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Title	'Career preference', 'transients' and 'converts': A study of social workers' retention in child protection and welfare
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Publication date	2011-04-01
Original Citation	Burns, K. 2011. 'Career Preference', 'Transients' and 'Converts': A Study of Social Workers' Retention in Child Protection and Welfare. British Journal of Social Work, 41, 520-538. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcq135
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1093/bjsw/bcq135
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Download date	2026-11-05 20:30:25
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/607

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Published in the *British Journal of Social Work* - http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/41/3/520.abstract

Citation

Burns, K. (2011) "Career preference', 'transients' and 'converts': A study of social workers' retention in child protection and welfare', *British Journal of Social Work*, 41, pp. 520-538.

Abstract

Both domestically and internationally, retaining social workers in statutory child protection and welfare work has been identified as a problem. However, this issue appears to receive only modest attention from researchers. This paper reports on the findings of a study that examined the retention of 'front-line' child protection and welfare social workers in one Health Service Executive area in the Republic of Ireland. A qualitative study was undertaken with forty-four social workers with experience of this work setting. Whilst familiar themes such as organisational supports, social exchanges with peers, amongst others were highlighted as important in social workers' decisions to stay or leave, a grounded analysis of the data highlighted the importance of a theme not previously presented in this research. In this study participants made links between their understandings of career pathways for newly-qualified social workers and what they perceived as the key role play by child protection and welfare in 'proving' or inducting newly-qualified social workers, and the likelihood of their retention in this sector. This analysis led to the construction of a career preference typology with three 'types' of social worker: 'career preference', 'transients' and 'converts'.

Keywords

Child protection, job retention and turnover, newly-qualified social workers, social work career typology, metaphors in the spoken language of social workers, Republic of Ireland

Retaining social workers in child protection and welfare

Both domestically and internationally, retaining social workers in statutory child protection and welfare work has been identified as a problem. In the Republic of Ireland, the present Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has commented on this issue (RTÉ, 2008), it has been frequently raised in Dáil Éireann (parliament) debates (Houses of the Oireachtas, 1996, 2008), and policy and government reports have identified it as a concern (see, for example, Social Services Inspectorate, 2003; Ombudsman for Children, 2006). In addition, an Irish child abuse inquiry implicated it as a factor in one Health Board's failure to protect a child at risk (McGuinness, 1993), and service users have reported that it impacts upon the quality of services they receive (Buckley *et al.*, 2008). Similar to the Irish experience, studies examining this issue in the United Kingdom, Sweden, the United States of America, Australia and Canada (Gibbs, 2001; Audit Commission, 2002; Mor Barak *et al.*, 2006; Stalker *et al.*, 2007; Tham, 2007) have also reported problems retaining workers in child protection and welfare.

Low staff retention rates in child protection and welfare appear–at least from reading the literature and newspapers-to be a perennial issue which impacts upon service users, employing organisations, social workers, and the social work profession; however, this issue appears to receive only modest attention from researchers. While the Irish literature suggests that retaining social workers in child protection and welfare is problematic, there is no specific Irish research that examines the factors influencing child protection and welfare social workers' retention nor the actual extent of the problem in the Republic of Ireland (hereafter, Ireland). Studies in this area usually examine the influence of individual, social support, supervision and organisational factors on social workers' retention (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2006; Strolin *et al.*, 2007), and recently published articles in this journal have examined this supporting literature in detail (Tham, 2007; Collins, 2008; Healy *et al.*, 2009) – something which I do not repeat here. This study sought to address these issues in an Irish context by asking: 1. What are the turnover and employee mobility rates of child protection and welfare social workers? 2. What are child protection and welfare social workers' understandings of the individual, supervisory, social support, and organisational factors that influence their decisions to want to stay in or leave their current employment? 3. What role is played by social exchanges between child

protection and welfare social workers, their supervisors and colleagues, in the retention of the former? The findings related to these questions will be presented in future publications as this paper focuses on unexpected findings from this study.

When analysing the qualitative data using a grounded theory approach, emerging *nVivo* codes based on the language used by social workers in their interviews suggested another way to think about child protection and welfare social workers' retention which has not, so far, been explicitly examined in the retention literature and were not addressed in this study's preliminary research questions either. The unexpected data led to the development of a supplementary research question which asked: How do child protection and welfare social workers' understandings of career pathways in social work influence their motivations to work in child protection and welfare and subsequent decisions to stay or leave? This paper examines the findings related to this question, with a particular focus on the career pathways for newly-qualified graduates. This analysis led to the construction of a career preference typology with three 'types' of social worker. This article explores how each of these three groups' understandings of a career in social work influenced their employment decisions and the likelihood of their retention within child protection and welfare, and how these decisions may change over time. The remainder of this article focuses on a further question raised by this data, which is whether child protection and welfare is used as a 'proving ground' for newly-qualified social workers. The next two sections set the context for child protection and welfare in Ireland prior to discussing the study's findings.

Current development in child protection and welfare in Ireland

Much like the United Kingdom and other countries, child abuse inquiries in Ireland have been the catalyst that have led to the incremental modernisation of what was, and some might argue possibly still is (Lynch and Burns, 2008; Garrett, 2009), an under-developed system to promote and protect the welfare of children. While Ireland has made respectable progress in developing the policy and legislative basis for a modern child protection system (see United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006; OECD, 2009; Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2009), the provision of financial resources to support these developments has been insufficient. The implications of this under-investment can be seen in the *Doing*

Better for Children report (OECD, 2009), where, for example, in a ranking of countries in the OECD, Ireland has the seventh highest level of child poverty (p. 35), the fifth highest rate of suicide for 15-19 year-old males (p. 52), and spends less than the OECD average on children, with particularly low spending on the under-sixes (pp. 74-75).

Recently published Irish child abuse inquires further highlighted abuse and less than adequate care of children in Ireland's religious-run residential units in the last century (Ryan, 2009), the sexual abuse of a large number of children by a significant number of Roman Catholic priests in the Dublin Diocese (Murphy *et al.*, 2009), and questioned whether service provision was adequate to prevent the deaths of children within their family home (Brosnan, 2009) and in the care system (Health Service Executive, 2010). It is yet to be seen whether a progressive plan published by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (2009) to the develop the child protection and welfare system in response to the findings of the Ryan commission report (2009) will receive adequate funding.

The global economic crisis has hit Ireland particularly badly, and one of the results of this has been the imposition in the public sector of a policy called the Employment Control Framework, which has meant that vacant posts are not filled and there is a moratorium on the recruitment of staff. This was on top of the existing issues of staff shortages in social work (Garrett, 2009). The impact of this policy for child protection and welfare has been that since late 2006, while child abuse referrals have increased year on year (Burns, 2009), a reducing number of social workers have been staffing the system. During this period, data collected on caseloads for social workers participating in this study found average caseloads of 40+ children per social worker (Burns, 2008). In mid-2009, *The Irish Times* quoted an unpublished HSE report stating that 6,500 children at risk had no allocated social worker (O'Brien, 2009). Despite the lifting of the moratorium on the recruitment of child protection social workers in the later half of 2009 to address this backlog of cases, the Irish Association of Social Workers (2009) argue that the current recruitment of social workers does not represent an expansion of the system as suggested by the government but will only restore the system to its 2006 labour-force strength of about 730 posts. A second result of the economic crisis for child protection and welfare has been that essential

services such as counselling, alternative care placements, and staff mileage to visit children at risk in their homes have been severely curtailed.

Within this context, child protection and welfare teams in Ireland, almost exclusively staffed by social workers, are endeavouring to provide a service to a growing number of children and their families being referred for assessment and intervention (Health Service Executive, 2009), with fewer resources and for a significant period of time, with a smaller staff compliment. In addition, coverage of child abuse inquiries in the media have contributed to increased scrutiny of practice and an increased rate of referrals. Why would social workers-particularly newly-qualified social workers-choose to work and stay in such a work environment?

Career pathways for newly-qualified social workers

A recurring theme in the literature addressing retention in child protection and welfare is the number of newly-qualified (often young) or 'novice professional phase' (Rønnestad and Skovholt, 2003) social workers employed in this setting, and the relatively short length of time they stay in work (see, for example, Gibbs and Keating, 1999; Healy *et al.*, 2009; Tham and Meagher, 2009). In Ireland, data from the most recent social work labour force report (National Social Work Qualifications Board, 2006) showed that a disproportionate number (nearly 60%) of newly-qualified graduates begin their social work careers in child protection and welfare. Table 1 summarises information on the 'top' four sectors identified in this report as employing newly-qualified social work graduates:

Table 1: Recently qualified practitioners by social work practice setting

Social work practice setting	Total posts by practice setting as a percentage of total posts	% of newly-qualified practitioners employed in 2005
Child protection and family support (statutory)	33% (737.9)	58.8%
Medical social work	13% (281.1)	16%
Fostering	8% (178.2)	4.7%
Probation service	13% (285.7)	2.7%
Other social work settings combined	33% (753.5)	17.8%
	100% (2236.4 posts)	100%

Why do a disproportionately large number of social workers begin their career in child protection and welfare and what are the implications, if any, for social workers' retention in this practice setting? Social workers in this study were asked about their preferred career path post-qualification and why they chose to enter child protection and welfare. The analysis of the qualitative data from this part of social workers' interviews examined the metaphors used by social workers in describing their career choices and time spent 'doing' social work in child protection and welfare. It was possible to discern some common themes associated with social workers' perceptions of employment options in social work; their perceptions of social work employers' expectations of prospective staff members; where newly-qualified graduates get their practice experience and first job in social work, and the idea of 'proving' themselves in this practice setting post-qualification.

