferson's democracy, and many more. Empowerment can point to regaining one's own power, or to giving power to someone else. According to Solomon (1976), empowerment-oriented

social workers intervene at the socio-cultural level, addressing the adverse effects of societal institutions that impair or hinder social functioning or even create barriers to legal and civil rights for minorities.

Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those into desired actions and outcomes (Rose, 2000). Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets, while improving the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional contexts which govern the use of these assets. Also considered a philosophy, approach or method of practice, empowerment provides a way to rethink social work practice and to achieve needed social change, personally and politically, in ways that meet human needs (Early & GlenMaye, 2000). Additionally, Derezotes (2000) believed the process of empowerment to be one that increased the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. Therefore, empowerment is the process of obtaining basic opportunities for marginalized people, either directly by those people, or through the help of non-marginalized others who share their own access to these opportunities. Within these opportunities are demonstrated acts of encouragement and skill development, highlighting a focus on eliminating future need for charity for the individuals of the group.

While this process can be difficult to begin and sustain effectively, there are examples of empowerment projects that have succeeded. Poe-Yamagata and Jones (2000) documented a delinquency prevention effort in the Hudson School District. Parents and paraprofessionals implemented the EMPOWER Program with elementary-

school-age children. Five participating elementary schools set aside an hour each week to implement the EMPOWER curriculum to all grade levels. The curriculum featured monthly themes such as "Let's Be Friends," "Let's Work Together," "Let's Make A Difference," and "Let's Learn about Our World." To determine delinquency prevention and program success, the researchers examined a number of factors such as school attendance, self-reported interest in school, and student's grades. After implementing the EMPOWER program, the schools noted reduced truancy, higher involvement of parents in school programming, and an increase in students' participation in extracurricular activities. Through school-based empowerment-oriented prevention programs, children developed positive feelings about themselves, had opportunities to play and work cooperatively, and resolved disputes with other children in productive ways.

Another example of an empowerment project is Healthy People 2010. A federal, state, and local community partnership that focuses on health promotion and disease prevention, Healthy People is a national initiative with 468 objectives to address health care concerns. In cooperation with the Centers for Disease Control, the National Health Services established an interactive data base to track progress on the objectives nationwide. Local communities, guided by national standards and their own state's goals, participate in setting objectives specific to their communities. In most instances, community public health agencies or county boards of health sponsored the local planning initiatives. Communities engaged a representative constituency to profile the community, considering geographical, cultural, and social factors; conducted health needs assessments; prioritized health objectives; and implemented and evaluated health

action plans. Communities engaged in change to benefit their members. The results of efforts to enhance the health and well-being of community members were empowering for the community as a whole. As an outcome of these two projects, empowerment was achieved.

Finally, there is a psychological definition of empowerment. It is one that refers to a state of mind, such as feeling worthy and competent or perceiving power and control (Lum, 2003). Related to the social construct of power and control, empowerment refers to a reallocation of power that results from modifying social structures (Swift & Levin, 2002). In other words, empowerment involves subjective elements of perception as well as more objective elements of resources of power within social structures. The implication is that empowerment encompasses exercising psychological control over personal affairs, as well as exerting influence over the course of events in the sociopolitical arena. While empowerment implies that people increase their control or power over the course of their lives, empowerment does not necessarily result in a power struggle or relinquishment of power by one group to another (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

The values of the social work profession support an empowerment base for practice. Social work adopts a view that suggests that humans are "striving, active organisms who are capable of organizing their lives and developing their potentialities as long as they have appropriate environmental supports" (Maluccio, 2000, p. 143). It should be noted that this view emphasizes a human capacity for adaptation and opportunities for growth throughout the life cycle. As such, this view links with the

purpose of social work as a way of releasing human and social power to promote personal, interpersonal, and structural competence. People achieve empowerment through experiences that are empowering. However, social workers will not find a how-to manual to use to empower clients, nor will they find a recipe with exact measurements of ingredients that combine to achieve empowerment for its achievement is multifaceted and multidimensional. Additionally, each circumstance, set of actors, or combination of influencing factors is unique; the process that leads to empowerment is highly individualized and nonreplicable (Saleeby, 2002). Clients and social workers generate solutions that they uniquely tailor to the dynamics of each situation. Nonetheless, there are, however, common elements that characterize these processes.

An orientation toward strengths and competence contrasts with the inclination to focus on deficits and maladaptive functioning is one element (Breton, 2004). The professional literature abounds with information on functional problems, maladaptation, victimization, and powerlessness. All too often professionals identify deficits and incompetence, yet seem unable to notice clients' strengths (Harding, 2000). The helping process does neither facilitate change when problems are described in term of deficits, when experts render the sole definition of problems, nor when social workers direct plans of action as a way to overcome clients' deficiencies (Lum, 2005). The multi-dimensional natures of their personal and environmental resources are factors to be considered when focusing and evaluating the strengths of individuals and families (Miley et al., 2001).

Additionally, empowerment-oriented social workers work collaboratively with their clients. They focus on clients' strengths and adaptive skills as well as the potential

of the client (Sturmey, 2004). As such, empowerment presumes that people themselves should be integrally involved in change processes from defining their situations to determining goals, selecting their courses of action, and evaluating the results. There have been times the literature has cited embedded patriarchal organizational cultures of social services delivery that has thwarted collaborative work with clients (Aguirre & Baker, 2000; Kagle & Cowger, 1984). To counter this influence, social workers address power imbalances that favor professional expertise and client dependency, denounce jargon and labels that exploit clients and escalate social control, and incorporate taxonomies of inclusiveness and collaboration (Lee, 2000).

Generally, empowerment research focuses on identifying capabilities instead of cataloguing risk factors and exploring environmental influences of social problems that blame the victims (Delgado, 2000). Thus, empowerment-oriented interventions enhance wellness while they also aim to ameliorate problems, provide opportunities for participants to develop knowledge and skills, and engage professionals as collaborators instead of authoritative experts.

The operationalization of these interventions can be understood through various strategies. One empowerment strategy is to assist people to create and work through organizations (Snyder, 2000). This rationale symbolizes that only the marginalized people, themselves, can know what their own people need most, and that control of the organization by outsiders can actually help to further entrench marginalization. In contrast, charitable organizations, for example, lead from outside of and can disempower the community by entrenching a dependence on charity.

In addition, capacity-building is a way that Leung (2005) defined empowerment. He believed that it is the totality of having decision-making power of your own, access to information and resources for making proper decisions, having a range of options from which you can make choices, the ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making, having positive thinking on the ability to make change, the ability to learn skills for improving one's personal or group power, and the ability to change others' perceptions by democratic means. A connection between capacity building and the achievement of organizational efficiency and effectiveness are essential for empowerment. Additionally, these attributes can be linked to organizational goals.

Empowerment is one approach to social work practice that brings together the core social work values of service and justice (Bennett, 2008). The literature suggests that this approach offers a multitude of benefits to participants. These benefits include increased levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and improved personal skills. Additionally, empowerment can have a transformative purpose focused on the systemic barriers affecting group participants. It can illuminate areas that require attention and exploration that allows individuals to be participants while feeling a sense of ownership to the process.

Though the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2000) speaks to the dual focus of social workers to address the service needs of clients and to advocate for systems change, social workers often identify themselves as falling into one or two camps: clinical or advocacy. Some clinicians fear that integrating social action into their clinical practice would dilute their clinical focus (Bennett, 2008). Clinicians have also

expressed being too overwhelmed with providing direct services to engage in efforts for systemic change (Bogo, 2005). Ironically, macro-practitioners often feel powerless engaging in a relationship with clients in a therapeutic manner. Despite these views, direct service and systems change can be mutually supportive. Hence, empowerment becomes a process of transforming powerlessness into increased personal control over individuals' lives. In doing so, the emphasis is on reducing professional domination and increasing individual choice and self-determination for clients.

Rather than a reliance on programs and services directed at groups of marginalized people, empowerment attempts to transform powerlessness by individualizing support for people based on their unique needs and strengths. Therefore, empowerment is considered an individual process-orientation in that one secures increased control over his/her life, and positive changes in the capacities or abilities of the individual occur in conjunction with supportive change within the community (Dewees, 2005). To acknowledge the strengths in people and their needs implies that we give recognition to the way individuals experience and construct their social realities (Miley et al., 2001).

Empowerment begins with the individual's self-defined needs and aspirations and then looks at the capacity development, resources and supports that are required to achieve those goals (Christy-McMullin, 2003). The empowerment process moves us beyond our previous ways of thinking about and supporting people, in two main ways. First, empowerment recognizes the interconnectedness among the various aspects of a person's life and well-being. Within traditional service delivery, the individual or group

problems to be worked are dealt with through five systematic steps specific to social

work. Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2006) list the sequential steps as assessing, planning,

intervening, evaluating, and terminating. Assessing a client's needs and strengths is the

first step in determining a course of support to those desiring help. Once there are

mutually agreed upon goals, the planning process for possible interventions can begin.

Upon execution of interventions, evaluations of goal attainment are made. Once and

evaluation has occurred, clients are then prepared for service or program termination.

Empowerment takes a holistic approach and recognizes that the biological, psychological,

social, and economic aspects of the individual are interconnected and affect the overall

health and well-being of the individual. Second, empowerment embeds individual change

and capacity development within recognition of a need for broader change within groups

and communities (Christy-McMullin, 2003). Competent systems are able to care for their

members, interact efficiently with other systems, and contribute to the resources of their

social and physical environments (Miley et al., 2001).

Historical Roots

The roots of empowerment in social work are found in the settlement house

movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kirst-Ashman & Hull,

2006). In the United States, settlement house workers were keenly aware of community

conditions that adversely affected their neighborhoods. Inadequate public health and

sanitation, lack of concern for occupational safety, deploring housing conditions, and the

clash of cultures among immigrants were of concern during this period of

industrialization and urbanization. Settlement house workers employed empowerment

strategies as they worked in partnership with their neighbors to address these social conditions.

In understanding this research, it is accepted that social work is one of several occupations in the social welfare arena; historically, however, social work has been identified as the primary profession that carries out the social welfare mandate. Differentiating social work from other occupations is complicated by the tendency for people to use the name of the profession for anyone working in the broad area of social welfare with social work (Collins, 2005). Thus, with respect to human services, the general public tends to identify individuals with a variety of educational backgrounds, training, and levels of competence as social workers. These human service employees may also identify themselves as "doing social work." In fact, social work requires a particular education to acquire the knowledge, skills, and value base fundamental to professional social work practice. Preparation for professional practice requires understanding human and societal needs, developing skills to facilitate change, and assimilating a social work value orientation. Clients touched by personal and societal problems engage with social workers to enhance the clients' societal functioning through a partnership of planned of change (Collins, 2000).

Lee (2001) described the empowerment approach to social work practice as both a "clinical and community-oriented approach" (p. 30) that unleashes human potential to build a more just society. Furthermore, she stated that social workers using an empowerment approach are facilitators, rather than change agents, in the self-healing and self-empowerment processes of marginalized populations. Various models have been

suggested to ensure that the full measure of empowerment is achieved on all levels. The

elements common to all models include: individual empowerment through personal

development, collective empowerment through validation of individual experiences,

consciousness-raising, and social action. In addition, most scholars agree that the

empowerment process does not occur in linear fashion, but as a dialect where each level

of empowerment supports and develops the other from multiple directions (Rose, 2000).

Freire's Empowerment Education Model

Freire (1970) saw liberation as occurring when the oppressed could see the

potential for change and transform their environment. He emphasized the oppressed

group's active participation in their education and the need for them to take full control of

their lives. Freire's view of students as fully empowered participants in the education

process shifted the locus of control from traditional educational models. For instance,

Freire (1970) wrote that community-based adult education provided a working model for

resolving the problem of illiteracy in the United States, not because it incorporated more

effective methods of instruction, not even because its connections with "grass roots"

organizations enhances recruitment efforts and grounds learning in the day-to-day

experience of the people. He recognized that embedded within many community-based

programs was a depoliticized vision, a by-product of cooperative arrangements with

other, mainstream institutions. Freire believed that literacy work was generally

recognized as most effective when undertaken by or in the context of community-

based organizations—and least effective when directly managed by large, bureaucratic

systems of schooling (Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox, 1975). Further, it was accepted

that literacy and other basic skills could be acquired with astonishing speed when the development of those skills is linked with other activities, the intended outcome of which is change in conditions of oppression (Freire, 1970). More recently, Freire (1993) offered the world a democratic and liberatory vision of education. Principles of social justice (liberation, equal access, and empowerment) were necessary to help individuals and communities address the larger socioeconomic causes of oppression.

