

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 26 – Alexandra Dean

Intro - Hi, I'm Charmaine Williams, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Academic, for the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Welcome to Profiles in Social Work. This podcast series is produced by our Faculty and Alumni Association. In 2014 the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work is celebrating 100 years of contributing to Social Work Practice and Education. You can find out more about us by visiting us online at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca We're glad you could join us today. The series Profiles in Social Work highlights how social workers are making a positive difference in our communities by presenting stories of how social work graduates are using their degrees. We hope you will enjoy this series. Especially if you are thinking about a career in social work or interested in hearing about what social workers do.

Profile - Alexandra Dean

My name is Alexandra Dean and I graduated from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2000.

I had actually decided that I wanted to go into psychology and work with teens, that's what I decided when I was in high school, and so that's what I studied. There was just something that just wasn't as good of a fit for me, so it was actually a professor that I had, one of my psychology professors, I toyed with the idea of art therapy or using arts in therapy, and he had suggested that I might be interested in social work where I could incorporate the arts into my work as well. I finished my degree in psychology, because by then I was almost done, applied to do my bachelor of social work and then of course ended up with my master's here. By the time that I decided I wanted to do my master of social work I had already been working in child welfare for two years. I chose U of T because of its international reputation and the program best suited my professional goals at the time.

My placement experience really stands out for me. Often the child becomes the identified client but really the child doesn't live in isolation; and so it was working with families around finding a solution to alleviate whatever symptoms a child was displaying. That's why I was interested in exploring that a little bit more because when I

was in child welfare, especially as an intake worker, your involvement with families is quite brief. After a month you either close the file or transfer to an ongoing worker. I always sort of wondered you know, what happened after. It wasn't as time limited. You stayed involved with families until the need wasn't there anymore, so it could be as short as a month, sometimes it was as long as two years.

What really stood out for me, and I was surprised by it, probably my research class. I'd always been intimidated a bit by research before I went to university, even while I was in university in my undergrad, but I think it was my experience in my graduate program at U of T that really, I think I finally got that click of the connection between the importance of research and the influence on frontline everyday practice. And I think that's something that we take for granted and sometimes it's automatic, particularly when I'm doing program development, the importance of research and past research is crucial in developing new programs and I think it was really my experience in my research class here that helped me with that. I had a great professor. She had very high expectations, which is a great thing, but she managed to take away the idea of research from being only in the academic world and bring it home to frontline practice, that you could choose an area, a method of research that fit for your needs, your practice and what your end goals were. Some of the clinical courses were helpful. Having the ability to raise questions in class that came up in placement was also helpful in terms of making that connection between again research and practice.

I did a school based mental health program that actually introduced me to what school social workers do. That was always one of the favourite parts of my job in children's mental health was going into the school system. One of the aspects of school social work that I really like a lot is there's the freedom and flexibility to be as creative as you want looking for unique ways to serve sort of often marginalized youth. Currently I'm working as a school social worker in a regional alternative education program so already our student population tends to be a bit more marginalized than mainstream school settings. And what I mean by that is, not everybody learns the same way. Education is designed for a certain student and it works for most. Most people have been through the same kind of education system and they tend to be larger school settings, larger class sizes and not as much one-to-one help available. That's just the reality of our system. Not everybody functions well in those environments, and especially when you have other barriers that are getting in the way of the freedom to be in school. Poverty, family conflict at home, mental health challenges, sometimes substance use; so a whole variety of social issues and also personal issues can interfere with someone's ability to learn.

Alternative education developed to support those students. So there's smaller class sizes, more individual help and often more support outside of school is available. So for students that won't access outside community counseling services, and that's just not an interest or they're not ready for that yet, that's also one of the aspects of school social work that I really like as well, meeting the needs of students on-site while they're at school. What kinds of programs can you develop that are less threatening for people, so they don't feel like they have to sit and talk one-to-one, that doesn't work for everybody as well, so the alternative program I run, I'm social worker assigned to programs, one of them is a program for expelled students and the other is a program that I helped initiate and co-develop for teen mothers; two very different student populations. With the expulsion program a lot of the students there have undiagnosed mental health problems and they don't want to be diagnosed, they just want to be left alone. However their behaviour gets them expelled, often poor choices will get them expelled and to be expelled from school you have to commit certain types of offences on or off school property. So I'd say the biggest reason for referral is substance, either drug use at school, selling drugs, assault is a big one, sometimes our students are involved with gangs but they still have that connection to school. There is a program that now is offered to them to be able to allow them to finish their education and get some more help.