Methodology

The study sample was comprised of 2 groups. In the first sample, 35 social workers and senior social work practitioners (sample population = 81 possible participants, 74 women and 7 men) who were working in child protection and welfare in one of five child protection and welfare teams in one HSE area, were interviewed. In the second sample, 10 participants who had left their employment as child protection and welfare social workers from this HSE area in the previous year, were also interviewed. In total, 43 persons were interviewed and two social workers were interviewed twice (once while in post and once after leaving their post). Only one person refused an invitation to be interviewed as they were going on maternity leave. Participants were selected to reflect the demographic profile of social workers in Ireland (age, sex, nationality), participants were selected to ensure each of the five teams were represented on a *pro-rata* basis by team size and type, and as the study was exclusively focused on two front-line social work grades, managers and other child protection professionals were excluded from the sample frame. 39 of the participants were women; three quarters of the participants were born in the Republic of Ireland; their average age on the day of interview was 37 (median = 32) and participants had an average tenure length in child protection and welfare of 3.5 years. Table 2

summarises the range of participants' child protection and welfare social work experience:

Table 2: Range of participants' practice experience in child protection and welfare

Range	***No.***	***%***
0 - 2 years	11	25%
3 - 5 years	18	41%
6 - 10 years	10	23%
11 - 15 years	3	7%
16 - 20 years	1	2%
21 - 25 years	1	2%
Total	**44**	**100%**

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken between March 2005 and February 2007 at venues of the participants' choosing, generally lasting between 60-100 minutes, and one participant contributed to the study by email. An informed consent process guided the ethical aspects of the study, all of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms are used for all social workers quoted below. Interview transcripts were analysed using *Atlas.ti* (version 5.2), a software package that supports the analysis of qualitative data.

Coding in the grounded theory tradition emphasises the importance of analysing research participants' use of language as 'specific use of language reflects views and values … and coding should inspire us to examine hidden assumptions in our own use of language as well as that of our participant' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47). The analysis of emerging data in the early part of the coding process focused on the language used by social workers to describe the time they spent in child protection and welfare. The social work career typology emerged from such an analysis: *nVivo* codes were developed during the data analysis and memos were written and refined which helped to improve the typology and to keep it anchored in the emerging data analysis. Each iteration of the typology was tested against the data to ensure it was sufficiently comprehensive and representative of all research participants' experiences. Drawing on this analysis, a social work career typology was developed with three archetypical career social work 'types' within child protection and welfare: 'career preference', 'transients' and 'converts'.

Perceived career pathways in social work for newly-qualified graduates

Social workers' motivations for entering employment in child protection and welfare were not explicitly present in the literature as a factor in determining whether social workers would stay or leave. However, interviewees made links between their decision to want to stay or leave their post in child protection and welfare with their perceptions of career pathways in social work, which contributed to their initial decision to work in child protection and welfare. For example, some of the interviewees stated that before they started work as a child protection and welfare social worker, they understood that this job would be a 'stepping stone' – possibly even an obligatory step – before getting a job in a preferred area of social work. For other social workers, working in child protection and welfare was their first choice career preference. This section explores how each of these groups' understandings of a career in social work influenced their employment decisions and retention within child protection and welfare, and how these may change over time. Each of the following sections examines their career expectations, questions the 'choice' made by each of these social workers to enter this work, and explores the likelihood of their retention.

Child protection and welfare as a 'career preference'

22 of the 43 social workers interviewed indicated that child protection and welfare was their preferred career choice in social work. The following quotes show that these social workers made very deliberate decisions to enter child protection and welfare: this work was their career preference. Jessica and Claire emphasised their commitment to children and their protection, and the excitement associated with this type of work was significant in their career preference for child protection and welfare:

> Child protection social work was my first job after graduation with an MSW. I purposefully pursued a post in child protection and welfare as it was of most interest to me, it can be exciting as a child protection social worker. I believed in the importance and necessity of good child protection social work, as I believe it can protect children from terrible abuse and hurt (Jessica).

