Child Welfare and Social Work Education:
From a Pedagogy of Oppression to a Pedagogy of Resistance

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Abstract: Social work has long been involved in child welfare practice. Though lauded as well- intended and admirable work, the profession's involvement in the child welfare system is fraught with contradictions, ethical tensions, and a legacy of historical trauma and deep mistrust in Black and Native American communities. Challenging this legacy requires an honest look at how schools of social work participate in policies and practices that work to uphold racialized surveillance and forcible family separation. Accordingly, this paper invites readers into a critical conversation regarding social work's collaboration with child welfare systems via Title IV-E training programs. To these ends, we draw on the conceptual framework of abolition as a useful tool for interrogating and disrupting social work's relationship to child welfare.

Keywords: Social work education; Title IV-E; child welfare; foster care; abolition; critical social work

Social work has long been involved in promoting child welfare practice. Though lauded as well-intended and admirable work, the profession's involvement in the child welfare system is fraught with contradictions, ethical tensions, and a legacy of historical trauma and deep mistrust in Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Roberts, 2020). Legal scholars and others outside of social work have critiqued the child welfare system for claiming to "protect children," while its policies and practices are aimed at monitoring, punishing, and regulating families (Raz, 2020; Roberts, 2009, 2020, 2022). Lawyers and advocates working in parent representation have drawn connections between the criminal legal system and the child welfare system, both with their roots in white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and the social control of Black, Brown and Indigenous bodies (Clifford & Silver-Greenberg, 2017; Cloud, 2019). Although criticisms of the child welfare system have been circulating in marginalized communities and among activists for decades, it is only recently that the voices of social work scholars have joined the chorus naming the child welfare system as a source of racialized surveillance and forcible family separation (Blakely et al., 2020; Detlaff et al., 2020; Eaddy et al., 2021; Jones & Haynes, 2020).

In this paper, we expand on the existing critiques of social work's relationship to the child welfare system. More specifically, we focus attention on the role that social work education plays in sustaining and reproducing child welfare as a system of "family

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regulation" (Roberts, 2020, para. 3) through participation in the federal Title IV-E training program. Accordingly, we invite readers into a critical conversation regarding social work's collaboration with child welfare systems via Title IV-E training programs. The arguments presented in this paper are inherently controversial and are likely to spark debates among scholars in the field. We believe this debate is urgent, necessary, and generative. We hope our commentary will lead to meaningful discussions about how we can re-envision supporting children and families in need.

We begin with an overview of Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, the Title IV-E training program, and its presence in schools of social work. Using an intersectional analysis, we illustrate how child welfare is implicated in broader systems and processes of racialized surveillance and control, emphasizing the ethical disconnect in training students to uphold the very injustices that our code of ethics charges us to eliminate (see: Abrams & Detlaff, 2020; Fortier & Wong, 2019; Kim, 2013; Richie & Martense, 2020; Social Service Workers United-Chicago, 2020). We argue, alongside others (Cloud, 2019; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Fitzgerald, 2020; Harvey & Whitman, 2020; Roberts, 2022; Williams, 2020), that social work must challenge the necessity of the child welfare system and the underlying rationale for family surveillance and the forcible removal of children – including the generally unquestioned practice of training students to become practitioners within the child welfare system. To these ends, we draw on the conceptual framework of abolition (Ben-Moshe, 2020; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2014; Kaba, 2021). The paradigm of abolition can be a useful tool for interrogating and disrupting social work's relationship to child welfare. Infusing abolitionist thinking into social work requires us to examine the ways in which our profession upholds and contributes to carceral capture – carceral capture, as we conceptualize it, includes institutions that work to perform the punishing functions of the state, with child welfare being one such institution. We contend that Title IV-E training programs serve to extend the punishing arm of the state rather than challenge it. In this way, Title IV-E training partnerships represent a serious violation to our Code of Ethics and should be eliminated.

Title IV-E of the Social Security Act

Since 1980, the two primary sources of federal funding for child welfare have come from the Title IV-B and IV-E provisions of the Social Security Act. Title IV-B provides support for prevention and reunification; it is designed to pay for in-home services, prevent out-of-home placement, and includes a training component (Raz, 2020; Stoltzfus, 2014; Zlotnik, 2003). Title IV-E is an entitlement program that provides federal reimbursement to states, territories, and tribes for foster care, adoption assistance, and kinship guardianship assistance and also includes funding for training related to these services (Congressional Research Service, 2012). Emerging from the passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, Title IV-E was created as a response to decades of "foster care drift" (Kawam, 2014, p. 23). The conditions of foster care drift – increased entry into the foster care system, extended amounts of time spent in foster care, and the low chances of adoption or family reunification – began in the late 1960s after mandatory reporting laws were passed in all 50 states (Myers, 2008; Raz, 2020). The obligation of mandated reporting, coupled with vague and widely cast definitions of child abuse (Raz, 2020), led to a rapid

increase in reports of child maltreatment throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Thomas, 2012). Child welfare agencies lacked the necessary staffing to respond to the significant increase in reports, and subsequently, record numbers of children entered the foster care system, many of whom were never adopted and never returned home (Kawam, 2014).