Another social worker at a hospital had developed a running program for his clients who suffered from anxiety and depression and I think they started with six people in the program and now it's well over forty. It's been really, really successful and so there was an article that profiled his running group and so I contacted him to see if he could help me work on a program for our students in the expulsion program and we had more limitations around how to offer this program because it had to be during school hours, near school property. We also couldn't quite train for the same kind of a race on the weekend, most of them didn't want to do that, however having said that, he connected me with a volunteer who had also seen the article, a running coach who was fantastic, and he came out to our program twice a week, and we got donations for running shoes and you know I will say that as much as the students didn't want to go running they still went twice a week and they felt better after, some talked about reducing their substance use, you know would comment around "I have to quit smoking" or "I have to stop smoking pot" whatever, cut back on it. Some of them continue to run during the summertime so that's just one example of how school social work you don't have to only do counseling, you can create all kinds of different programs to meet the needs of the particular population that you're working with.

Everyone's unique so it's finding what will best suit the needs of that unique person or that unique group and work. One of the reasons why I'm drawn to school social work is because there is a lot of freedom and independence in your work in the school system to be able to create any type of programming that you want to. You can do social skills groups, you can do anger management groups, and you can do arts groups and with some students building trust, some in particular more so than others, have a harder time trusting and so that relationship building is key. And you can do through activity or starting a program, it'll be a small class, to support students who have mental health challenges. And so one of the programs that I'll be doing there, I have an interest in photography, so the principal of the school is going to order some cameras and software program and then we're going to do photography projects together. I don't know what the end project will be yet, but sometimes it's the process of doing something that shapes the end project. So you can go in two directions, have a specific goal in mind or develop your goal along the way.

I know my hospital experience working in the maternal child health program, women and babies program, strongly influenced my interest in trying to develop a program at the school board for teen mothers. The goals are really around stabilization and transfer. It's not meant to be a long-term program. This past September we had eight babies born throughout the year and a couple of the students just wanted to come for one semester and go back to their home school, their regular school so they could graduate with their friends. It allowed them to take a break from school after they delivered their baby, we had child minding on site, so they could come bring their babies. The babies were close by but not in the classroom, although sometimes that had to happen if they were breast feeding. They could be in the classroom working on their education while their babies were being looked after and then get their credits. We tended to focus on girls that were credit deficient, they were at risk of not graduating high school, a lot had family issues that already existed before the pregnancy and got exacerbated by the pregnancy or as a result of a pregnancy, so providing support and family support to them to address any barriers to them completing their education because being a parent is hard enough, and also providing some parenting education jointly with public health as well. The ultimate goal is so they could complete their high school diploma and move on to hopefully post-secondary education or a job, whatever their interests were so that they could do that successfully; also peer support. I'd have to say right from the very beginning that most of the girls bonded with each other and provided a support to each other, you know even just sharing stories about the discrimination that they experienced on the bus with their strollers, being a young parent being judged by patrons on the bus and talking about that together, about what that felt

like, or how their families reacted when they found out they were pregnant and just that common bond of shared experience, that they wouldn't necessarily get in the regular school system.

Professionally it's learning to be comfortable and live with that you're not going to always see immediate rewards in the work that you do, and I think that's something to be really mindful is it's baby steps a lot of the time and learning to be patient and not rush and working within a system that doesn't always understand that too. Issues take years to develop. They don't always take days to go away. Being able to know and hope that some of, or a lot of the work that you do in your current work with someone does have an effect down the road.

I think the most important thing to remember if you're considering the field of social work is that you really have to leave judgement out of the room, and that can be hard for people because we inherently, that's sort of something sort of natural that we all do. Really working from where someone is at in their life and having patience. Probably the most important thing about being a social worker to me is recognizing that everyone has their own story how life happens to them and being able to really listen and find out what that story is, where they are today, their strengths and their challenges. What you see on the outside doesn't show people's lived experiences. I learn from everyone that I talk to especially the people that I work with. People's resiliency and strength always astounds me. Helping people see the strengths in themselves is a really important part of the work for me.

Outro - This is Charmaine Williams from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Thank you for listening to our podcast. In 2014 our school is celebrating 100 years of social work research, teaching and community service. For more information about the faculty and our programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca