Teaching From the Heart

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Abstract: Most social work instructors come to teaching with a wealth of practice experience. This experience allows us to actually teach what we know, using our experiences in the field to provide a more colorful illustration for our students. This essay describes the profound effect my experience as a foster parent has had on not only my teaching, but also my relationship with the students at my regional comprehensive university in the southeast United States. Using specific examples from my experience with children placed in my home, this paper discusses how my teaching about social welfare policy and empathy has been changed.

***Keywords*:** foster care, social welfare, policy practice, empathy

Background

The call came less than a week after our final home visit. "Hello! Would you be able to take a sibling group of three?" My husband and I had always known we would be foster parents, but we waited until our four children were somewhat independent before going through the training and licensure process. At this point, I was a full-time social work lecturer teaching mostly social welfare history and policy courses. As a professional social worker, a mom of four, and a social work educator, I was pretty sure that I was well-positioned for this new adventure. Our family's experiences in fostering would lead me to question everything I thought I understood about parenthood, child and social welfare policy, and my purpose as an educator. Through this essay, I will focus on the profound impact my fostering journey has had on my teaching and relationships with students.

I have taught social welfare policy history and social welfare policy practice courses in the policy sequence at my university for years. I am well-versed in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974) and its origins. I use the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) in class as a tool for critical policy analysis practice. I teach students each semester about how United States federal policy and state policy impact state regulations, which lay the groundwork for how we do our jobs as social workers. Experiencing policy and regulation and how they work together firsthand with my family and vulnerable children coming to stay in our home was a whole different thing. When we started fostering in the mid-2000s, the state child welfare program was severely understaffed and underfunded. We (Kentucky) have one of the nation's highest rates of child abuse reports and substantiations. In fact, out of 48 states reviewed between 2005–2014, ours ranked second in rate of children confirmed by child protective services to be victims of maltreatment; at 21 children per 1,000 in 2014, this rate was over double the national average (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). As my husband and I were completing the required foster training, I shared with my social work classes what we were talking about and learning. I read the state administration regulations and the state regulatory statutes that dealt with removal of children from families and foster care in class. We discussed the content in the training and compared it to our understanding of the regulations and policies. What I learned very quickly was that the reality was entirely different.

The Reality

It is not an exaggeration to say that the first month of that first placement with "Beth" (three years), "Mary" (18 months) and "Joe" (eight months) was the hardest month of our lives. The children, whose names have been changed in this narrative, had been left by their parents with a caregiver who had serious cognitive disabilities. After three days in the hospital, the children then came to us. They were dehydrated and covered in bug bites and diaper rash. When the social services worker first called, there was almost no information available about the children. Their parents had been identified but not found. The only information was from their birth records at the hospital, and they had no clothing or other personal items. When I brought them home, we had to stop and get clothes—they had one outfit each from the hospital closet. For the entire three months they were in our home, the only information our family could be given about their previous home life and parents came from Beth, the three-year-old.

Our relationship with that first social services worker was rocky. I had high hopes because she had a bachelor's in social work. But she had just graduated from college, was brand new to her job, and was still in training—facts she did not share with me. I was a professional social worker and an educator—facts that I shared immediately with her. I was assertive and persistent. She was overwhelmed and scared. This was not a good start. To make matters worse, our state was furloughing employees due to budget concerns that year, and there were also four state holidays during the months that the children were with us. In the second month we had the children, our worker had a total of five workdays within that month in which she was not on furlough or in training to cover her entire case load.

Another early example of the discrepancy between the ideal and reality came in regulations regarding the development of a family team plan and information sharing. By state regulation and agency policy, when there is a child removal from parental custody, a meeting to establish goals for the family and discuss the roles of the child protection system and the foster family should be called within five days. The family team meeting is an opportunity for all the parties involved to get together and share information about the family and the children. For example, the reason the children are in care and any important information about routines, culture, and medical and behavioral history of the children may be shared by the workers and birth parents with the foster parents. In our first placement with Beth, Mary, and Joe, there were no parents involved when we received the children. At the time, this meant there was no family team meeting, which meant that we as foster parents received no information. Our worker was in the middle of training that stressed the importance of confidentiality. The state statutes and agency policy about what information foster parents receive relies somewhat on worker discretion. Foster parents were given only the "information needed to care for the children." The worker in this case was not a parent, had not had any previous cases, and defaulted to confidentiality being the overriding concern. In theory, this was exactly as we hope all social workers operate. In practice, this meant that we, as foster parents, did not have all the tools we needed to care for the children in our home. I tried repeatedly to convince the worker that I needed information about the children and their history to adequately care for them and that it would not be a breach of confidentiality to provide it. I was never successful. The feeling of frustration impacted our relationship with that worker and our ability to provide the best care for these children.