The training provision of Title IV-E, which provides funding for the training and education of current and future child welfare workers, was created to help manage the workforce crisis in child welfare that emerged in the mid-1970s (Zlotnik, 2003). While maltreatment reports were exploding in numbers, concurrent slashes to state and local budgets created a situation where the needs of child welfare outpaced the service system's capacity to respond (Ausbrooks et al., 2014; Thomas, 2012; Zlotnik, 2003). In an effort to manage increased caseloads, many public child welfare agencies reduced their hiring requirements, eliminating educational prerequisites for workers (Ellett, 2014). Doing so allowed agencies to quickly fill needed positions and resulted in a subsequent "de-professionalization" of child welfare (Ausbrooks et al., 2014; Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Falk, 2020). Researchers argue that the process of de-professionalization led to increased turnover, incompetent workers, and negative outcomes for children and families (Ausbrooks et al., 2014; Falk, 2020). Title IV-E training partnerships between state child welfare agencies and university social work programs emerged in the late 1980s as an approach to bolster and re-professionalize the child welfare workforce (Ausbrooks et al., 2014; Scannapieco et al., 2012; Zlotnik, 2003). Title IV-E currently serves as the primary source of federal funding to train the child welfare workforce (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2018) and "its growing use has helped create new bonds between social work and child welfare" (Zlotnik, 2003, p. 7).

The overall purpose of Title IV-E is to move children through the foster care system in an effort to support permanency (Zlotnik, 2003). Importantly, IV-E funding exceeds that allocated for IV-B family preservation efforts (Raz, 2020). This may be in part due to the fact that Title IV-E funding is directly linked to the number of children in out-of-home placements. Critics argue that this funding formula creates a misaligned incentive for states to prioritize child removal and foster care placement over in-home services and family preservation (Raz, 2020). In response to concerns related to incentivizing the foster care industry, the Families First Prevention Services Act was passed in 2018. Families First legislation aims to prevent foster care by allowing states to use IV-E funds to pay for prevention services, such as substance use treatment, mental health treatment, and parenting programs (Lindell et al., 2020; Torres & Mathur, 2018). Families First also provides financial incentives for states to reduce the number of children currently in foster care (Lindell et al., 2020; Torres & Mathur, 2018). As the Families First Act was only recently enacted, studies of the implementation of and outcomes related to the law have yet to be published at the time of this writing. Rigorous research studies and program evaluation are needed to determine if the Families First Act has led to meaningful changes in how states engage in child removal versus family preservation services (Lindell et al., 2020).

Implementation of Title IV-E Training Programs

With Title IV-E funding, the federal government provides a 75 percent match to states for short- and long-term training, including the attainment of educational degrees (Ellett, 2014; Social Work Policy Institute, 2012; Thomas, 2012). Though implemented in 1980, IV-E training funds only became widely used among social work educational programs starting in 1990 (Strand & Popescu, 2018; Thomas, 2012). Since then, child welfare and university partnerships have developed across the country to prepare social work students for work in public child welfare (Scannapieco et al., 2012; Zlotnik, 2003).

The National Title IV-E website housed at the University of Houston collects information on IV-E training programs; however, schools are not required to participate in data collection efforts, making it difficult to ascertain exact data on Title IV-E training programs across the nation. The most recent data compiled by the University of Houston indicates that over 220 schools in 37 states are accessing Title IV-E funds to educate BSW and MSW students (Cheung, 2021). Title IV-E training funds are administered at the state level and implementation varies widely between states (Zlotnik, 2003). Funds can be used for a variety of educational purposes including: curriculum development, instructor salaries, employee leave costs and replacement staff, field instructors, educational materials, program evaluation, and direct financial assistance to students (Zlotnik, 2003). Typically, students who are direct recipients of IV-E funding are offered tuition remission and stipends in exchange for a commitment to work in public child welfare for a specified period of time after they graduate (Cheung, 2021; Social Work Policy Institute, 2012). Advocates of the program argue that it serves as an important incentive for encouraging social work students to pursue a career in child welfare and has "revitalized federal investment in social work education" (Zlotnik, 2003, p. 9).

Outcomes of Title IV-E Training Programs

The explicit goals of Title IV-E education and training funding include: stabilization of the child welfare workforce and the enhancement of the competencies and skills of said workforce (Ausbrooks et al., 2014; Piescher et al., 2018; Zlotnik, 2003). The education and training component included in Title IV-E demonstrates consistency with the long-held belief among social work leaders and child welfare professionals that a highly trained child welfare workforce was critical to ensure positive outcomes for child well-being (Thomas, 2012). Available evidence indicates that Title IV-E child welfare/university partnerships have aided in re-professionalization of the child welfare workforce, improving both preparation for work in child welfare and retention in the field (e.g., Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Falk, 2020; Greeno et al., 2017; Slater et al., 2018). However, research has not been able to link those outcomes (e.g., retention rates, education level, skill and knowledge attainment) to improved outcomes for children and families in terms of safety, permanence, and well-being (Hartinger-Saunders & Lyons, 2013).

Furthermore, little research has been able to specifically examine the relationship between participation in Title IV-E child welfare agency-university training programs and actual outcomes for children and families who are involved in the child welfare system

(Barbee et al., 2012; Ellett, 2014; Falk, 2020; Hartinger-Saunders & Lyons, 2013; Scannapieco et al., 2012). Comprehensive studies linking IV-E training to child and family outcomes are difficult to undertake for a variety of reasons, including: inconsistent program implementation across states and universities, IV-E organizational complexity, high worker turnover, and challenges defining and assessing client outcomes (Ellett, 2014; Falk, 2020; Social Work Policy Institute, 2012). Although a small number of studies have found a link between child welfare workers with MSW degrees and positive outcomes for children involved in the child welfare system, (see: Albers et al., 1993; Littell & Tajima, 2000; Ryan et al., 2006), studies that specifically look at the relationship between worker participation in Title IV-E training programs and child and family outcomes are exceedingly rare. One such study, conducted by Leung and Willis (2012), compared workers who participated in the IV-E training program and workers who did not and assessed five client outcomes: reoccurrence of maltreatment, foster care reentry; foster care stability; length of time to achieve reunification; and length of time to achieve adoption. Their results showed a mild relationship between IV-E workers and reduced time to achieve reunification as well as a strong relationship between worker IV-E status and reduced time to achieve adoption. Additionally, they found no statistically significant relationship between worker involvement in the IV-E training program and reduction in the recurrence of child maltreatment, reduction in re-entry into foster care, or improved stability in foster care.

Despite a dearth of research directly examining Title IV-E's impact on child and family outcomes, there is extensive data on the general experiences of and outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system over the 30 years since Title IV-E child welfare agency-university partnerships began. When we look at this data (which is the subject of the next section), a picture emerges of a system of family regulation deeply rooted in racism, classism, and misogyny (Davies et al., 2007; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Roberts, 2009, 2020, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). While IV-E training programs may help with worker preparation and retention, the oppressive aspects of child welfare are not due to retention issues. Furthermore, retention of workers has not been shown to alter the oppressive landscape of child welfare. Therefore, the common argument in favor of the IV-E training program - that is, a better trained workforce can help improve outcomes for marginalized children and families - remains unfounded. To be clear, we are not suggesting a causal connection between IV-E training and negative outcomes for families, and we recognize that there are a range of factors beyond child welfare (e.g., neoliberal capitalism, welfare entrenchment, punitive family policy in the U.S.) that contribute to the problems faced by children and families. Rather, our argument, which will be expounded on in the next section, highlights that despite decades of IV-E training, the child welfare system continues to function in a harmful manner.

Child Welfare and the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender

In this section, we provide an intersectional analysis of the current state of child welfare. We begin with a discussion of how the oppressive forces of racism, classism, and misogyny each operate within the child welfare system. We then illustrate how those whose lives exist at the intersection of racial, class, and gender oppression are most harmed by

this system, despite the assertion that these are the children and families who the system is professing to protect.

Racialized Inequity

Racial disproportionality and racial disparity, terms that respectively refer to the over- or under-representation of a racial group compared to its representation in the general population, and the unequal experiences or outcomes experienced by one racial group compared to another, have long been documented in the child welfare system. This is particularly so for Black and Native American families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Studies have consistently shown that Black and Native American families are more likely to be reported to child welfare for suspected maltreatment than White families (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). Once a report is received, those involving Black and Native American children are more likely to be referred for investigation than those involving White children (Fluke et al., 2003; Harris & Hackett, 2008; Hill, 2007). In addition, during investigation, reports of maltreatment against Black and Native children are more likely to be substantiated than those involving White children (Dettlaff et al., 2011; Font et al., 2012; Hill, 2007; Maguire-Jack et al., 2020).

After making a determination of child maltreatment, one of the most severe responses that a child welfare agency can take is to remove the child (or children) from their parent(s), caregiver(s), or legal guardian(s). Racial disproportionality is particularly notable within the context of child removal and foster care. While the majority of children placed in foster care are white, children of color are vastly over- represented compared to their representation in the general population. At the end of FY 2018, there were 435,052 children in foster care in the U.S. (Puzzanchera & Taylor, 2020). Black children made up 25.2% of these children, despite composing only 15.1% of children ages 0-17 in the general U.S. population (Puzzanchera & Taylor, 2020). Thus, Black children were 1.66 times more likely to be in foster care compared to their numbers in the general population. Native American children made up 2.6% of the U.S. foster care population and only 1.0 % of the general population of children ages 0-17 (Puzzanchera & Taylor, 2020). Native American children were thus 2.67 times more likely to be in foster care compared to their numbers in the general population. When the national foster care data is disaggregated by state, there is a wide range in disproportionality rates for Blacks and Native children. At the high end, in California, the percent of Black children in the foster care system is 3.34 times higher than their proportion in the general population. In Minnesota, the percent of Native American children in foster care is 15.76 times higher than their representation in the general population (Puzzanchera & Taylor, 2020).

Racial disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system first gained national attention in the early 1970's (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Dettlaff et al., 2020). In the last 50 years, as racial disproportionality and disparity have continued to be documented and studied, child welfare researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have debated their causes. The main question has been whether these racial differences are the result of racial bias in the child welfare system or evidence of a higher risk of maltreatment among Black and Native American families due to their greater exposure to poverty and other child

maltreatment-related risks (Drake et al., 2011; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2012). However, this argument appears to be tautological as the higher exposure to maltreatment risks (what is often referred to as "disproportionate need") among Black and Native American families is itself a result of centuries of racism and structural oppression (Dettlaff et al., 2020). As Dettlaff and colleagues (2020) explain, "These issues of disproportionate need are then compounded by oversurveillance and over-reporting of Black families in the child welfare systems, which begins their involvement in a system that exacerbates these inequities through racial biases in decision-making that disproportionately impact Black children" (p. 507).

Class Bias

Recent research has demonstrated a clear relationship between income levels and child protection involvement (e.g., Fong, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). In a study of CPS reports in Connecticut between 1997 and 2015, Fong (2019) found that, compared to children in low-poverty neighborhoods, the risk of CPS involvement was twice as high for children living in moderate-poverty neighborhoods and three times as high for children living in high-poverty neighborhoods. Using national data, Zhang et al. (2022) found that lower income families had higher risks of CPS involvement and child neglect, but not higher levels of physical or psychological abuse than those with higher incomes. It is also important to note that the relationship between poverty and child welfare involvement may not be solely due to the correlation of poverty and maltreatment risks, but rather to a bias against families with lower incomes. Studies have shown that physicians are more willing to consider abuse as a cause of a child's injury if the child comes from a low-income family than for children in higher income families (Lane & Dubowitz, 2007; Laskey et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2010). Additionally, realities of daily life for families in poverty, such as multiple siblings sharing small bedrooms or lack of consistent heating or electricity, can be labeled as evidence of "neglect" by judges and child welfare professionals and used as justification for family separations (Roberts & Sangoi, 2018).

Regulating Gender

In addition to its racialized and classed nature, child welfare is also a highly gendered system. In many states, child protection cases are filed under the mothers' names, regardless of whether or not the mother is the accused perpetrator (Brown et al., 2009; Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003). In fact, information on fathers is often limited or completely absent in child protection case records (Brown et al., 2009; Coady et al., 2013; Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003). Even when children have two parents who are present in their lives, child neglect investigations often focus solely on the mothers' actions and responsibilities (Coohey & Zang, 2006). Charges of "failure to protect" have been applied against mothers who are victims of domestic violence who could not successfully protect their children from the actions of the batterer. Similar charges have been applied to mothers whose children have experienced sexual abuse at the hand of a relative or acquaintance (Azzopardi et al., 2018; Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003).

Feminist scholars have long argued that "child protection" is a misnomer used to disguise the primary functions of child welfare, which is the surveillance and scrutinization of mothering practices (e.g., Davies et al., 2007; Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003; Roberts, 2022; Swift, 1995). Davies and colleagues (2007) argue, "couched in such phrases as 'the well-being of children', 'support for families', and 'least intrusive measures', the capacity of women as mothers drives child protection practice while remaining largely implicit and invisible" (p. 24). Legal scholars go further to make the point that rather than the protection of children, the primary outcome of child welfare involvement is the punishment of mothers, primarily low-income mothers of color (Appell, 1997; Roberts, 2012, 2022). Advocates draw comparisons between child welfare and the U.S. criminal legal system, particularly in the way both systems engage in the institutionalized disruption of the Black family (Clifford & Silver-Greenberg, 2017; Roberts & Sangoi, 2018). The criminal legal system disproportionately engages in the punishment, control, and removal of Black men while the child welfare system punishes and controls Black women via the removal of their children (Alexander, 2020; Roberts, 2009, 2012). In this way both systems are used to enforce raced, classed, and gendered power structures (Roberts, 2022).

Intersectional Injustice

The evidence presented in the preceding paragraphs clearly illustrates that the oppression and discrimination perpetrated by the child welfare system is intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989). Given the intersections of race, gender, and class oppression that operates at the core of child welfare, it is not surprising that many of the processes within the system deny families their expected civil rights and protections (Appell, 2004; Newport, 2022; Pattison, 2016; Roberts, 2003). Child welfare cases are considered civil cases, not criminal, and thus they are not necessarily subject to the same standards and protections as those provided in criminal courts (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022). For example, in child protection investigations, parents who are investigated for suspected child maltreatment are not read Miranda rights, despite the fact that anything they say to the investigating social worker can be used against them in civil court and could result in serious consequences to them and their families, including the loss of their children (Easton et al., 2014; Newport, 2022; Texas Public Policy Foundation, 2020). Depending on the state, parents may not have the right to an attorney in initial or subsequent hearings, or their right to the provision of an attorney may be based on legal standards that are differentially enforced (Duffy, 1982; Sankaran & Pollock, 2016). For example, in Minnesota, the statute that governs whether a parent who cannot afford counsel receives court-appointed counsel reads "the court shall appoint counsel to represent the parent, guardian, or custodian in any case *in which it feels that such an appointment is appropriate* [emphasis added]*"* (Minnesota Courts, 2018, p. 2).

States may also remove children from their parents with scant evidence of harm. Local child welfare agencies typically draft a petition of allegations of abuse or neglect for court consideration. This petition, which is presented and reviewed at an initial hearing - often referred to as a Preliminary Protective, Emergency Protective, Emergency Removal, or Shelter Hearing - constitutes the only evidence that must be presented at the hearing and establishes whether or not a child welfare case will proceed (Child Welfare Information

Gateway, 2022). At this point, judges consider whether the petition establishes a *prima facie* showing that abuse or neglect has occurred. *Prima facie*, or "on its face" implies that judges proceed based solely on the content of the petition, with no additional testimony or information, and under the assumption that the facts contained in the petition are true and accurate. Judges then consider whether the facts in the petition meet the grounds for deciding that a child is in need of protection. Each state has their own statute regarding these emergency protective care hearings, but the process and requirements are generally consistent across states (Minnesota Courts, 2018). The standard of proof necessary for a termination of parental rights is that of "clear and convincing evidence" (*Santosky v. Kramer*, 455 U.S. 745), which is less stringent than the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard necessary for criminal conviction. Finally, if families are separated, there are no firm, clear standards for reunification to which child welfare agencies are beholden. (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016c; Gupta-Kagan, 2010; Kaiser, 2009).

The Federal Title IV-E program requires state child welfare agencies to provide "reasonable efforts" ("active efforts" if the child qualifies for Indian Child Welfare Act [ICWA) provisions] both to avoid removing children from their homes and, if they are removed, to reunify them with their parent (Indian Child Welfare Act, 1978; U.S. Congress, 1980). The legal definition of "reasonable efforts" is broad yet relatively standard (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). In practice, however, what constitutes reasonable efforts varies widely and can range from simply providing contact information to local community-serving organizations to highly detailed case plans (Kaiser, 2009). Families are required to adhere to their case plan, which becomes a legal document entered into court proceedings, but simply completing the written steps of a case plan may not be considered sufficient for reunification (Gupta-Kagan, 2010; Roberts, 2022). Unlike in other civil and criminal court hearings, once a child is removed from their parents, judges can make decisions about their permanency plans based solely on the opinions of government attorneys and social workers, without requiring actual evidence, and without allowing the parents to appeal the judge's decision (Gupta-Kagan, 2010). Gupta-Kagan (2010) refers to this unique situation in child protection cases as a "due process donut hole" (p. 14) and argues that this type of judicial decision-making occurs because of a lack of meaningful due process procedures in current federal law regarding permanency planning and reasonable efforts.

Any evidence that child welfare involvement "protects" children from harm or promotes their well-being is scant – particularly when we consider the most draconian intervention of removing children from their parents (Dettlaff et al., 2020; Sugrue, 2019). For children who have experienced some form of maltreatment, out-of-home placement has been shown to provide little to no measurable benefit in terms of cognitive or language development, academic achievement, mental or behavioral health, or suididality (Maclean et al., 2016). In fact, rather than protecting children, out-of-home placement is itself a source of harm (Author, 2019; Dettlaff et al., 2020). Research has consistently shown that involuntary separation of children from their parents results in lifelong trauma (Dettlaff et al., 2020). Children involved in the child welfare system who have been placed in foster care have been shown to be at increased risk of juvenile and criminal justice involvement

(Doyle, 2007, 2008, 2013; Yoon et al., 2018), mental health problems (Baldwin et al., 2019; Cote et al., 2018), and early mortality (Gao et al., 2017).

As we have illustrated, the child welfare system does not achieve its "well-intended" goals of ensuring child and family well-being. Proponents of the IV-E training program assert that professional social workers can promote better outcomes for children and families. Given social work's own history in upholding gendered, classed, and racialized injustice, we should be wary of assuming the positive impact of good intentions (Abrams & Detlaff, 2020). Despite the reality that child welfare intervention often does more harm than good, many schools of social work continue to rely on federal funding through Title IV-E that supports and incentivizes the foster care industry (Raz, 2020). Furthermore, the rationale for Title IV-E partnerships explicitly pivots on expanding the child welfare workforce (Ausbrooks et al., 2014; Zlotnik, 2003), thus bolstering the reach of a punitive system of control. This serves as a distinct violation to our Code of Ethics and erodes the connection between social work and social justice. As such, we believe the practice should be discontinued. To be clear, our argument is not about weaknesses with the training program itself. It is about what we see as a fundamental problem with training students to work in a system that we believe should no longer exist. We acknowledge the contested nature of our position and by the end of this paper, we will show that, while controversial, there are ways for social workers to address child harm and need without relying on state intervention.

In addition to upholding a system of injustice, we are also concerned with the reality that many schools and states utilize IV-E funding (via the training program) to provide economic support to marginalized students. We recognize that providing students with support to pursue their education is of the utmost importance. However, we do not believe that coercing students, through financial incentives, into a relationship of complicity with state control is the answer to the economic precarity faced by many of our students. Schools of social work, and the profession at large, have a responsibility to find ways to support students and to make social work education affordable and accessible without relying on funding that requires students to reinforce rather than disrupt the workings of the family oversight system. We suggest that the politics and praxis of abolition has much to offer social work education in its quest to promote child and family well-being.

Abolition, Title IV-E, and Social Work Education

Abolitionist frameworks bring forth an understanding of punishment and control as embodied in both physical spaces and institutional logics (Meiners, 2016; O'Brien et al., 2020). In this sense, sources of surveillance and control are understood to be located not only in the criminal legal system but are also infused into the doctrine of other institutions that dictate norms for behavior and institute practices that serve to enforce and regulate conduct. As we see it, child welfare is a primary and pervasive institution of surveillance and regulation that sits beyond, but often intersects with, the criminal legal system (Fong, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2021; Schenwar & Law, 2020). Here we add to the cacophony of voices that name the child welfare system for what it is: an entrenched system aimed at the regulation of families (Cloud, 2019; Roberts, 2020; Williams, 2020). Further, we

conceptualize the child welfare system as an "integral part of the U.S. carceral regime" (Roberts, 2020, para. 7) and a key manifestation and driver of white supremacy (Bergen & Abji, 2020; Cloud, 2019; Roberts, 2020). In other words, child welfare is a punitive system of capture rooted in white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberal capitalism.

An abolitionist framing requires us to move beyond instituting reforms and to critically analyze the underlying logic and rationalities that shape the child welfare system. Meaningful change will not occur through diversifying the workforce, tweaking policy, or through providing bias awareness education to workers. Indeed, after decades of reforms to the child welfare system including a systematic push to professionalize the workforce, little change has occurred (Harvey & Whitman, 2020; Roberts, 2020). Substantive change will only occur through processes and practices that question and "up-end" the underlying logic and rationale driving the existence of the system in the first place (Detlaff et al., 2020). As we see it, a first step in up-ending child welfare is to refuse to supply it with the labor that it needs to function. Many may assert that compared to other professions, (e.g., medical, criminal legal, and generic behavioral health professionals), social workers are better-positioned to improve the deep-seated issues embedded in the system of family regulation (Briar-Lawson et al., 2016; Clark & Yegidis, 2016; Leung & Willis, 2012). However, such arguments forsake social work's own history in upholding gendered, classed, and racialized injustice (Abrams & Detlaff, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2023). Arguments in favor of social work's alignment with child welfare also cast aside data that show continued disparities throughout the child welfare system despite social work's presence. We hold that social workers should absolutely be a part of meeting the urgent needs of children and families; however, history clearly shows that child welfare involvement is not the avenue through which need is met (Roberts, 2022). An abolitionist framework helps us consider how social workers can work to co-create safety and well-being with families rather than working as representatives of the state.

Reformist Reform vs. Non-Reformist Reform

Scholars of abolition distinguish between "reformist reforms" and "non-reformist reforms" (Ben-Moshe, 2020; Gilmore, 2014; Kaba & Duda, 2017). Reformist reforms absorb critique through accommodation; they make changes within an existing framework without fundamentally altering (or questioning) the status quo (Ben-Moshe, 2020). Non-reformist reforms, on the other hand, work to meet the pressing needs of the most marginalized but are "carried out with the broader goal of abolition" (Hereth & Bouris, 2020, p. 362). For example, fighting for substance use and mental health treatment for parents in need are supported by abolitionists and considered necessary non-reformist reforms. In contrast, other popular initiatives such as the use of drug courts are considered reformist in that they strengthen and expand, rather than displace, the reach of surveillance and control (Ben-Moshe, 2020; Gilmore, 2018). Similarly, foster care was a reformist reform that replaced orphanages and almshouses by placing children in the homes of distant strangers without addressing their family's needs (Roberts, 2022).

We argue that Title IV-E training is firmly entrenched in a reformist logic. IV-E training programs track the path of reform that social work has historically taken: to make

conditions better for some people without fundamentally disrupting the status quo. The predictable result? More of the same. As Dorothy Roberts (2022) states, "Reforming family policing results in more family policing" (p. 284). Questioning the efficacy of the child welfare system, which served as the impetus for IV-E funding, and making tweaks in relation to the system's downfalls (e.g., education and training initiatives) is different than questioning the underlying logic of the child welfare system, or the rationale for its existence. Indeed, the IV-E training program relies on the logic embedded in the child welfare system that sees state intervention as a necessary and reasonable way to ensure the safety and well-being of children. Thus, through the establishment of IV-E collaborations, schools of social work reinforce the legitimacy of state intrusion into the lives of children and families.

Abolitionist thinking involves both a strong social critique and an ability to imagine-resistance and creation (Ben-Moshe, 2020; Davis, 2003; Kaba & Duda, 2017; Schenwar & Law, 2020). Critique is necessary in order to understand and deconstruct the current social, political, and economic conditions that contribute to the legitimation of systems of surveillance and control. Abolition simultaneously requires an ability to envision responses that lie outside of the current systems and institutions. Ben-Moshe (2020) contends that abolitionist frameworks "imagine a different horizon and are not limited by a discussion of what is possible at present" (p. 16). In relation to child welfare, abolitionist thinking requires a critique of child maltreatment that centers an analysis of structural inequities rather than individual parental failings. Further, it requires generating a social landscape in which children and families can thrive and imagining non-punitive, non-regulatory responses to the struggles they face. It means deconstructing colonial ideas of what "good parenting" and "protection" entails. It also means prioritizing the well-being of children and families over professionalizing the child welfare workforce (and using this as a trigger to legitimize social work), and ensuring families have the resources they need to keep their children safely in their homes without state intrusion.

Dis/Epistemology of Abolition

Ben-Moshe (2020) offers a reading of abolition that we find particularly generative for social work education. She describes abolition as an "epistemology and an ethical position" (p. 111) about "knowing and unknowing" (p. 125). The epistemology of knowing generates a broad critique of history and the social conditions that frame certain bodies and subject positions as disposable. Such critique includes an analysis of the neoliberal political economy that prioritizes "institutionalized budgets" over direct assistance/payments to families (Ben-Moshe, 2020). For instance, one of the biggest federal entitlement programs for children is the foster care system (Cloud, 2019). What this means in practice is that rather than financial assistance and supportive services being provided directly to parents and families in need, resources are funneled toward punitive responses, including intrusive surveillance and the forcible removal of children from their families (Cloud, 2019). An epistemology of knowing allows us to untangle the knot between child maltreatment (its unclear definitions and its relationship to poverty), the construction of "idealized" parenting (rooted histories of white supremacy and settler colonialism), and child welfare interventions.

The epistemology of unknowing (dis-epistemology) "invites us to abandon our attachment to knowing and especially to knowing all" (Ben-Moshe, 2020, p. 127) in order to generate new possibilities. Ben-Moshe (2020) describe three ways in which abolition can be understood as dis-epistemology: it is about letting go of certainty, professional expertise, and specific demands for what comes next. From this analytic viewpoint, we are encouraged to see not knowing and "disorientation as generative" rather than inhibitive because it is from this place of not knowing that we can begin to prefigure the world (Ben-Moshe, 2020, p. 127). Indeed, it is from this place that activists and abolitionists across the nation have begun to advocate for radical change in our country's approach to child welfare, working to replace the current system with community-based responses to harm and need (Roberts, 2022).

Application of an abolitionist framework to the child protection system is not a denial that there are children who experience serious harm and abuse at the hands of their caregivers. Rather an abolitionist approach rejects simplistic narratives of safety and protection and refuses to accept that the well-being of children must come at the expense of social justice. When asked about how they would respond to those who argue that police abolition is harmful because police are needed to protect the public and prevent crime, the sociologist and police abolitionist, Alex Vitale, stated, "The police are not providing the kind of safety that we think that they are providing – not because of bad intentions; not because they don't want to protect people. It is the wrong tool. The damage has already been done by the time they show up" (Demby et al., 2022, 27:35). The same thing can be said of the child protection system. It is the wrong tool, and we have an ethical responsibility to imagine new ones.

Toward A Pedagogy of Resistance

In this paper we have argued that child welfare is a system of family regulation (Roberts, 2020) that implements punitive measures to manage and surveil the families caught in its sphere of influence. As such, Title IV-E child welfare training partnerships are in direct contradiction to the profession's guiding principle of social justice. Reflecting on this ethical disjuncture, we have advanced an abolitionist analysis of IV-E and social work education. We are deeply troubled by the ways in which we, as social work educators, are implicated in the ongoing harm perpetuated by child welfare. So too, we worry for the well-being of our students.

Moral transgressions in child welfare work are virtually unavoidable and moral injury among workers is the inevitable outcome (Haight et al., 2017). Moral injury is a lasting psychological, spiritual, and existential wound that occurs when individuals perpetrate or witness actions that violate their moral beliefs and expectations (Litz et al., 2009). Research has shown that child welfare workers experience moral injury by virtue of their complicity with a system that is entrusted with helping families and instead causes them harm (Haight et al., 2017). Child welfare workers in Haight et al.'s (2017) study questioned their own identities as moral and ethical professionals while working in a problematic system "steeped in human misery" (Haight et al., 2017, p. 37). More crushingly, the participants

in the study expressed that their participation in the child welfare system led them to doubt whether the world itself can be a good and moral place.

As social work educators, we need to scrutinize the ethics of training our students to work in this type of environment, both for the harm it does to families and the harm it causes to social workers. The well-being and ethical integrity of students are compromised when they are relegated to work that actively enacts rather than resists harm. As Rossiter (2005) states, "social workers as people suffer when the results of practice seem so meager in comparison to the ideals inherent in social work education, in agency expectations, and in implicit norms which define 'professional'" (Rossiter, 2005, para. 4). We can do better.

Rather than teaching our students to function within well-oiled machines of oppression, let us infuse the epistemology and ethics of abolition into our curriculum. This means teaching our students to question the actual functions of "common sense" systems like child welfare (among so many others) and sensitizing them to the immediate and long-term consequences of child welfare involvement for families. It means critiquing dominant practices such as mandated reporting and instead teaching frameworks of "mandated supporting" which offer approaches to ensuring child well-being by providing families with needed resources and support, rather than relying on state intervention (Harrell & Wahab, 2022; Raz, 2020; Social Workers Against Mandates, 2021). It means helping them interrogate the foundation and logics of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberal capitalism which lie at the heart of much of child welfare (and social work) practice. It means teaching them to locate the cause of child and family distress in structural inequity rather than individual parental pathology. It means allowing students to embrace value systems and ways of thinking beyond those embedded in the neoliberal standards and agendas of our professional organizations (Brady et al., 2019) and thereby emphasizing practices of movement building and resistance as legitimate forms of professional practice. A pedagogy rooted in abolition means giving our students the creative space to prefigure the world in an unforeseen direction.

A common refrain against abolition (prison, institutionalization, child welfare) is "what's the alternative? If not this, then what?" In simple terms, the alternative to family policing is the creation of a just and caring society in which the needs of families are prioritized and provided for without the threat of surveillance and separation. Although this type of societal reshaping may seem like a fantasy, the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a tangible example of what this type of radical restructuring could look like (Arons, 2022; Roberts, 2022). During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the U.S. experienced what Arons (2022) refers to as "an unintended abolition" of the child protection system. When the U.S. went into lockdown in March 2020, the country's child protection systems did as well. While traditional forms of social services and government regulation were shut down in the early days of the pandemic, alternative forms of community support and mutual aid flourished. By the end of July 2020, there were 60 mutual aid networks operating in New York City alone, providing services such as grocery deliveries, childcare, and support groups (Arons, 2022). These groups removed traditional bureaucratic intake procedures and eligibility requirements typically required by government and private charity organizations and made racial justice and collective care their founding principles (Arons, 2022).

In addition to local mutual aid, the federal government also increased direct support to families without the ties of surveillance and control during the early months of the pandemic. In April 2020, Congress passed the CARES Act, which included a one-time payment of $1,200 for adults earning less than $75,000 a year, $500 for each child under the age of 17 in the household, and $600 per week in extra unemployment benefits through the end of July 2020" (Roberts, 2022). This was the largest federal direct aid to families in U.S. history and the money was distributed without any of the investigation, surveillance, and regulation required of the "supports" provided through child protection systems (Roberts, 2022).

Data from New York City showed that, during the city-wide lockdown, child fatalities and reports of child abuse and neglect dropped significantly and once the city reopened in Fall 2020, there was no surge in reports in child neglect or abuse nor an increase in the rate of abuse or neglect determinations (Arons, 2022). Arons (2022) concludes that, "Though unintentional, this brief experiment shows that the outsized and reactionary family regulation system . . . is not necessary to protect children. . . Abolition need not be a fantasy; New York City already made it, for a moment, a reality" (p. 5).

Lessons from the pandemic give us hope for "what next" could be, but the political, economic, and social reality of creating and sustaining this type of transformation long-term will be complicated and difficult work. Yet as Meiners (2016) reminds us "resolution is not a prerequisite for critique" (p. 192). We should not let fear of the uncertainty and complexity inherent in abolition work keep us stuck in the ongoing practice of supporting incremental, ineffective "reformist reforms." Rather than insist on certainty in our pursuit of justice and abolition, Meiners (2016) encourages us to invoke the *not this.* "*Not this* reorients the terrain and forces other imaginative possibilities. *Not this*, as a tool of the marginal, firmly interrupts business as usual" (Meiners, 2016, p. 192). Following Meiners (2016), we draw on the ethics of resistance embodied in abolition to say not this: Not this to IV-E training partnerships in schools of social work; not this to taking money that legitimizes and expands a system proven harmful to children and families; not this to preparing our students to be cogs in a white supremacist machine of family regulation. Not this.

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