Lee (2001) highlighted Freire's Critical Education Model as an empowerment practice that embraces the notion of shared power through methods that help clients develop a critical consciousness that leads to action. Several factors contribute to grassroots social service agencies being an ideal context for forming empowerment-oriented social action groups (Lennon, 2005). First of all, social workers commonly practice in non-profit social service agencies addressing the needs of disadvantaged populations, and have a professional mandate to combine interventions targeted to both individuals and systems. Second, the existence of many social service agencies arguably arises out of conditions generated by historical and institutional oppression that need to be redressed through social action. Therefore, there is a need for collective action. Third, social service agencies have access to experts on the effects of structural oppression, i.e., clients seeking services who have first-hand experience on the impact of structural barriers to opportunity. Each day, social workers practicing in social service agencies encounter the expert power of people seeking services that could be bundled and channeled to affect change through empowerment-oriented social action groups. In addition, to being experts on the problems, agency clients are also experts on the

remedies required to correct the structural deficits. Fourth, social service agencies have organizational resources (staff time, technology, office space, access to knowledge on organizing practice, and so on) to help raise consciousness and/or frame issue among agency clients, to provide education on action strategies and tactics, and to facilitate organizing and mobilizing for collective action.

While it may be hard at times to invoke, it is essential to remind all grassroots workers that the person, family, or community in front of them possesses assets, resources, wisdom, and knowledge. Individuals, groups and communities are more likely to continue develop and grow when they are funded by the currency of capacities, knowledge, and skills that natural leaders in an area bring (Delgado, 2000). Moreover, empowerment perspectives provide distinctive lens for examining the world of practice.

Grassroots Community Initiatives

Promoting empowerment means believing that people are capable of making their own choices and decisions. It means not only that human beings possess the strengths and potential to resolve their own difficult life situations, but they increase their strength and contribute to the well-being of communities and societies by doing so. There are several empowerment grassroots initiatives that have taken been and been cited in the literature. In one instance, Katherine Kelly and Tullio Caputo (2006) implemented empowerment strategies while utilizing a case study methodology in a grassroots community development initiative in St. John, New Brunswick. It was part of a larger study designated to investigate the sustainability of community-based crime prevention activities. The case study highlighted a unique strategy for addressing local community

needs. The lessons learned in St. John address many of the common challenges related to sustainability. Some attention is also directed at the role of government and non-governmental agencies in community-based initiatives since this represents an ongoing concern for those involved in the role of empowerment activities and community development.   While initially self-help groups tend to be informal, more formal organizational structures may eventually develop. Some may be like a club or association. Others form coalitions, federations, or even national organizational structures. And some, disdainful of professionalism and bureaucracy, avoid hierarchical structures of any kind. The basis for self-help groups include "principles of empowerment, inclusion, nonhierarchical decision-making, shared responsibility, and a holistic approach to people's cultural, economic, and social needs" (Krysik & Finn, 2007, p. 78).

Additionally, Wahl (2001) shared observations from parents and youth development staff about students who organized a campaign targeted at officials in New York to restore cuts to youth programs in the FY 2000 budget. Wahl wrote that parents and staff reported a demonstrated growth in "confidence and command among the youth" (p. 4) and a competence in skills, such as outreach, conferring and coordinating around an issue, and articulating to a range of audiences the need to invest in youth by employing empowerment strategies.

Another example of the utility of community-based empowerment research was demonstrated by Catherine Campbell and Zodwa Mzaidume (2001). The two of them collaborated on a project between the London School of Economics and an HIV project

near Johannesburg, South Africa. This micro-qualitative case study of a community-based peer education program led by six workers at a South African mine examined the role of grassroots participation in sexual health promotion. The study involved in-depth interviews with 30 members of the target community. The interviews were analyzed in terms of social capital, empowerment, and identity. The study yielded a detailed analysis of the way in which community dynamics have shaped the peer education program's development in a deprived, violent community where existing norms and networks did not support healthy behaviors. The fabric of local community life was shaped by non-local structural conditions of poverty and sexual inequality in ways that challenge those seeking to theorize the role of social capital in community development in general and in sexual health promotion in particular. The study's authors revealed that much remains to be learned about the complexities of translating the theoretically and politically vital notion of "community participation" (p. 3) into practice among hard-to-reach grassroots workers. This research was important because it spotlighted the perception of the close cultural and socio-economic proximity that was needed to ascertain sensitive information from the population. It further illuminated the need to continue to document the impact of grassroots workers and their roles in affecting change in the research literature.

While reviewing the literature, it became obvious that there are barriers to implementing an empowerment approach to strengthening grassroots workers' perceptions of themselves and their work in the community. On one hand, researchers working at the intellectual level lack an understanding of the grassroots perspective, and on the other hand, grassroots activists often lack understanding macro-contexts (Delgado,

2000). They also lack the capabilities and skills to articulate their experiences, analyses, and insights from practice to theory. These barriers result in the near-complete lack of communication between the two groups of people. The major impact of this lack of communication is the exclusion of the grassroots perspective in the policy-making and decision-making process. While part of this exclusion may be deliberate and could be attributed to wanton political considerations of the powerful, this may not always be the case. Hence, based on these presumptions, through the aforementioned study, for example, the group of workers in South Africa tried to open up a channel for dialogue and analysis with the grassroots activists.

Another example of an empowerment initiative with grassroots human service providers is Project WISE. This was a program for women with low incomes in Denver, Colorado which incorporated elements of personal, interpersonal, and political empowerment intended to lead to personal and social change (East, 1996). The mission of the program was to help women sustain empowerment as they transitioned from welfare to economic self-sufficiency. The program provided affordable individual counseling, group experiences, and community advocacy opportunities to help women to realize both their personal and family goals and to participate fully in their communities. The program addressed issues faced by women that went beyond job training and placement to include the effects of disempowerment and oppression that often malign women who are welfare recipients-issues such as low self-esteem, histories of physical or sexual abuse, domestic violence, and depression or other mental health difficulties. Personal counseling was augmented with support, educational groups, and opportunities

for community involvement and leadership development. Over time, these women self-reported increased feelings of personal, political, and interpersonal power as a result of empowerment activities.

Empowerment approaches are frequently utilized in grass roots community based projects. The model of empowerment (Miley et al., 2001) is specifically suited to accommodate segments of the population who do not feel that they have a "voice" in the larger social and political arena. This model emphasizes such actions as partnerships, resources, strengths, and creating alliances. With this recognition, empowerment practice emphasizes the importance of the process of personal and community transformation (Miley et al., 2001). Formulating these activities in communities supports personal, social, and communal change.

There are unique needs that appear to only be met by the utilization of empowerment strategies. Despite the practical, psychological, and cultural barriers to accessing services in many communities, some groups of racial minority and economically challenged clients can only be successfully engaged socially, educationally, and therapeutically if their idiosyncratic needs and issues are addressed by providers or leaders (McKay & Bannon, 2004). McKay and Bannon (2004) implemented empowerment strategies to address barriers to mental health care in mostly African American youths and their families. Engagement was shown to increase attendance at first time mental health appointments. Other studies (National Institute of Mental Health, 2006; Strohman, 2003) demonstrated improved retention for Latina women in primary care and community clinics by reducing practical barriers and by adapting cognitive-

behavior therapy to fit their clients' culture, including adding a case management component.

Judith Freidenberg (2003) illustrated some of the complexities involved in planned community change by grass-roots workers employing empowerment practices. The notion of utilizing empowerment strategies as a tool for change and advocacy is widely recognized. The special education department at the University of Alabama at Birmingham accepted a federal contract to complete a qualitative case study that focused on a conflict which arose between two child advocacy groups in North Carolina. One group consisted of nurses, social workers, and public school teacher and administrators; the other group consisted of ministers and church day care providers. At stake was the legislative initiative, *Smart Start*. It was proposed that *Smart Start* would fund twenty model day care centers in the state, reduce staff-to-child ratios in day care centers, and increase child immunizations. The study measured the degree to which families and providers stated that they felt empowered by the tactics of educational opportunities and child advocacy. Family members reported feeling empowered by receiving access and information to their children's daily academic experiences and by having access to the providers to give input about their children's developmental needs. This study contributed to the literature because it demonstrates the impact of creating empowerment opportunities by allowing parents to feel included and vital in their child's academic success.

Empowerment and its Impact on Education

The use of empowerment tools to shed light on the impact education has on grass roots community human service workers can be likened to the impact that our public educational system has on the youth in this country (Gutierrez, 2001). Education is traditionally viewed as a leveler of opportunity. In a free and public education system, children of all backgrounds can theoretically achieve any adult status by seizing opportunities available to all and excelling based on their merit and effort. In an unequal society with a highly residual social welfare system, however, the actual possibility of mobility through education is central to social justice efforts, creating a critical pathway to opportunity for children born into disadvantaged families and whose families are subject to marginalization because of racial discrimination.

With historic concerns about the quality and equality of public education in the United States, much has been written to signal trouble with the Unites States public school system (Freire, 1993). Although dated, some of the historical writings and research in this area of educational inequalities cannot be overlooked. Dramatic differences in school quality are well depicted from Kozol's (1991) description of the deplorable conditions in East St. Louis to the "Corridor of Shame" described by Ferillo (2005) in a film documenting the inability of impoverished schools in rural South Carolina to provide even a "minimally adequate" education. But in additional to the types of obvious differences noted by Kozol and Ferillo, educational quality reflects a range of more subtle processes, experiences, and opportunities at the intersection of school and academic environment. Within academic settings, educational quality depends on several

factors, including opportunities for empowerment activities (McPhail, 2004). Classrooms are natural settings for these actions. Teachers are important as primary facilitators of the social and learning environment, and as resources, mentors, and supports for the development of those taught. Some teacher attributes appear particularly important to predicting academic outcomes. With more experienced teachers, those with stronger academic and cognitive skills, and teachers with subject-specific preparation and expertise are all associated with positive effects on student learning (Mayer, Mullins, Moore, & Ralph, 2000).

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to review the literature relevant to the research questions proposed in Chapter I. First, empowerment was defined as it is understood, practiced, and accepted by practitioners and scholars. The profession of social work and its support of an empowerment base were explored. Several studies that highlighted the empowerment process were described to demonstrate how empowerment projects have been successfully implemented. The next section explored the historical roots of an empowerment based model in social work history that noted social worker's use of empowerment. The third section utilized Freire's Empowerment Education Model to link his Critical Education Theory to the significance and similarity of empowerment activities regardless of where these activities take place. The next section discussed grassroots community initiatives and how empowerment approaches impacted community based projects and informal helping groups. The last section reviewed the use of empowerment to shed light on the impact education had on grassroots community

workers. Further, it examined at the utilization of educational opportunities as catalysts

for change and empowerment.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter provides the rationale for the qualitative research methodology selected for this case study. The next section contains a description of the context of the study and its participants, followed by a description of the data collection and data analysis procedures. The role of the researcher also is addressed. Finally, I provide an explanation for the establishment of trustworthiness.

Design of the Study

The specific methodology chosen for this study of empowerment practice through social work education was the instrumental case study (Stake, 1995). Specifically, Stake (1995) noted that in an instrumental case study we begin and end with the dominant issues. In gaining insight and perspective of these issues, the attention to the context of the case is extremely important. Two strategic ways that researchers utilizing instrumental case studies reach meanings about cases are through direct interpretation of the individual instance and through aggregation of instances until something can be said about the group.

Case studies are designed to bring out the details from the viewpoint of participants by using multiple sources of data (Gibbs, 2002). My bounded system consists of nine social work paraprofessionals employed at a grassroots community-based family

service agency. The instrumental case study is used to understand more than what is obvious to the observer. Creswell (2003) stated that case study methods support the goals of researchers who seek to explore a single entity or phenomenon (the case) bounded by time and activity (a program, event, process, institution, or social group) and collects detailed information by using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). Bogdan and Biklen (2006) note that case studies are an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed. Because the case study is a form of qualitative research, it is useful to begin the examination of it within a broad context.

My goal through the utilization of the instrumental case study was to gain deep understanding of how the paraprofessionals make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world. My intent of the study was to strive for a depth of understanding as an end in itself, not as an attempt to predict what may happen in the future or to generalize. Through field observations, including examinations of archival data, and interviews of the participants, I was able to observe them in their natural work environments. This included interactions with consumers and their peers. I was able to observe practice in action. The participants' reactions to each other during breaks, lunches, trainings and meetings were also observed.

Furthermore, I was able to become intimately involved in other people's lives and worldviews. I was eventually able to make connections between participants' life experiences and social theories not just purely academic reasons, nor solely because the processes involved and products of these processes are generative and creative, which

they are. As a result, I was able to make these connections because the voices and

experiences of the participants as they demonstrated a grasp and a response of the

complexities of human situations. The participants were observed in the natural setting of

their workplace while engaging in routine work activities. I made every attempt to

minimize the intrusive nature of my research. Stake (1995) wrote that in case study

research we use ordinary language and narratives to describe the case. We seek to portray

the case comprehensibly, using ample but non-technical descriptions. This research is

noted as being highly personal. Researchers may be encouraged to include their own

personal perspectives in the interpretation. Stake (1995) further stated that because a case

study is an exercise in such depth, the study is an opportunity to see what others have not

seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive

powers, and to advocate for those things that are important. My study is unique because

it illuminated a group of service providers whose contributions are virtually

unrepresented in the literature. This study added the significance of ensuring that helpers

such as paraprofessionals are systematically provided opportunities to become equipped

with the attributes they may be attempting to impart to those they serve. This attribute is a

sense of empowerment.

Context of the Study

Crossroads Family Services is a grassroots family support agency founded in

1995 that embodied the principles of strengths-based advocacy, empowerment, and

education. Typically, clients seen at Crossroads were involved in the social service

system. Many of them had been recipients of substance abuse and mental health services

through the local mental health authority. Children from these adults had frequently been the care of the local Department of Social Services [DSS]. The unsubstantiated and substantiated investigations of neglect and abuse often times led to a referral from these large governmental entities to smaller more personalized services at agencies similar to Crossroads. This organization differs from the Department of Social Services in that it is a community-based, private, non-profit organization without state or federal service mandates. It was founded to meet the gaps in service by providing services not funded through the local DSS.

The director of this agency contacted me after she attended a mental health case management conference where she was informed of the benefits of providing skill development for all frontline human service professionals tackling difficult social problems. There were discussions of the need for the staff to gain additional academic experiences to support their daily community based activities. At this point, I had been teaching at Slater State University for five years.

Slater State University is a Historically Black University. These institutions were established to provide college opportunities to African Americans who would not be readily accepted into predominately White institutions. Serving underserved populations by providing training and support as been a longstanding commitment of these institutions. This collaboration was classic example of outreach to a rural community with limited options for a program of this type. Slater State University is a liberal arts institution with a history of large numbers of students majoring in degree programs such as psychology, sociology, and social work. The University has a history of supplying the

region with competent human service professionals. Supporting adult learners charged with empowering families and children in the social welfare system was a bold academic stance because the courses would not lead to a certification or recognition by the Council on Social Work Education, the accrediting body for social work educational programs.

The Social Work Paraprofessional Program at Slater State University partnered with Crossroads Family Services in the spring of 2000. This union emerged after a meeting between the Director of Distance Education at Slater State University, the director of Crossroads, and me, it was determined that the best course of action would be to offer a twenty-one credit hour certificate in paraprofessional social work studies. Some of the courses offered were in the content areas of social work methods and services, child welfare, cultural competency, social welfare policy, clinical documentation practices, and professional social work practice. These courses were offered face-to-face and through distance education to any of the 21 adults employed or volunteering at Crossroads. Of the 21 eligible participants, nine of them had the time, interest to apply for the program, and were eligible to meet the admissions criteria at Slater State University. Each participant gave written consent to participate in the study. The consent form can be found in Appendix C.

Geographically located near a military base in the eastern part of the State, Crossroads Family Services is housed in a seven-room brick building that was converted from a residence of an elderly supporter 13 years earlier. An old storage house adjacent to the property is used as a "clothes shelter." There are eight small tenant units on the grounds. These transitional houses allow homeless women with children to receive free

lodging for up to 12 months as long as they are drug-free, seeking employment, and actively involved in counseling services as dictated by their treatment plan.

Participants

The participants for the study were a diverse group of adults who shared a common value base of advocacy, self-sufficiency, child protection, and family empowerment. Through self report, the ethnic composition of participants included four African-Americans, one Latino, and four Caucasians. By gender, there were seven women and two men. They ranged from 24 years old to 58 years old. The educational level extended from participants with high school diplomas to persons with baccalaureate degrees. Three of the participants were ex-military personnel or had a spouse or child in the military. Most of them began their work with families in crisis through some type of religious affiliation. At the time of the study, Crossroads aligned itself with many churches around their region to fund and deliver services. As a purposive sample (Creswell, 2003), of the 21 eligible participants, nine of them had the time, the interest to apply for the program, and were eligible to meet the admissions criteria at Slater State University. These nine volunteered to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were used for each participant.

Participant #1 was Edna. She was a 31-year-old African American woman with three children living in her home. Edna was working two jobs at the time of the study. Employed by Crossroads during the day for approximately four years, Edna held a second job at a local retail shop during the evenings and on weekends. Edna, a previous recipient of social services, had obtained a General Education Diploma (GED) at the

inception of the program. At Crossroads, she worked primarily with children and families through community outreach services.

Participant #2 was Darlene, a married, 40-year-old African American woman with two adult children. She received her high school diploma and worked towards an Associate's Degree at a neighboring community college. Having previously worked at the commissary, she had been at Transitional Housing Services at Crossroads for past three years.

Participant #3 was Sara, a 36-year-old Caucasian woman who resided with her two minor children and a boyfriend. Sara stated that she had an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education; however, having a degree was not a requirement for the program. At Crossroads, Sara worked primarily with adults who were substance abusing. She had been employed for three and one half years at Crossroads.

Participant #4 was Angela, a 48-year-old widow Caucasian widow. Her husband had been killed while he served in the U. S. Army. She had one adult son and two grandchildren. She worked with families seeking adoption and also with homeless parents who had minor children. Angela had been employed for two and one half years at Crossroads.

Participant #5 was Theresa. A single 43-year-old Caucasian woman, she mentioned she had taken a few community college courses after serving in the military for three years. At the time of the study, she was doing intake and referral activities. Her tenure at Crossroads was four years.

Participant #6 was Rebecca. She was a single, 24-year-old African American mother with one child. She had taken a few community college courses. Rebecca had been in the military but only served for a short period of time and left with an honorable discharge. She worked with abuse and neglect victims. She had been employed with Crossroads for two years.

Participant #7 was Frances. She was a married, 51-year-old African American with three adult children. Like Rebecca, Frances also had taken several community college courses. At Crossroads, she worked in Family Preservation: her tenure there was seven years.

Participant #8 was Carl. Carl was a 58-year-old, African American man who was married and had three children. He held a divinity degree and had earned additional community college course credits. As a volunteer, he worked in the prison ministry and was active in Community Outreach Services. Carl had been associated with Crossroads for five years.

Participant #9 was Robert. He was a married, 42-year-old Latino with four children. In their home, Robert and his wife were also supporting her ailing mother. Robert obtained his high school diploma and considered but had not pursued college level courses. Robert worked at Crossroads for five years in the following activities: Bi-Lingual Services, Intake, Referral and Case Management.

Data Collection

Data for the study were generated from several sources. Data collection for this study included: (a) one individual interview per participant: (b) 30 participant

observations among participants; (c) archival documents; and (d) researcher's field notes. The rationale for these data sources was to provide additional support for the findings of each. This is called triangulation of data. Protocols used for the study included an interview and observation protocol.

Interviews

One advantage of interviewing is the potential of creating a meaningful relationship with the participants in an attempt to get at both breadth and depth of information. Stake (1995) wrote that interviews are the main road to multiple views of the case. Also, the researcher is afforded opportunities to exercise an increased degree of latitude. Disadvantages relate to the researcher's presence during the interview. In conducting interviews, the researcher's presence has been noted in the literature as potentially creating bias or apprehension on the part of the participant (Creswell, 2007). An alternative for eliminating this is to ensure that the researcher remains a listener and not a contributor in this process.

A general interview guide approach was utilized to support the dual needs for consistency in questions provided to the participants and a need to potentially rephrase for the sake of clarity for them. Given the narrative nature of the research questions, the responses were written to be open to digressions. This enriched the study and allowed for exploration of intertextuality.

The interviews took place in a private office at the facility that provided a non-threatening environment. The interview protocol consisted of a set of questions and accompanying prompts. The interview protocol and prompts are presented in Appendix

A. Copious handwritten notes were taken of each interview. To overcome this concern, at the termination of each interview, each participant was read the responses as documented. They were asked to provide any corrections for erroneous statements that were detailed. This activity is called a member check. Finally, it is important to note that the interviews took place after the certification program ended. Grades had been recorded and certificates of completion were received by each participant before any personal interviews took place.

Observations

The researcher utilized the Observation Protocol in Appendix B. The list of activities that were observed included:

- Establishment of rapport by making eye contact and referring to consumers by name.

- Clarification of issues by re-stating the problem as defined by the consumer and explorations of the impact of the problem on the client system.

- Consumer engagement by asking the consumer for additional information, viewpoints or opinions.

- Asking consumers for their input towards resolution to their own issues.

- Demonstration of cultural competency by verbal recognition of differences and referral to appropriate community services.

- Activities that demonstrated professional knowledge such as:

  - Clinical notes

  - Documentation

- Treatment plans

- Notes

An observation dictates that a researcher views a situation where some behavior or actions of interest noticeable to the researcher will likely occur. Observations work the researcher toward greater understanding of the case (Stake, 1995). Qualitative or interpretive data have meanings directly recognized by the observer. Additionally, the researcher will observe the frequency of the particular behavior and record what has been observed. The recording methods for observations of the paraprofessional staff at Crossroads can be found in Appendix B. Activities consistent with empowerment principles can be observed from watching paraprofessionals engage in routine support for families and communities such as: staff meetings, family case planning meetings, in-service trainings, and opportunities to observe staff executing their duties in the center.

Archival Documents

Gathering data by studying documents follows the same line of thinking as observing or interviewing (Stake, 1995). Sample archival documents reviewed were referral forms, admission forms, case notes, and client social history documents. These documents provided evidence of the participant's ability to incorporate what they learned the classroom into the formulation of clinical forms and notations. Through the formulation of the agency's goals, language that spoke to personal, social, cultural, or political was reviewed. The goal and mission statements of the agency were reviewed. They were reviewed for the utilization of empowerment language.

Researcher's Field Notes

       Researcher's field notes are a record of the researcher's activities in the field and should be written up immediately after the observation. They are records that help the researcher to remember activities, events and the particular actions of staff in various settings within the agency. The researcher's field notes consisted of writings and jottings that occurred at Crossroads while staff engaged in their normal work activities, such as staff meetings, in-service trainings, and in actual daily incidences that may have occurred in a participant's workday (i.e. a crisis call). They should include such things as general observations about the progress of fieldwork, impressions of persons who have been interviewed, summaries of conversations, descriptions of settings, and drawings and diagrams of buildings and other artifacts (Neuman, 2000). A crosswalk that aligns the research questions with data sources can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Crosswalk Aligning Research Questions with Data Sources

Research Question	Data Source
How do the adult learners at Crossroads Family Services view the collective experience of being enrolled in Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program?	Interviews
How have the values, attitudes and beliefs of the adult learners been impacted by their participation in the Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program?	Interviews Observations Documents
How has the Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program provided social work knowledge and skills for adult learners?	Interviews Observations Documents
How have the dispositions of the adult learners been influenced by the collective experience of the empowerment process?	Interviews

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using content analysis (Babbie, 2003). Qualitative data analysis is the range of processes and procedures whereby we move from the qualitative data that have been collected into some form of explanation, understanding or interpretation of the people and situations we are investigating (Gibbs, 2002). Qualitative data analysis is usually based on an interpretative philosophy. The idea is to examine the meaningful and symbolic content of qualitative data (Lewin, 2005). Content analysis, as described in the literature by Miles and Huberman (1984), is a coding mechanism whereby coding and classification vary based upon the studies' conceptual framework. Krippendorff (2004) defined content analysis as the use of replicable and valid methods for making specific inferences from text to other states or properties of its source.

Sources for this data analysis were: participant interviews, observations of staff interactions, and a review of archival data, and the researcher's field notes. The process began with me coding in an attempt to define units. From the participant's interviews, observations, and researcher's field notes, I began reviewing the data to describe what I observed in units. In an effort to avoid researcher bias and to assure inter-rater reliability, a colleague coded initial data independently. We came together to discuss our coding. When instances of disagreement, she and I went back to the data, discussed our conclusion and came to a common consensus. Thirty-five units initially emerged from the data. Consequently, I was able to collapse some of the units because of repetition or overlap; therefore, the initial 35 units became 15. From these 15 units, four categories were generated that included skill development, values, spiritual emphasis, and change in

themselves. Through additional analysis the following themes emerged: (a) "I know better": Acquisition of skills; (b) "It's not always about me": A new clarification of values; (c) "God has not forgot": Fueling the journey by the spirit; and (d) "The real change was in me": Self-transformation in the making. The titles of themes begin with direct quotes spoken by participants.

Role of the Researcher

My personal and professional experiences with grassroots community paraprofessional workers relate directly to my experiences as a social worker and a social work educator respectively for over 20 years. I began my career as a counselor in a residential treatment with adolescents suffering from severe and persistent mental illnesses. I provided individual and group psycho-educational support. Within a couple of years, I transitioned to a local mental health authority to lead a case management initiative for children and adults with mental disabilities, substance abuse, and mild to moderate mental illnesses. After completing a graduate degree in social work, I accepted a position as director of an outpatient psychiatric day hospital for the next five years. With an opportunity to share these experiences in the classroom, I left community mental health to teach social work education at Slater State University. These experiences provided me with a frame of reference and familiarity that to understand the services provided by Crossroads.

Additionally, as a researcher, I served as teacher, evaluator, and advocate. In the role of teacher, I facilitated the instruction of the 21 hours each student received in the paraprofessional social work program offered by Slater State University. Many of the

participants voiced concern about a lack of confidence and concrete knowledge of the

profession of social work. The course selection of the social work paraprofessional

program was intended to address this deficiency as recognized and labeled by the

participants. Too, I played the role of evaluator as I gauged student performance and

academic growth over the period of instruction and recorded their grades for each course.

However, though my observations, reviews of archival documents, and recording of

researcher's field notes took place during the participants' coursework; the interviews

took place after all certification requirements had been completed. As an advocate, I

frequently supported initiatives to give the staff more community visibility and a more

viable presence in professional organizations in the community such as school and church

presentations. I also served in the role of interpreter by giving meaning to the experiences

and day-to-day agency interactions that the participants shared both in class and during

social times, such as lunch or intermittent breaks throughout the day. As the author of

these adults' stories, I served in the role of biographer (Stake, 1995). In the role of the

researcher, I was able to relate to the participants because we shared a similar cultural

framework of meaning. One area of similarity was my ability to relate to the southern

rural location of Crossroads. Having spent the majority of my life serving clients and

living in a similar environment, I could appreciate the challenges of attempting to serve

families with limited resources and limited referral options. The references to religious

beliefs were also familiar to me. The southern rural nature of many people's existence is

linked to the one viable social outlet that can be found in places of worship. The church

provided a common ground for faith and a validation of their beliefs in a higher power.

These themes of religious reliance were pervasive throughout the discourse of the participants. Most of them had some reliance upon God as they each knew of him. This provided a sense of meaning in their lives and a cultural framework for interpreting their experiences.   These cultural contexts of meaning served as multiple sources of strength for the participants.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Stake (1995) wrote that case study research is not sampling research. It is specific to a bounded system. My obligation was to understand the particular case (group of participants) at Crossroads Family Services. The goal for studying the participants at Crossroads Family Services was to obtain a deep, holistic understanding of their experiences and interpretations of social work paraprofessional students (thick description). My goal was not to generalize. The participants (the case) are unique, while sharing a cultural framework of meaning that consisted of sharing various opportunities for conversation throughout the classroom encounter. Maxwell (1996) wrote that in qualitative research, sampling is neither about probability nor convenience. It usually involves purposeful sampling in which particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected to provide important information that could not have been rendered from other choices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I attempted to gain insight from all of the participants. Miles and Hubberman (1984) wrote that selecting those times, settings, and individuals that can provide one with needed information to answer research questions, the most important consideration in qualitative sampling decisions.

Malterud (2001) defined an audit trail as a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings. These are records are kept regarding what was done in an investigation. The raw data in this study was recorded in hand written format at the time of the participant interviews. Observations were documented in the same format.

According to Mann (2006) member checks whereby, data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. If the researcher is to be able to purport that the reconstruction of statements are accurate, it is imperative that the participants be given an opportunity to respond to their statements. Each participant in this study was given an opportunity to read their responses, to further clarify their statements, or to alter the content/wording of a response provided.

Finally, related to the analysis of data, I consciously attempted to avoid researcher bias by having another colleague code data independently of me. Our discussions, even in disagreement, allowed me to monitor my own subjectivity as much as possible. By doing so, it was another attempt to establish trustworthiness.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to amplify voices of participants'

understanding of the empowerment process as they experienced it in the Social Work

Paraprofessional Education Program situated in a grassroots community-based family

services agency. The study was created to explore the impact of the participants'

educational experiences, the impact the program had on the way services were provided

by the participants, changes in the participant's values from the inception of the program

until its termination, and their experiences with peers while enrolled in the Social Work

Paraprofessional Program. Using an instrumental case study design, data were gathered

through (a) individual participant interviews; (b) participant observations among

participants; (c) archival documents; and (d) researcher's field notes.

I viewed the participants in their day-to-day operations and interactions. They

were observed executing routine job responsibilities in their unaltered settings with peers,

families, children, other professionals, other paraprofessionals, community stakeholders,

and pertinent collaterals. Four categories related to empowerment emerged from the

analysis of data: skills acquisition, values clarification spiritual focus, and self-

transformation. From these categories, the following themes were generated: (a) "I know

better": Acquisition of skills; (b) "It's not always about me": A new clarification of

values (c) "God has not forgot: Fueling the journey by the spirit; and (d) "The real change

was in me": Self-transformation in the making.

"I Know Better Now": Acquisition of Skills

Skills acquisition was the primary purpose of the Social Work Paraprofessional

Program. Many times, skills building activities have been incorporated into the

programming process and goal attainment activities of consumers, families and

organizations. As a natural extension, providers have to value skills acquisition in the

form of educational activities or adaptive learning activities. Teaching people skills in the

confines of a laboratory is similar to teaching history as simply a series of dates and

events without the proper context. Therefore, having a natural environment in which the

transfer of skills and task mastery could occur was optimal for the participants. This

created not only fertile ground for learning and refining skills, but also each participant

was able to observe his/her peer operationalize the skills in their work setting.

Opportunities to work, study, and learn together, as well as a chance to contribute, are

rewards that may not have been straightforward and initially evident to anyone involved.

It further created meaning for the experience and provided an opportunity for connection

in a new fashion among all nine of the participants.

Edna expressed her skills acquisition by stating:

The program first of all taught me what social workers really do. It helped me see
the services in a different way. I now see the workers in a different way also. I
learned that I could learn. I got my GED 2 years ago. Just like my grandson, I
graduated too.

This experience made the educational aspect real for her. It connected her to a set of

experiences that were tangible and meaningful.

Darlene spoke of learning about hard work and how to work with families.

Darlene in many ways was another participant who was unsure of her ability to be

successful in an academic setting. She said, "I was never a good student. I know better

now" (Field Notes). Darlene liked to tell a story of a cloudy Friday morning in

September. She recalled:

> The one thing I remember the most was the day the girl said she was going to kill
> herself in our bathroom. She was still in the bathroom when you got her that
> morning. The teacher told them not to call the police because they would surely
> take her little boy back to DSS. We all just looked at the teacher. She talked to
> her, got her out of the bathroom and then called to set up some help for her
> without them having to take her baby. It made me cry. She stayed clean because
> the teacher scared her so bad. We talked about that for months. She kept on
> coming back for services too . . . Now that was skill. You were able to use the
> same strategies that were in the book. We tried to learn from you. We wanted that.

Darlene verbalized her acquisition of skills, such as crisis management and verbal de-

escalation, when she went on to say, "We understand our jobs now. I want to work now

and I know more about services I send people to."

At a macro-level, Edna and Darlene had been involved in a peer review process.

They had received some training from the Quality Assurance and Compliance

Department of a local DSS. They both commented that portions of the training were

confusing and seemed dissimilar to the day-to-day functions at Crossroads (Field Notes).

A joint observation was that classroom explanations and teachings clarified the

accountability issues associated with peer review of clinical documentation. They further

noted that teaching of consistent documentation practices in and of themselves improved

their skills (Field Notes).

Rebecca was an adult learner who had not previously seen herself attending

college. She spoke of not knowing what she wanted to become once she had grown up.

Rebecca remarked,

> The best thing was the day I told you I didn't understand what we read in Child
> Welfare/Child Abuse. You told me it was your fault . . . that it must have been
> something you did not do. That as the teacher, it was your responsibility to make
> sure I understood. Nobody ever took responsibility for me before. I remember
> that. I now know the importance and interviewing skills the importance of
> documenting accurately what is said in the interview process.

The tasks that Rebecca credits to her direct participation in the program were

described this way:

> It has helped me understand alcohol, drugs, violence, child abuse, mental illness
> and how to link in the community to what services they need. I have more respect
> for families now. My interviewing skills are better. I know how to write my notes
> if I go to court, I can trust what they said and what I wrote. I was able to help
> them by knowing where to send them and what to tell them. I understand social
> work for the first time . . . that's what we were doing all the time.

The need to know more served to motivate participants in the program. For

example, Theresa sat at the conference room table one morning and said, "I needed to

understand what the practice of social work looked like. I needed to know about lots of

services and how they could be used to benefit our families in this community" (Field

Notes).

Theresa continued by saying,

The services make sense to me now. Before the classes and the program, I did not really understand how people were qualified or turned down for services. You helped me see what I was doing. You opened my eyes. I was able to help them better because I know better. I know that when there is a conflict, I try to get both sides and to get both people talking or to figure out what is going on. Then I would use the skills that were taught to us to get people working on the real issue and solving problems.

Theresa would constantly speak about her increased skill level (Field Notes). She noted on numerous occasions that she was able to complete tasks assigned in the agency with a greater sense of security. In essence, her perception of her level of competency had been increased.

As Carl spoke to various consumers and community stakeholders about his academic pursuits, he would often cite examples of the benefits in the form of skill set development from his involvement in the program. Specifically, he remarked:

I learned how to work effectively and I learned the answers to things I had not been taught before. I learned about the social problems these men had . . . how to talk and work with them. You taught me to know that some problems are larger than the individuals that have them. No matter who the people would have been, they would have suffered from those situations.

Carl had lengthy discussions about how this learning experience was different for him. It was different because he had been exposed to material, information, and theories that were outside his normal set of theological teachings to which he had grown accustomed to as a minister. He stated, "I was able to better help and serve them because of what I learned. Social work methods and the human behavior stuff really helped me" (Field Notes).

On the contrary, Frances was somewhat skeptical and apprehensive of the actual benefit of the program to her. She was also leery of the fact she needed to do so little to enroll and actually receive college credits. In the beginning, she would ask, "So what's the trick?' She was told by her peers, "There isn't one" (Field Notes). Frances recalled:

> I have learned how to view my experiences here through the social work lens. When you told me to try and enroll to get into your classes, I wondered why you asked me to join. I told you I have never taken or learned about social work. You told me I would be a good student and this was the reason I needed the program. At first, I didn't want to. Then I saw everybody getting excited and I didn't want to be left out. I learned the history of social work that I didn't know or understand. I only knew about mental health and DSS . . . taking children and giving out food stamps. You taught us the good about social work. You seemed so proud to tell us about it. I learned about drugs and alcohol and how it destroys the families work with.

While using the skills she was learning, Frances discussed difficulty in completing social histories. She expressed concern about sharing her information with professionals from other agencies who also served those same consumers. After she received several examples and accepted practice techniques, she was able to complete them with greater levels of proficiency.

Frances was also able to verbalize an increased comfort level in sharing this information. This sentiment was a theme expressed by others in a similar fashion. Sara noted," I learned about the history of social work, who they are and what they do. She went on to say, "I learned things I did not know, like where they work and how they are used by different agencies." In addition, Angela spoke often of the skills she acquired in the program. She reflected:

I had a great experience learning how to work within the confines of the social service system. I used to hate social workers because of the way they treated people in my family a long time ago. I learned so much about the child welfare part of the class. The stuff about when kids are taken away was new for me. The laws are very complicated. The workers need to know their stuff and they probably deserve more support from the community and the rest of us. A good thing was seeing all of us work together to finish. Only one person left but I was surprised that we all stuck in here.

Angela was also able to utilize her knowledge in a number of ways. In reviewing her documentation, she had become much more proficient in writing thorough case notes (Archival review). Angela was more descriptive in the family dynamics and began to include environment data. These were skills that had been taught in two of her classes. She even commented that she was able to capture more information about the family after having taken some of the courses that specifically dealt with these issues.

Through review of an assessment completed by Sara, it was observed that she had incorporated terminology from one of her courses (Archival review). This was significant because she admitted being unsure of her clinical documentation skills. She was also observed as being more precise when noting details of clients' academic performance in her case notes (Field Notes).

On the other hand, Robert had a slightly different view of his skill improvement. He was not accustomed to writing for external review. Most of his documentation remained inside the organization in client folders that were not shared outside Crossroads. Conversely, in the program, he had his notes and papers reviewed and evaluated by an outsider (Field Notes). Robert was able to provide some level of self-assessment. He remarked that all of the practice exercises in class had increased his

comfort level with producing documents that would become a part of the consumer's permanent agency record (Field Notes).

Having been the major focus of the Social Work Paraprofessional Program, the participants were able to confirm skills that they learned along with a transfer of knowledge in the practice of social work. They were able to label and describe the program's impact on learning in significant ways. The increased ability to translate theoretical teachings into their practice setting provided confidence and competency to them.

"It's Not Always About Me": A New Clarification of Values

Corey (2006) wrote that values refer to what is intrinsically good, useful, and desirable. The issue of values and how they inform practice can be an issue for many workers and the people they serve. Values clarification and how individuals and families are seen is frequently discussed. In service provision where there are not mandates and specified directives, individual values are the guiding principles. The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2000) provides guide and recommendation for professional social workers. In light of the fact that the participants did not have prior academic or professional social work exposure this resource was not an option for their prior review. All nine of the participants related their educational process through the paraprofessional program to a greater clarity of values in their own lives.

Carl remembered vividly his desire to sort and compartmentalize his religious values against his introduction to professional social work values. Carl struggled with grasping a more secular orientation to "helping" those in need. He remarked:

> I had Biblical teachings and Biblical values. My values were based on my upbringing and my teaching. At first, I didn't want to read the social work values and ethics stuff. Then it was related to me in a way I could understand and respect. I have decided what I wanted to adapt and take with me. It was presented it in a way that was respectful . . . our values were not attacked.

Carl's sentiments confirmed that as he learned of accepted values linked to the social work profession, he was not forced to accept social work perspectives; he was asked to be open to viewing humankind through a different set of lens.

Theresa would comment in class that "our clients are no different than we are" (Field Notes). She spoke of the hardships that many of them encountered and how they lacked resources and support systems. She went on to say that her experience with many social workers had not been positive. This lack of positive interaction had set the stage for her opinion and her cynicism about social work values. Theresa reiterated:

> You talked about values and ethics in our classes. It was funny coming from a social worker, until I realized you were not like them. You knew what you were doing. You loved your job, your work, and what you were doing. It shows. That was powerful. That moved me. Social work values are like my own values. I didn't know that until you taught this to us.

Some participants, however, were much more cavalier about their views of their own values and how they influenced their work. For example, Darlene stated:

> Everybody has values. I didn't think so much about mine. In a military town, you get to see lots of different values. Some you like and some you don't. I know I have learned more about values and what they mean to everyone. Now, I don't always think that people who need help don't have values or that they don't make good choices for themselves and their families.

Additionally, Edna remarked:

My values are better after hearing from other people. I didn't want to think in other ways . . . especially about other people that were different from you. I have become more open. I am more respectful of myself and of others, even when it is hard to. I didn't know about social work values. I only know DSS. They didn't have values to me. I see differently now. I had to realize that it's not always about me.

Edna and Rebecca sat around the lunch table to discuss the families they had seen recently. Both commented that "family values" had "gone down" (Field Notes). Their discussion centered on the notion that adults did have the same sense of protection and obligation to children as they had when their parents were growing up. Rebecca stated:

My value system was good. I loved children and wanted to help . . . I just couldn't get a good job. I value my job and my education. I value what you taught us. Not just the book stuff . . . but life's stuff that you shared as a person. I value the person's opinion and view more now than I did. I don't blame them anymore for what happened to them.

Rebecca was able to see through her experiences and discussions that many times the families she worked with were in situations beyond their control. A realization that the economy or victimization was not an individual character flaw gave her an alternative perspective.

There were also discussions in the office about the impact that having a context to understand and discuss the concept of "values" in general was useful (Field Notes). Angela in particular would mention how classroom exchanges had led to her re-evaluation of her value system. She remembered, "My value system is much more open to new views now than before." Angela continued to reflect after a case staffing one day that she did not understand the decisions that a mother she worked with was making, but

she was at a point that she could at least be open to another person's values that were

different from hers (Field Notes). This led to her stating that the classroom process of

discussing values and various choices about which people are affected can be largely

attributed to their value systems. She went on to talk of value influences such as family

members, peer groups and religious affiliation. Angela commented later:

> My value system is much more open now. I am willing to look deeper at things
> and people. My work in the program and the exercises changed me. The program
> made me take a hard look at myself. I see now how I can be better to myself, my
> family, friends and those people I work with.

Robert attributed his birth of his value system to his cultural and familial

background. Robert explained his orientation in this way:

> My values came from my culture and my family. Some of my values are different
> from the people here. We were taught that both values matter. We learned their
> views and our views. I have a great respect for values of others now. Social work
> values are not always like my values on abortion and birth control . . . maybe not.
> I don't have value conflicts. I just respect everyone and I try to do what is right.

Robert mentioned in class that his culture had a huge impact on his value system

(Field Notes). He discussed how the various ethnic groups in the United States had

variations on their agreement with certain "American values." According the NASW,

culture "implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes the thoughts,

communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic,

religious, or social group [and] "includes ways in which people with disabilities or people

from various religious backgrounds or people who are gay, lesbian, or transgender

experience the world around them" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW],

2001, p. 4). Robert's interpretation of culture and its impact on his values coincided with

the NASW definition. Robert remembered from class that awareness of these cultural

contextual orientations was an important part of "grasping cultural differences" that

resulted in distinct and varying behavioral responses of the families served at Crossroads

(Field Notes).

The introspective nature of value assessment and culture was noted by Sara. She

commented:

> I don't know how my value system has changed. My values were always good
> and honorable. The program made me look closer at myself and how I viewed the
> world. I have done what the instructor asked us to do about learning about people
> and their culture that are different from us. That was fun and good for me. I did
> not always want to but I am glad I did. It made me a better woman and mother. I
> feel better about me now. My family is proud of me.

Additionally, Frances would speak of her "new lease on life" and the impact of the

program (Field Notes). However, she also spoke frequently of her prejudices and her

need to have a safe environment to discuss them (Field Notes). Specifically, she added:

> My values have indeed changed. I changed as a person and a worker. The
> instructor helped me see my own prejudices and how I used them to not help
> people and families in the community. I learned to put my feelings aside and
> focus on the issues of the clients. I learned social work values and about the
> ethics.

Frances, by her own admission, referred to her value system as being very conservative.

She would lead very heated conversations about liberal and conservative views related to

various societal issues (Field Notes). On many occasions, these discussions would lead to

assumptions about the value systems of the families served in the agency. There was

some degree of fascination with people who appeared to be different from mainstream families.

When decisions seemed to be inconsistent with what the participants had become accustomed to or were not similar to their values, there was always curiosity and bewilderment. Edna would say, "Where are they from?" (Field Notes). Edna's question alluded to the foreign nature of some of the consumers' behaviors and decision making patterns. Exposure to some level of understanding about the personal and complex nature of values provided foundation and grounding for them. Theresa went on to conclude in the conversation, "Having someone to help us make sense out of nonsense gives us a leg to stand on when dealing with these clients."

Values serve as a cornerstone for the profession of social work. Therefore, the mission of social work is rooted in its value base. Related to this study, the participants were able to describe the ways in which a critique of their value systems impacted not only the views they held of their clients served, but also in the way the made decisions that influenced families.

"God Has Not Forgot": Fueling the Journey by the Spirit

Historically, many African Americans have been reluctant to seek help from social service agencies for a variety of reasons stemming from a distrust of society due to the history of institutional racism and discrimination (Harrison, 2000). African Americans have traditionally been weary of the receipt of mental health related services. There has been a view of distrust and a reliance on the supernatural for "help" and "healing." Understanding spiritual belief systems offers some guidance in the provision

of services to African Americans. The spiritual focus involves the distinct characteristics

that the participants attributed to their religious beliefs and spiritual connection to a

higher power. It was through this process that many of the participants found themselves

drawn to the helping profession. They used their relationship to a higher source of power

to make meaning of their roles in the community agency. Van Hook and Aguilar (2001)

described the link between religion and the cultural contexts that workers find themselves

by noting:

> All religion is practiced in a cultural context, and one's
> beliefs about the relationship of healing to the supernatural. Religion is often a
> conduit for spirituality, because it provides the cultural structure in which a
> person can grow spiritually. Culture and ethnicity inform religion and spirituality
> and influence the expression and practices of religion. (p. 282)

Five participants linked spirituality to their practice. The reliance upon a higher

power is evidenced throughout their stories and interpretations of events while enrolled in

the Social Work Paraprofessional Program. For example, Edna spoke of the day the

pastor, also a program participant named Carl, prayed for them at the inception of the

program. She described the prayer as "connecting us." Additionally, she went on to say,

"I know why we are here." Her view of intervention external to the involvement of the

agency and university was symbolic of her thinking that this encounter was not by

happenstance. In her estimation, "God has ordained me to be in this program. He has

blessed me in this program." She described her immense sense of gratitude to have had

an opportunity to receive access to college courses without physically having to travel to

an unfamiliar college campus setting that she perceived as threatening and remote. The

availability of the program was "a dream come true" for her. Edna spoke frequently of being raised in a "God-fearing and God-loving" household. She stated:

> I viewed these experiences as a part of God's grace. I cherished the opportunity to be a part of something that seemed like I would never get a hold of it. I did not have the know the money to make this happen. It was a miracle.

Her struggles mirrored the struggles of the people and families she was trained to served. At some level, this was a blessing because of "the good" she had rendered to others over the years. She said, "God pays us in a number of different ways." For her, the program was tangible evidence of that payment.

Other perceived "miracles" were acknowledged. One afternoon in the family visitation room, Theresa was speaking with Frances about her experiences. I entered and sat next to them on the sofa prior to returning to class. The two of them were in a reflective conversation. Theresa remarked that, "I am a changed woman. God is alive" (Field Notes). Her statement was an extension of a discussion where she spoke of feelings that were "real" to her throughout this process. For her, there was something occurring that was non-academic and non-group process-oriented. She described a spiritual state "of being at peace and doing God's will by participating in this program." These kinds of statements supported participants' feelings of purpose for being a part of this experience.

Theresa would go on to say "God's spirit is in our house" (Field Notes). She was making reference to the Crossroads facility itself. She mentioned:

I want to start by saying that I am a changed woman. God is alive in you and we got to see and feel His presence every week. I learned what the real meaning of social work was. We were taught from your life. You taught from the book. You taught from your experiences. That was so powerful! So real!

This exchange of ideas lasted several minutes. Just before re-entering the conference room where classes were being held, Frances noted, "this program helped me to see myself differently. God blessed me here" (Field Notes). She went on to state her disbelief that she would ever have an educational opportunity at the college level. Her involvement in the program translated into a sense of pride and accomplishment. This was significant because many people working in non-degreed paraprofessional jobs lacked the same skills and resources as those they served (Dewees, 2002). Many of them may live in the same communities, frequent the same community activities, and have educational statuses that are equivalent to those persons who are receiving services. Her participation in the program had not set a scenario for the development of distance between how she saw herself and those whom she served.

Her participation in the program had served to bridge a gap of self-perceived inferiority with an increased level of humility and compassion. Frances commented, "I want to help and now I understand that I was called to serve" (Field Notes). Frances was the member who always signaled the lunch break and initiated the prayer. She would take it upon herself to pray or take great pride in delegating this responsibility. She would begin her prayers with "Let's hold each other's hands as we strive to hold to God's unchanging hands" (Field Notes). She would sometimes combine singing and praying together to serve as a festive interlude before the meal (Field Notes). These actions were

common, expected, and accepted by the other group members as they, too, were

spiritually grounded and connected.

Carl had a deep sensitivity to this concept of spirituality. He spoke of not looking

at people struggling with challenges as those who he needed "to pray the bad out of

them." He explained:

> I am a minister. I came to work in the prison ministry to share God and love with men who think God has forgotten them. God has not forgot. I told you about the problem I was having. I had been trained in divinity and in social work. I recognized a need for more education. God sent you to us. We had talked about a program like this and it was delivered.

Carl provided multiple examples of God's presence in the program. He would

speak of incidences in which single mothers with numerous children would come in to

seek help. Many of them would stay in the house the entire day. They would usually wait

for meals, clothes for the children, or other incidental benefits that would present

themselves. Carl would frequently say, "We have a family in the big room waiting on

God's blessings" (Field Notes). On many occasions, when the family was about to leave,

he would comment "God's come and gone for the moment. They got what they needed"

(Field Notes). Carl was not only acknowledging God's work with the participants, but he

was also acknowledging blessings of all of those connected to the program.

Other examples of the presence of the participants' focus on spirituality was

evidenced at traditional prayer times such as just prior to meals, and at the beginning of

each class when Carl would usually ask permission to pray prior to the onset of

coursework. These prayers tended to consist of a mention of participants' great

appreciation for the opportunity to be involved in the process. Participants included a request to continue to guide and lead this process according to God's will. Additionally, God's watchful presence seemed to ordain the endeavor with pride and credibility needed to sustain them.

Sara believed she was working for what she said to be a "greater cause" (Field Notes). Equipped with a degree in Early Childhood Education, she would speak at lunch about her motivation to serve others. She felt that the motivation was akin to that of those who were called to the ministry. Consequently, social work was a "calling" for most people. Through this program, Sara felt as though she has found the perfect fit for her interests in being of service to others. She frequently spoke of being frustrated and unable to reach children in classroom where many needed the intervention the most. Sara thought utilizing the vehicle of social work was a much more direct and effective way to provide the help many of the children she had taken an interest in needed. In her opinion, support and guidance were needed in the homes and communities where there was a greater likelihood of reaching parents. Sara believed, through her own self admission, that engaging parents was a necessary step to having any long-term impact on the lives of children. Working in the capacity of a social worker was the most direct route for her to respond to her perceived calling.

It was apparent that spirituality was of importance to most of the participants. All five of them had a perception of the role it played in their lives. Its presence was evidenced throughout the conversations and in their views of how they came to be involved in the program.

"The Real Change was in Me": Self-Transformation in the Making

Self-transformation is a process that increases personal extropy. Extropy can be viewed as a measure of a person's intelligence, information content, available energy, longevity, vitality, diversity, complexity, and capacity for growth (Lennon, 2005). Clearly, I intend "self-transformation" to necessarily imply "positive self-transformation." On the other hand, self-awareness is the ability to perceive one's own existence, including one's own traits, feelings and behaviors. In an epistemological sense, self-awareness is a personal understanding of the very core of one's own identity (Gray, Griffiths, & Oyama, 2000). This type of transformation was demonstrated during the process of participating in the program. Six of nine participants spoke of the changes they recognized occurring internally as they matriculated in the program.

Edna spoke of becoming more open as a result of this process. Edna used this opportunity to take a serious look at her life and the decisions that had dictated where she was. She spoke frequently of "looking inward" for a different view of herself (Field Notes). Additionally, as her views of herself were gradually being altered by new information and alternative views of the world, she was forming some evaluative assessment of this activity. Her viewing lens was colored by having grown up in the social service system. Edna stated she was a product of the processes that were often deemed "cruel and inhumane" to its recipients. She admitted to still harboring some resentment and animosity towards the "system" itself and those who interpreted and administered the policies. Consequently, the "transformation" was not just about her self-identity but about a more noble cause of "forgiveness" and a "broken service delivery

system" that had damaged many of the people it was intended to help. Edna, just as many other participants, internalized their experiences in a unique manner. She explained:

> When I was working on my GED, I didn't think very much of myself. I was struggling with everything you could imagine. I wanted a different kind of life for me and my kids. More than that, I wanted to be somebody different. I wanted to look in the mirror and see somebody different. I hated everything and everybody. Believe it or not, this program put love in life and love in my heart. I see myself and the world in a positive light now.

Edna believed that continuing to gain additional education would allow her to engage in positive activity that would contribute to her increased perception of self-worth. For many of the participants, this was the first time in their adult lives that they had received positive feedback in an academic and professionally related environment in a way that was meaningful for them. Edna felt as though she finally found a good fit and a set of activities that were comfortable for her.

At the same time, Robert had sometimes expressed sentiments of feeling excluded because of his Latino heritage. Even though he served in a significant capacity by being able to translate and gain the trust of many Latina/Latino families who came to Crossroads for assistance, when the opportunity arose to be enrolled in the Social Work Paraprofessional Program, he was slightly reluctant. Robert stated:

> For me, everything in my life changed with the program. For the first time, I felt included when I was encouraged to join the class because of my race. You saw that I could help with the people who spoke Spanish. It changed my attitude and made me want to help. I learned about how social work came into play . . . what it is . . . what it does and who you can work with. It helped me see how to use it to serve my people since not many people here speak Spanish or understand our families. I have always seen our families in crisis. They are better here, but the rules and laws hold them back. You taught me to use the rules to benefit them.

Robert had come a long ways from where he began. He started at one point and ended at another.

Early in the program, Darlene mentioned feeling "intimidated" by people with more experience and education than she had. She had a history of constantly comparing herself to others. Many times she assigned negative characteristics to herself. One afternoon just prior to the beginning of a treatment team meeting, she mentioned having to replace a colleague who left early due to illness. Darlene went on to say that she probably would make "a ton of mistakes" while leading the meeting. When Darlene exited the meeting, she was smiling. She stated, "It worked. I used what we had been taught and it worked (Field Notes)." Her experiences in some ways, altered her views of herself and the value of education. There had been no apparent link between educational attainment and quality of life for her. She said:

> I learned a lot about myself. This had been a journey for me. I didn't know what to expect in the beginning. I didn't know about you or the work. I really didn't think I would like it at all. Then about half way through the courses, I thought the work started to change. Even the group had started to change. I now understand that the "change" was in me. The real change was in me. That's what was happening. I started to see everything so differently. I wasn't negative anymore.

For Darlene, the transformation had been gradual, but the impact had an immediate effect on her view of herself and the world around her. For the first time, it was acceptable for her to look inward. She was now pleased and accepting of what she saw, a huge demonstration of progress made (Field Notes).

On the other hand, Sara shared a different kind of message. She had an undergraduate degree in early childhood education (Archival review). Consequently, she

was not as 'impressed' with the classroom experiences as some other students had been.

She had been more taken by the group process. For her, program participants came

together in a very special way that created a bond that she had not been accustomed to

prior to this process. She mentioned feelings of being a part of the team for the first time

ever in the work place.

> This program taught us to work together for a greater cause than just our cause or
> our services. It helped me see outside of my services to look at other people's
> needs. I now think I have the confidence in myself to do other things that I had on
> the back burner. My peers taught me to ask for help. They helped me to see that it
> was okay to do it. We are all here to serve to the best of our abilities. The program
> brought out my best abilities.

Sara's feelings that being a part of a group process was significant and meaningful helped

to shape her views of the impact of the program for her.

There appeared to be an evolutionary process for other participants also. For

example, Carl spoke of a changed worldview. Although there was a huge spiritual

influence for him, there was also a changing perception of himself and his new found

ability to view the world differently. A minister, Carl had come into the program with

very conservative views of human nature. He had spent many years ministering to men in

the criminal justice system. Consequently, a large portion of his orientation was geared

towards punishment and not rehabilitation. He was operating under the philosophical

mindset that people were inherently bad and deserved to be punished for their bad deeds.

This for Carl was linked to a character flaw. He actually admitted early in the program

that some inmates were not worthy of help or forgiveness (Field Notes). Carl's

progression through this process was significant because he became willing to consider,

at least at a cognitive level, that there are some macro-level causes that contribute at some
level to the precipitation of social problems. He remarked:

> It made me think better of people and what they have done and how they got into
> the situations they are in. I was told not just to pray for them, but to work for
> them. That was so powerful to hear. I now put to use the empowerment strategies
> I learned and not my version of the weakness strategies that I used to use with the
> inmate. I have changed. I look for the positives in every person. I don't just try to
> pray the bad away.

His transformation was noteworthy because it was demonstrative of the transition he, as a
minister, made as he moved away from a religious or more righteous orientation to a
more secular one in viewing the world and those he committed his life to serving and
guiding.

Angela had similar experiences. For instance, Angela had lingering memories
from the disrespectful treatment of family members by human service workers and social
workers. Therefore, her journey was not just an academic one of gaining understanding
about the process of learning or learning of social work as a profession. It was also the
practice of learning dimensions of a profession about which she was extremely biased.
Ironically, Angela and three other members of this cohort had negative impressions of a
field of employment upon which they were choosing to work. For this very reason, their
evolving journeys were interesting because they entered the process with stereotypical
views. Angela commented:

> I had a great experience learning about the social service system. I used to hate
> social workers because of the way they treated people in my family and in my
> neighborhood a long time ago. I learned so much about the child welfare part of
> the system from class. I did not know all the stuff that went on when they took a

child from the home. All of that was new to me. The laws were so complicated. The workers really did need to know their stuff. I now saw that they probably deserved more support from the community and from the rest of us. The work and exercises and talks in the classes have made me take a hard look at me to see how I could be better to me, my family, friends, and those I work with.

Her statements were profound not only because of their introspective nature, but also they were significant because they demonstrated her personal growth. Angela allowed herself to consider the possibility that the small number of social workers to which she and her family were exposed to may not have been representative of all social workers. She was also willing to accept that there may be some systemic and structural causes that employees in certain professions may be predisposed to a particular set of personality traits. Angela was open to hear that stress coupled with limited resources to assist families may indeed solicit a less than professional set or responses from some workers. The important aspect of this was not getting Angela to change her mindset or viewpoint. It was getting her to be open for both activities to occur.

The personal transformations among the participants were illuminated by their stories. They were able to describe their progression and the impact that their openness had on their views. The identification of this was a testament to not only an evolution of thinking, but an evolution that was recognized and attributed to their participation in the program.

Six participants spoke of various ways in which they were impacted by the program. Each was able to specifically speak of circumstances linked to their experiences that had an impact on them. Their comments directly related to characteristics of

empowerment theory. They all used language that was strengths-based in describing their

interpretation of events.

CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This case study was intended to provide a platform and supportive environment to understand within a contextual framework the experiences, self-discovery process and newly gained and embraced empowered status of grass roots community based family service agency participants. These observed and interviewed participants were in the Social Work Paraprofessional Educational Program. The case study concentrated on these participants with varied educational backgrounds, on their peer interrelationships, on the different delivery styles of social service outreach, and the dividends netted from a structured forum which allowed for idea exchanges and their voices to be heard and acknowledged.

This study revealed the participants' understanding of the empowerment process as they were impacted by their experiences in the Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program in the contexts of four domains of their lives. The nine adult paraprofessional community-based human service workers experienced alterations in the areas of: (a) skills acquisition, (b) values clarification, (c) spiritual focus, and (d) self-transformation. The experiences as described by the participants within these contexts support the empowerment gained as a result of their experiences as adult learners in the program. The unique feature of the collaboration between the Social Work Paraprofessional Program and Crossroads Family Services was the fundamental

assumption that education could support and empower families. A key element of empowerment is the tenet that individuals understand their own needs better than others are able to understand them. This empowerment of paraprofessionals was intended to provide emotional sustenance and instrumental assistance to educate, inform, and prepare those who were most likely to serve families in crisis.

In the final section of the dissertation, I answered the study's four research questions based on its findings as they relate to the research literature. Additionally, implications for utilizing education as an empowerment strategy for adult learners and for further research are included.

Summary of Research Questions

<u>How do the adult learners at Crossroads Family Services view the collective experience of being enrolled in Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program?</u>

All the participants in the study learned something from their collective experiences in the Social Work Paraprofessional Program. They spoke of the exchange of ideas and views learned from and shared with one another. For them, there had never been the opportunity to have an open exchange of views among themselves. Training opportunities had offered the one-way transfer of knowledge. The program also offered a reciprocity of ideas and the safety of negotiating views and interpretations. Additionally, the group process was evidenced. The group dynamic that emerged was one that demonstrated assets and resources that each participant possessed.

More specifically, Robert initially voiced that he perceived his lack of mastery of the English language as his greatest barrier to taking college courses and being employed

in a non-Hispanic work environment. Language barriers caused minimal interference with the effectiveness of the communication within the group. As reflected in the literature, language often reflects social attitudes. It shapes thoughts and attitudes and guides thinking patterns and the expression of ideas (Lum, 2005). The roles that language plays in human interaction within the context of human diversity can encourage or discourage individual efforts and can influence whether groups and communities attain optimal health and well-being (Anderson & Carter, 2003). Robert's fluency in Spanish benefitted the entire group. He was able to contribute to the discussion with an interpretation of cultural nuances that had previously been ignored. Additionally, he answered questions from the group related to the translation of certain words and phrases that were used in an informal speech pattern by consumers of the agency. He learned that what he perceived to be a deficit became a strength. Collectively, the ability of group members to contribute by a demonstration of their talents allowed each of them to learn and grow.

Delgado (2000) noted that individuals and groups are more likely to continue development and growth when they are funded by a currency of capacities and diverse views. The participants spoke of hearing information for the first time from people they worked side by side with daily. They were met with surprise and an awareness for the thirst for knowledge demonstrated by their peers. Many of them co-existed around vocational tasks and pre-determined duties as assigned by the director at Crossroads. The intellectual exchange process afforded by the program created fertile ground for critical evaluation and reflection of how the staff functioned as a team.

As a process, communication involves the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver. According to Toseland and Rivas (2005), communication includes (a) the encoding of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings into language and other symbols by a sender; (b) the transmission of language and symbols verbally, nonverbally, or virtually; and (c) the decoding of the message by the receiver. The communication pattern was discernable and present within the participants' group interaction. This communication was effective because of the participant's ability to be uncensured, to trust the environment in which they were present, and to share their perspectives as a result of developing a healthy respect for their peers. These communication processes were seen as the vehicle by which the paraprofessional group interaction was significant and enhanced. There were observable instances of nonverbal communication patterns. One example of this was evidenced during the morning salutation of participants by a slight bow of the head in respect for each other as they entered into the office or classroom. Another situation was witnessed as participants responded during classroom discussions. As participants spoke, others in the room would acknowledge engagement by nodding and maintaining eye contact.

Group work is a social work method that uses group process and interactions to promote growth and change (Anderson, 2002). The group itself was a vehicle for change, and change occurred at several levels. Currently, social workers use the group structure and process to facilitate change. Small groups are significant resources for people who need to develop social competencies, especially those experiencing powerlessness,

alienation, or those that felt inadequate in changing their current human relationships (Scotch, 2002).

For example, Edna described Carl's prayers as "connecting us" throughout the process of taking courses together. These ritualistic activities served to provide a sense of togetherness for the group. It also led them from a singular purpose towards collective goals. On a related note, Carl spoke of conversations between participants prior to the inception of the Social Work Paraprofessional Program. There was a sense of agreement that the participants wanted and "needed something else" to strengthen and validate their competencies. Consequently, Carl noted that they spoke of such a program and a program was made available to them.

At the group level, a number of variables were apparent when looking at the group's composition. The diversity of the group's composition forced a richness of ideas and helped some group members dispel myths of stereotypes. The ethnic, gender, age and racial diversity in the group served to increase the cultural awareness and appreciation for the program participants. Specifically, the participants spoke of the attitudinal response of others who were external to their agency not assuming that they possessed an adequate grasp of the duties required to maintain the agency. Therefore, it was paramount that all of the participants successfully complete the program. This was an institutional goal that the nine program participants held as a desirable outcome.

These findings corroborate the research literature. A group is two or more people who share a common definition and evaluation of themselves and behave in accordance with such a definition (Vaughan & Hogg, 2000). The group is also considered to be a

collection of people who interact with one another, accept rights and obligations as members and who share a common identity. In psychological research, it has been known for many years that social support is a key factor which determines people's level of physical and mental health. In group and workplace settings, we also know that socially supportive teams are more likely to reach their objectives, hence this big focus in corporate development training on leadership styles and teamwork (Neil, 2002). Being in a learning environment which is both challenging and supportive is a powerful formula for growth.

Darlene seemed to have had a summation of the process. She noted that throughout the group process something out of the ordinary and familiar had been taking place. She mentioned experiencing a feeling of being a part of a team for the first time while in the program. As the program ensued, the other eight participants came to the same agreement.

How were the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the adult learners impacted by their participation in the program?

In this study, the participants perceived an expanded ability to evaluate their value system as a result of their participation in the program. The preamble to the NASW Code (2000) stated that "the mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values" (p. 49). This statement reflected the importance of values for social work. It is possible that few professions—perhaps with the exception of philosophy—concern themselves with values to the extent that social work does (Dolgoff, 2005). Over time, the profession has nurtured and refined a set of values that has given meaning and

purpose to generations of social workers' careers. Social work's enduring commitment to vulnerable and oppressed populations, and its simultaneous preoccupation with individual well-being and social justice, are rooted in the profession's rich value base.

Angela, for example, reported utilizing her openness about her own value system to improve the way in which she evaluated situations with families. Her own process of self-evaluation signaled to her a new-found level of tolerance for diverse views. The nine participants spoke of the alterations in their views of their own values as having been the catalyst to being more accepting of the values of others. They were motivated to be introspective of their values as they witnessed their peers doing similarly. The participants identified personal beliefs and prioritized their values in these areas: the human potential to grow and heal, the human ability to identify wants, and issues of self-determination, individuality, and uniqueness. At some point in the program, they became aware that their cultural competency in helping a very diverse group of individuals and families near a military base was linked to an awareness and acceptance of their own values and biases. For instance, Carl remembered evaluating his value system that was largely influenced by in background in the ministry. He struggled with being open to hear and accept a view that encompassed more secular values. He spoke of his relationship to a new value system having been introduced in a manner that was non-threatening and respectful. The introduction in this way served as a catalyst for him to be more receptive.

The literature has shown the common values of the profession reflect social workers' fundamental ideas about the nature of humankind and the nature of change—"core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person. Importance of

human relationships, integrity, and competence" (NASW, 2000a, p. 5). Values guide the

professional activities of social workers in their efforts with client systems. Social

workers value client systems' strengths and competencies while working in partnership

with clients to develop creative solutions. According to O'Neill (2001), social workers

demonstrate integrity when their personal values and actions compel attention to and

respect for the uniqueness and intrinsic worth of each person. This focus on values serves

to have social workers make institutions more humane and more responsive to people's

needs. This was significant because the emphasis on values is the cornerstone of the

profession of social work (Dolgoff, 2005).

Specific to the study, Theresa discussed how powerful the experience had been as

it helped her to evaluate and compare her personal values to social work values. The

commonality she discovered was affirming and served to bolster her confidence in

making ethical decisions with the families she served through the agency. The theme of

possessing a level of proficiency substantial enough to support or guide those in need of

referrals or resource acquisition in a non-biased way was evidenced in the comments of

all nine participants. For instance, Theresa commented early in classes that she was

surprised to hear a social work instructor speaking of values. This seemed inconsistent

with her perception of social workers based on her experiences. Surprisingly, she was

able to discern that social work values were not at all inconsistent with her values. At

some level, this diminished the distance between her and the social work profession.

In a similar vein, Edna noted discussing values in class over an extended period of time. These discussions had assisted her in processing different views and cultural nuances in more unbiased fashion. Further, these experiences had allowed her to view her decision-making processes in a more humane and dignified manner. A reflection of these experiences helped to shape how she assessed other social workers in various organizations with which she collaborated. Her new understanding translated into an alternative way of conducting human service business because she now had a clearer and less stereotypical view when serving families and working in concert with other community organizations.

Robert had an alternative view of values and their significance to him. He viewed this topic through a cultural lens. Many of Robert's values were deeply steeped in the Latino culture. Through his participation in the group, his rigidity on certain issues was challenged. Initially, Robert was unyielding, but after open dialogue and a new found ability to listen and accept the different views expressed by his peer participants, he was able to widen his perspective and take a critical look at his values. He spoke of various ethnic groups in America deciphering American values from their native values. This was a bold stance for him to take. He was the only non-American born participant in the program. His comments were well accepted by the others. This demonstrated his personal growth. He was comfortable enough with the group to take a critical glance of his values.

How has the Social Work Paraprofessional Education Program provided social work knowledge and skills for adult learners?

The idea of building on a client's strengths has achieved the status of adage in the lore of professional social work (Saleeby, 2002). The strengths perspective has been a dramatic departure from conventional social work practice. Practicing from this orientation means that everything a social worker would engage in with client systems would be predicated, in some way, on helping to discover and explore clients' strengths and resources in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals and to shed the irons of society's domination. To practice and transfer this orientation, the knowledge base of social workers must continually be retooled. Therefore, educational programs must incorporate a dual knowledge and skill-based curriculum to support the tenets and foundation of the profession.

The course selection and method of delivery of the program sought to eradicate the myths and cynicism embedded in a helping arena borne of labels and diagnostic labels. Consequently, a self-reported assessment of the improved knowledge and skills of participants was central to the study. These courses were taught in a natural setting for the academic content to be explored. The participants were involved in the course selection for the program. Additionally, on a daily basis, real life situations unfolded just feet away from the theoretical discussions.

In light of this, it was significant to hear the participants speak of the knowledge-based benefits provided by the Social Work Paraprofessional Program. Darlene, spoke of her acquisition of skills and knowledge as being necessary to equip her with a basic level

of skills to perform her tasks at the agency. She had been concerned that she did not

know what she needed to assist families with the complex issues they presented. Darlene

had commented, in particular, about the need to gain additional skills to work with deeply

troubled individuals and those who appeared on the steps of Crossroads in crisis. After

observing a crisis in the facility, Darlene was able to critique her skill level and how she

would have handled the situation. She recognized certain skills that had been discussed in

class and how they were utilized to de-escalate the situation.

Rebecca discussed not knowing what she wanted to become once she thought she

was grown up. The acquisition of skills led her to solidify her decision to work in the area

of social work. Her classroom success led to feelings of accomplishment and a desire to

seek further opportunities for this type of gratification. She spoke of seeking out specific

times in which she could utilize her skill sets with families of other community providers.

She spoke in particular of utilizing strategies to interview individuals that incorporated

open-ended questions and furthering techniques to gain richer responses from those

persons interviewed.

Kagle (2008) wrote that records were crucial to the operation of social service

agencies and departments because they inform cases, caseloads, and agency management.

Social workers use services and their efficiency and effectiveness. Information culled

from records is used to demonstrate practitioner and agency adherence to organizational

policies, legal requirements, and professional standards. Such competence in

recordkeeping was recognized by Angela. She benefitted tremendously from increased

skills in the area of clinical documentation. She self-reported being much more proficient.

Additionally, she spoke of providing better services to families as a result of taking better

notes and recording data that was more specific to the client's needs. Her professional

practice served as a clinical benefit to clients as well as an administrative benefit to

Crossroads. The administrative benefit was that rich, sound documentation reflected

integrity in the services provided by Crossroads.

How have the dispositions of the adult participants been influenced by the collective

experience of the empowerment process?

Empowering processes are those that people create or are given opportunities to

control their own destiny and influence the decisions that affect their lives. They are a

series of experiences in which individuals learn to see a closer correspondence between

their goals and a sense of how to achieve them, gain greater access to and control over

resources, and where people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their

lives (Lee, 2001). According to Dewees (2005):

> empowerment compels us to think in terms of wellness versus illness,
> competence versus deficits, and strength verses weaknesses. Similarly
> empowerment research focuses on identifying capabilities instead of cataloguing
> risk factors and exploring environmental influences of social problems instead of
> blaming victims. Empowerment-oriented interventions enhance wellness while
> they also aim to ameliorate problems, provide opportunities for participants to
> develop knowledge and skills, and engage professionals as collaborators instead
> of authoritative experts. (p. 167)

Further, empowerment is the "process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or

political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve

their situations" (Gutierrez, 2002, p. 65). The roots of empowerment lie in the political

and philosophical foundations of our culture as "the concept of democracy and its

embodiment in our political institutions are based on the principle of empowering citizens to participate in decisions affecting their welfare" (Swift & Levin, 2002). Empowerment is also a collaborative process. Those working together are seen to be partnering for a common, mutually beneficial outcome. Informal social networks are a significant source of support for increasing one's competence and sense of control. Empowerment is achieved through the parallel structures of personal, political, and socioeconomic development. When people experience empowerment, they feel effective, conclude that they are competent, and perceive that they have power and control over the course of their lives (DuBois & Miley, 2002).

Although crediting someone or something else for perceived blessings or rewards may seem counter to the tenets of empowerment, the participants saw that scenario differently. Throughout the program, there was evidence of a strong relationship between spirituality and participants in the Social Work Paraprofessional Program. This increased sense of spirituality coupled with crediting the opportunity to have such a program was attributed to a higher power. The gift of the program appeared to them as a reward for living according to God's will and in serving God's people. The notion of God's recognition of their obedience was in and of itself empowering.

For Theresa, the program provided a source of confidence for her. She spoke of being at peace. The peace was derived from working in harmony and accordance to the will of God. This provided a sense of personal power that Theresa had not been aware that she possessed. This personal power translated into a sense of empowerment.

Carl's empowerment with the support of his peers was revealed in a slightly different way. Carl's focus on religion had sometimes monopolized the group discussions. His emphasis on a super natural etiology for many of the human sufferings that were presented at Crossroads, were recognized by his peers. Carl began to feel safe and comfortable enough in the group that he could be open to a more secular and societal cause of problems and challenges associated with the families the agency served. He understood that unemployment for a twenty-two year old African-American female may not be indicative of a lack of moral fiber. If her factory closed, this set of unfortunate circumstances would have been beyond her control. In Carl's discussions with his peers, he was empowered by the acceptance of the participants to verbally acknowledge and give credits to a secular perspective that would be beneficial in analyzing clients' issues and in collaborating on potential strategies.

Edna discussed her acquisition of personal empowerment when she admitted looking inward at herself and seeing a different person as a result of her collective experiences with her colleagues in the Social Work Paraprofessional Program. She spoke of her opinion of herself and her ability to contribute and how her view had been altered. It was altered by new sources of information and alternative world views that she was willing to evaluate and accept those aspects that were consistent with a level of personal comfort.

Robert's socio-cultural empowerment was a result of his safety in revealing some of his insecurities about his Latino heritage. He was unsure about his peers' perception of him as an individual and their views of Latinos. The collective process of the program

empowered him to speak freely about his fears. Upon doing so, he found that other had similar insecurities, but for different reasons. Many of the participants reveled how much they relied on Robert's ability to speak Spanish. They reinforced the necessity to have a translator on site. He gradually developed a sense of pride and accomplishment. This fueled a tremendous amount of personal empowerment.

Implications

Implications of the investigative study may be divided into two categories: implications for education and practice, and implications for further research. Each is discussed below.

Implications for Education and Practice

From the findings and results of the investigation, several implications for classroom practice can be noted. These implications are as follows:

1. From the statements of all nine participants, there was consensus that the process they engaged in had a powerful impact. It appeared that the educational process in and of itself served as a vehicle of empowerment for the participants. Not only was there a tremendous academic impact, but there was also a transformation in each participant's self-awareness and world view. This was significant because adult learners tend to be more likely fixed in their perceptions and world view because they have lived longer and held those views longer. This process brought the group together around a common purpose. Their perceived success at the completion of the program clearly linked their experiences with feelings of pride, confidence, and

accomplishment. Educational implications are apparent in the sense of togetherness the participants shared as a cohort. This spoke loudly to the notion that this type of collective academic process in the workplace served as a teambuilding tool for the group. This was a unique way to utilize the educational process to unite workers around a common goal. Although this was not the intended effect of the program, it was a desirable one.

2. The course presentation allowed for the constant discussion of a strengths-based perspective, a highlight of empowerment theory. The explicit infusion of this type of content identified skills that social workers needed to impart to those with whom they worked. Therefore, the program helped them to acquire skills they needed to use with those whom they served. In essence, the paraprofessionals began the program without possessing the skills they were attempting the transfer to others. This action is significant in that many human service workers spend their workdays advocating and attempting to broker services. Many of them do not possess the skills necessary to pass on to others. A program of this type addressed that deficit. The paraprofessionals were provided the opportunity to acquire and demonstrate mastery of the skills as they helped to empower others.

3. There was a powerful cultural opportunity for the participants to learn and grow. The American-born participants learned many cultural and linguistic nuances from the Latino participant. Even though the participants worked with each other for years, it was not until their participation in this program

did they venture out of their secluded comfort zones to learn about their

differences and similarities. Although they shared clients from diverse

cultures and backgrounds, they had not felt safe enough to have open

discussions about the meanings and implications of the diversity that was so

pervasive. A significant implication for social work educators is the

acknowledgment from the participants that some cultural understandings had

not been shared until they engaged in this educational opportunity.

Implications for Further Research

In an effort to apply the findings of this instrumental case study, specific

implications surface for future research study, as based on the analysis and conclusions of

the study. The implications are as follows:

1. One area for further exploration is to continue to look at utilization of

    paraprofessionals in communities to illuminate issues of concern that may not

    have been presented in a formalized or structured way. Many times, social

    issues that impact populations that have not had a vehicle to be heard may go

    unnoticed unless grass roots workers bring these concerns to the attention of

    others. Paraprofessionals are in a unique position to serve as the eyes and ears

    of those segments of the population that do not have political power.

    Paraprofessionals find themselves employed in non-traditional settings

    because they do not possess the academic credentials to meet the professional

    requirement for other settings. When they find themselves in positions outside

    of governmental entities, they may not means test for services. This can

encourage those served to be more open and forthcoming about information. They may be more forthcoming because there is not a perception of punishment for withholding benefits or services. Consequently, these workers may be knowledgeable of community based problems and have more accurate details than information reported to governmental personnel.

2. Additional research should be conducted on the necessity of employing paraprofessionals in low wage support positions for services provided to the elderly and those with severe disabilities. There are positions that require rehabilitation technicians. These positions are available to adults with a high school diploma. Further research could indicate the need for this population. Additionally, there could be some recommendations as to the type of training and skills-building activities required for paraprofessionals to gain a minimal level of competency. If this population of workers is not going to have a huge likelihood to grow due to mandates to professionalize the field of social work, there may be justification to support the paraprofessionals with substantial work experience with opportunities for academic preparation to salvage their knowledge base while professionalizing them to stay in the field.

3. Research in the area of worker empowerment should be explored further to specifically study workers who find themselves in employment situations where there is the expectation that they demonstrate mastery and an ability emotional skills as well as cognitive skills. Additional research should be done to ascertain effective ways in which workers maintain their emotional

reserves. This is critical not only for their survival, but also as a necessary skill to be shared and transferred to others. It may be necessary to investigate task-oriented activities and how they provide a source of empowerment for those involved.

4. Another area of potential research would be to study whether or not empowerment is perceived differently by men than by women. Both men and women were interviewed with no gender specific questions. The Department of Labor Statistics (2006) published that 75.3% of those employed in social work roles were women. Given this datum, the overrepresentation of women working in social work jobs merits further evaluation of how empowerment is interpreted and evidenced.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your experiences in the Social Work Paraprofessional Program.

   Prompts

   What did you learn?

   How did your participation in the Program impact your view of families in crisis?

   Were there particularly good events or bad events that you recall?

   What did you gain personally from being in the Program?

2. Tell me about the Program and its impact on the way you provide services to families.

   Prompts

   What strategies were you able to incorporate?

   How were you able to help them?

3. Tell me about your value system when you began the program as compared to your value system after completing the program.

   Prompts

   Are social work values consistent with your personal values?

   How did you learn to handle value conflicts?

4.   Tell me about your experiences with your peers while having been enrolled in

the Social Work Paraprofessional Program.

Prompts

How do you all work together as a team?

How do you view your collective responsibility to the families you serve?

Appendix B

Social Work Paraprofessional Program

Observation Protocol

Date: _____ Participant's Name: _____

Activity: _____ Location: _____

Time: _____

Skills	Evidence
In what way does the worker introduce him/herself and the purpose of the contact?	
Are there thing that appear to signal to the client that their needs are the focus of the contact?	
In what way does it appear that the worker gives the client options for services or referrals?	
In what way was empowering language used?	
How did the worker focus on the strengths of the client?	

Appendix C

Consent to Act as a Human Participant: Short Form with Oral Presentation

Project Title: "A case study of the impact of social work education on a diverse group of adult learners working in a grassroots, community-based family support agency".

Project Director: Sharon Warren Cook

Participant's Name:

Date of Consent:

Sharon Warren Cook has explained in the preceding oral presentation the procedures involved in this research project including the purpose and what will be required of you. Any benefits and risks were also described. Sharon Warren Cook has answered all of your current questions regarding your participation in this project. You are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw your consent to participate in this research at any time without penalty or prejudice; your participation is entirely voluntary. Your privacy will be protected because you will not be identified by name as a participant in this project.

The research and this consent form have been approved by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board, which insures that research involving people follows federal regulations. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this project can be answered by calling Dr. Beverly Maddox-Britt at (336) 334-5878. Questions regarding the research itself will be answered by Mrs. Cook by calling (336) 750-2625. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided to you if the information might affect your willingness to continue participation in the project.

By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in the project described to you by Sharon Warren Cook.

_____
Participant's Signature

_____
Witness to Oral Presentation and Participant's
Signature