After three months, the children were moved from our home (strictly a foster home) into an adoptive home. Because the parents had not been involved in the children's care or completed a case plan within 90 days, regulations in our state allowed for the goal of the case plan to be changed to adoption, and termination of parental rights was initiated. The children were adopted by the family they moved to, and we continue to have occasional contact with them. The worker for our case ended up leaving child protection after just one year.

The Ideal

Shortly after Beth, Mary, and Joe moved, we received another placement. "Chase" was a beautiful three-month-old, happy, healthy, and clearly loved by his mother, "Nicki." This placement was completely different from our first because we had a very proactive and engaged parent devoted to getting her son back. We had all the information we needed to care for Chase and to support Nicki. It looked like a textbook case of how foster care is supposed to work—a child is placed in a supportive foster home while a struggling parent is given the tools to make changes that allow for the return of her child. As foster parents, this was exactly the situation we were hoping for. As a social worker, this was evidence that the system does work. As an educator, this was a perfect example to use in class.

The good news is that Chase returned home. Nicki had a few bumps in the road, but she worked her plan, and right before his first birthday, Chase was back with his mother. If the story ended there, it would be perfect. But it didn't. And in the next year, I learned about the social welfare system in a whole new way.

While Chase was with us, we developed a close relationship with Nicki that lasted after he returned home. She did not have any support system or family in town, so she and Chase became part of our family and, in turn, part of our support system. Nicki had overcome some—but not all—of the challenges that led to Chase being in foster care. Nicki was a single mother with a low-paying job with no benefits. Chase's father was in prison. She became pregnant again shortly after Chase went home with a man who was marginally employed and unable to provide much financial aid. Very quickly, Nicki was facing eviction. She reached out to me when she had tried everything she knew for help. Having taught for years about social welfare resources and having successfully navigated the use of the Women, Infants, and Children nutrition program (WIC) as a foster mom, I believed with my whole being that I would be able to solve Nicki's problems, so I went with her to resolve this situation.

Nicki did not have subsidized housing, so our first stop was the local housing authority. Nicki had told me that she had put her name on the waiting list when Chase was first born but I was skeptical that the list could be that long. In the office, I found out that the average wait for housing in our mid-sized city was over two years. It did not matter that Nicki had a job, had a child, and was pregnant. There was no housing assistance available. We left the housing authority with no help. Our next stop was the local Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) office. TANF replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1996 and is a time-limited cash assistance program (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022). Recipients must work or be in an education or training program to receive benefits. Again, I was convinced that

Nicki just needed an advocate to help her get the support she desperately needed. And once again, we left empty-handed. After waiting for over an hour, all we found out was that Nicki could receive emergency assistance once the baby was born, as long as she was able to prove she still had a job and could get the birth certificate to the office immediately after birth. As Nicki didn't have transportation and this was before our local office accepted files electronically, this was a tall order.

What actually kept Nicki in her apartment was a local church. In the end, we found out about a program that provided financial support for people in the community. I wrote a letter on Nicki's behalf, and within a week, Nicki received $7,000 in financial support. As is very often the case, that financial support was only enough to sustain Nicki until the next crisis. About a year later, Nicki lost her job after both children got sick and she was unable to work. This started a slide that resulted in another removal, a voluntary termination of parental rights, and the children eventually being adopted into a wonderful family.

Living and Learning the Experience

Throughout Nicki's journey and the next several foster placements, I witnessed the real experience of social welfare in our state. With all the children that we served in our home and, in fact, in the overwhelming majority of cases of child maltreatment in our state, neglect is the only stated cause for involvement in the child welfare system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, 2021). Poverty, addiction, and mental illness are key contributors to neglect, and access to needed services is crucial in reunifying and keeping families together. In Nicki's case, the services she tried to access were run by "street-level bureaucrats," a term I now use in class. There are federal policies, state policies, and state and local regulations, but the experiences that individual clients have are directly related to the individual worker they have (Lipsky, 2010). Lipsky (2010) found that this could have a positive outcome, in that it can reduce the time it takes to implement services, and it can also result in services being more tailored to the individual—but it can also have a negative impact when the worker serves as a gatekeeper, supplying or withholding services at their discretion.

It is one thing to talk about how street-level bureaucrats can impact a client and an entirely different thing to experience it. For example, in the first placement we had, the social services worker's discretion in telling us information about the children in our care had a negative impact on our ability to care for those children. In Nicki's case, sometimes she was able to find a social services worker that listened to her issue, told her what to do, and walked her through the process to get needed services. In other cases, she hit a stone wall where the worker used their own discretion in withholding information.

One perfect example of the reality of our social welfare system involved a Verification of Household form. This is a form that people receiving TANF must fill out every year to verify that they have reported all adults living in their homes. In our state, there is no proof of identification and requirement on who can fill out the form but at this time, it had to be printed and submitted in hard copy to the TANF case manager each year. Nicki asked me to fill out the form. I signed it and she took it to her case manager. A month later, she received a letter saying

that her TANF benefits would be cut off in 30 days if she did not submit a valid Verification Letter. It turns out my signature on the letter was not readable. I needed to fill out the form and return it with a better signature. Nicki did not have an extra blank form, so I went down to the office and tried to pick one up. In our TANF office, you entered the waiting room and signed your name and case number on the sign-in sheet, then waited until you were called. I signed my name but as I did not have a case and was not opening a case, I did not have a case number. The person sitting at the sign-in desk did not put me in the queue as I had not filled in all the blanks on the form. After 45 minutes, I finally went up to the window and was escorted back to my seat by the armed security guard. I explained my issue to another worker and was finally, after 30 more minutes, allowed to go to the window to get a copy of a form. I filled it out and signed it at the window and attempted to give it to the worker, but the worker explained that it had to be submitted by the client. Nicki had to either buy envelopes and stamps or take the day off work, get public transportation, and turn the form into the worker in person. That day in that office, I had a glimpse of how demeaning and demoralizing our social welfare system is for people trying to access services. I was extremely frustrated and angry at being treated poorly for no reason other than being in that place seeking help.

In theory, my state's TANF program is one of the more generous in the country. On paper, there is a wide array of supports in place to help people just like Nicki rise out of poverty (Cabinet for Health and Family Services, 2022). My mid-sized city has educational opportunities and entry-level job availabilities. There is childcare and housing. There is public transportation. In class, I had always had students read our TANF policies and programs and discussed the array of services available to clients. We looked at the number of subsidized housing units. We talked about the average cost of childcare and the array of options. Now, we look at those documents and we talk about the real experience of trying to utilize resources. Many of the students at my university are first-generation and come from low-income backgrounds. Our service region includes many rural communities. Students often share their experiences of family that have received assistance and the struggles they have experienced.

We also talk about the stereotypical views of people who receive welfare and how our lived experiences compare. This is another area in which my fostering experience has informed my teaching. One of the concepts we learn about is *residual aid*. This is assistance provided with the understanding that you only get government help as a last resort if you are in crisis, and you only get it until you are out of the crisis. We talk about the concept of *less eligibility*, meaning you will not receive everything that you need, lest you get comfortable and stop trying to be independent.

These concepts have been in my lesson plans forever, but it took a day at the WIC office for me to truly understand their power. The youngest child in our first placement, Joe, was still on formula for feeding when he got to us. The social services worker said that he had a WIC card and suggested that I transfer it to my name and use it for formula while he was in our care. In addition to being a financial benefit for me, it would also keep his case open so that his parent or next foster placement would not have to reapply. This made perfect sense and so I started using WIC. The first visit was fine. At this time, the program in our area still used paper coupons and was a little complicated. I had a wonderful worker who helped me understand the system and

what I needed to do. During my second visit, I mentioned to a different worker that I was running out of formula before the end of the month. I told her that the doctor had told me to give Joe X number of ounces a day, but the amount of formula did not cover that. She looked me dead in the eye and said, "Do you think that we are going to give you everything? You can just get the rest." The way I felt when she said that is something that I will never forget. After the initial shock, all I could think about was the impact on the populations we serve when they hear words like that.

After that, I started paying more attention to the treatment of people in vulnerable populations, such as the way parents were treated in social welfare offices. I also listened more to the way those parents and others responded back. I was able to keep control of my response that day when that WIC worker shamed me, but there are some days that I don't know that I could have. I once witnessed the front desk worker at the child protection office tell a birth parent—who had taken a day off work, most likely without pay, and traveled from out of the county—that her child wasn't available for a visit because the foster mom had another appointment and they had forgot to let the birth parent know. The mother began yelling. She was then threatened and told to "get her act together" if she wanted to get her child back. I honestly almost wept, thinking about the level of frustration that parent must have felt at that moment.

In my campus office and classrooms, I began to listen to my students' stories differently. I asked more questions about the resources they had and needed, and sought more information services both at my university and in my community. I tell my students these stories not to make them feel sorry for our clients or to make them hate the workers. I tell them so we continue to have empathy. Our clients sometimes make horrible choices. But as social workers, dignity and respect for those clients is our mantra. This also extends to the professionals that work in these settings. We discuss burnout and what that can look like when dealing with complex client situations. We have the opportunity, using these real-life examples, to consider not only what the client might be experiencing but also what might lead to inappropriate professional behavior. We have had rich discussions about self-care and boundaries through roleplaying the WIC office and visitation examples and put ourselves in the place of the client, the worker, and others who might have witnessed the interactions.

Teaching the Experience

With these lived experiences, I am able to provide my students with a more nuanced and balanced look at the social welfare system. When we talk about the progression from mother's pensions in the 1800s (Leff, 1973) to the development of Aid to Dependent Children (Ross, 1985) to TANF (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022), I am able to lead in discussion about not only the policies and implementation, but also the very real rules and values that impact the clients who use these services. At the beginning of this current semester (at the time of writing), I shared with my classes the Preamble to the National Association of Social Workers (2023) Code of Ethics:

> Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. … These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing,

> supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems. (para. 2)

As I talk about the experiences I have had as a foster parent, we revisit this preamble and talk about what the reality of this ideal is for our clients, communities, and organizations. All faculty in our program come into the classroom with a wealth of practice experience, and many of us—both social work educators and students—come with lived experience dealing with social work and social welfare services. Using these lived experiences in the classroom together provides the opportunity to grow empathy but also instill the drive to change the systems in real ways. What we frequently recognize is that the preamble is not always the way we as social workers treat our clients. So, we talk about how we can promote empathy and improve policies.

We have long talked about the importance of voting and often have voter registration drives on our campus. I explain my experience of sitting in court and seeing the power that our family court judges have in making and breaking families and talk about the importance of doing research about candidates not only at the state and national level but at the local level. We also talk about the importance of talking to our clients about their right to vote for the very people who will determine very tangible aspects of their lives. I made sure that all the foster parents I worked with were registered to vote and understood the importance of it by explaining how much power elected judges have and how legislators make the rules about the social supports they need. We remind students that our responsibility as social workers does not stop at micro practice with individuals—our mission is clear that we must work at all levels to effect change.

Another benefit that I have seen in my social work program since I started talking about my experience as a foster mother is that more students are now sharing their stories of involvement in the foster care system. We have a large number of students who have aged out of the foster care system, or who were adopted out of the system, because our university participates in a state-wide tuition waiver program for foster/adopted students. We also have a high population of low-income, first-generation students. Because we have worked diligently to create a safe environment in our classrooms and our offices, we have seen an increase in the number of students who openly talk about their experiences as recipients of social welfare, their experiences with social workers, and how this had led them to social work as a profession. This provides a rich discussion about advocacy, but also gives an opportunity to discuss boundaries and separating the personal from the professional. Using our history to inform our practice while recognizing that our experience may not be the client's experience can be a hard lesson to learn for students, so this opportunity is particularly helpful.

What's Next

Because of my personal experience and the professional experience of faculty in our department, we have begun doing research focusing on training for new child protection workers. We partnered with the training resource center at our university in their contract with the state to

review the training curriculum and recommend improvements. We were able to include students at both the BSW and MSW levels in this research and incorporated the findings into our classroom discussions. We have also begun research into improving the retention and graduation rates of college students who were formerly in foster care. Our social work department is collaborating with the Student Success Office and Dean of Students Office on campus to develop programming targeted to this student population based on the research efforts that are underway.

I am no longer a foster parent. Overall, we ended up having a total of eight children in long-term placements. In all but one case involving two sisters, we know that the children are in safe and stable homes. Over the years we had some great workers and some okay ones. We learned more about advocating for our children, and developed relationships that were lasting. We eventually reverted to doing respite—providing short-term help with other foster families. This has been the perfect opportunity for us, and we have had amazing experiences with kids of all ages.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed the use of my personal experience as a foster mother in my classroom to illustrate policies and programs, such as the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act and TANF, and concepts, including street-level bureaucracy and residual aid. I have provided examples of how I incorporated the real interactions I had with birth families and social services workers into my teaching, and I have discussed the importance of empathy and self-care when working with not only vulnerable families but for ourselves and our colleagues. When meeting new classes or recruiting students to social work, I tell them that my commitment to our program is based on the experience of being a client. My life as a foster mother has proven the importance of the work that I do as a social work educator. When I stand before my class, or work on curriculum changes, or read admission essays, I am not only my professional self, but I am an advocate for the children that have lived in my house. I am the liaison for parents that don't have custody of their children and desperately want them back. I am the mother standing in line at the WIC office, trying to be patient and get the things my baby needs. I consider this to be the greatest honor in the world. And at graduation each semester, I send these new social workers out into the world with a hug and the mission to remember my stories and do better.

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