> My commitment is to look after children. That's the area that interests me most …the variety that was in the work…the idea of being out in the community and kind of meeting families and working with families … that appealed to me (Claire).

Rather more equivocal amongst the group who identified that child protection and welfare was their career preference was a group of social workers who described their awareness that child protection and welfare was the largest employer of social workers: for Laura it is a career preference only due to the large size of the sector, and therefore entry is more likely to be a pragmatic career 'choice':

> I always felt that child protection was kind of your starting off point and then you kind of climbed. But, I couldn't [now] see myself as doing anything else in [name of geographical area] within social work, except child protection. I find other areas quite unchallenging (Laura).

These are interesting points: if for some social workers child protection and welfare is seen as a 'starting off point' in one's professional career, as Laura described, the likelihood of their retention may be low as they were always planning on leaving to 'climb' to a post in another social work setting. Laura's suggestion that child protection and welfare is a 'lower' status career choice, where the newly-qualified begin their career, was also identified by Ciara when describing how some social workers saw that other social work jobs were 'better' than child protection and welfare:

> They do their time and then they move onto better jobs (Ciara).

Ciara's use of the metaphor 'do their time' - a metaphor used to describe being in prison or an apprenticeship - is interesting as it may suggest that social workers perceive that they have to work in this area for a limited period before they work in another social work setting, a theme I will return to later in the article.

Most of the career preference social workers chose to work in child protection and welfare because they had a strong commitment to child protection work and its service users. Social workers in this group who expressed a desire to stay perceived that they were making enough of a difference (see Burns, 2008), and they were likely

to have good peer supports and/or experience their supervisor as supportive, which together, often ameliorated the negative aspects of less than optimal organisational conditions such as the organisational climate, organisational support and caseload size. If alternative employment opportunities were perceived to be available to this group they were not interested in them as their commitment was to working with these children and families. Also, these other job alternatives were described as somehow less 'attractive' or they did not conform to participants' expectations of professional growth and/or need for a challenge.

Of these 22 social workers, 10 wanted to continue to work in child protection and welfare, four had left by the end of the study (however, three were still working in child protection and welfare in another area), and eight indicated that they wanted to leave. Within the eight who wanted to leave, there was a discernible group who were disillusioned with their professional experience in child protection and welfare. These social workers may have had good peer supports, but they often experienced supervisor support as low, they did not perceive the organisation as supportive and they expressed disillusionment at the 'difference' they were making as professionals in the lives of service users (see Burns, 2008, 2009). Should this group eventually leave, their turnover should be considered as potentially avoidable: this work is their career preference and the employing organisation (HSE) could have considered the possibility of developing mechanisms to address their concerns and thus help them to stay.

It should not be assumed that the 'career preference' social workers are guaranteed to stay or that those who want to leave will actually leave. Some social workers stay not because they like or dislike the job/organisation, but their decision can often be based on the degree of their embeddedness within the organisation and/or the community (Holtom *et al.*, 2006), aspects of which are often external to, and outside the control of, the employing organisation. Even if they are disillusioned, some of these social workers said that they are likely to stay, at least in the short to medium term, because employment contract conditions are perceived to be better than non-HSE jobs, there were few perceived job alternatives, they want to stay living in a particular geographical area (family or life-style), or other life choices were more important that work environment and/or professional considerations at this time.

The second group of social workers identified in the data-analysis were the 'transients', whose motivations for entering child protection and welfare suggested that their decision to leave child protection may have been made even before they entered.

Child protection and welfare as a 'stepping stone' (transients)

Within the study, there was a discernible group of social workers who also 'chose' to enter child protection and welfare, but their reasons were different to the 'career preference' group. The other 21 social workers in the study initially entered the sector for instrumental reasons or because felt that they had no 'choice' due to a lack of alternative employment options, and they had a clear expectation of a short-term career in child protection and welfare ('transients'). Following a period of employment in this setting, two thirds of the transient group revised their career plan and expectations regarding their tenure length in the sector, and these social workers ('converts') are discussed in the next section. However, for one third of the transient group who entered for instrumental reasons, their experience in the setting did not contribute to a revision of their career plan and their career in child protection and welfare continues to be 'transient', and therefore it is unlikely that the sector will retain this group. One example of the instrumental reasons highlighted by social workers for entering the sector was to get additional practice experience. This instrumental use of the sector is illustrated by Sophia who pointed out:

> It's like having a third placement. I am going to use this and get out (Sophia).

Furthermore, the perceived availability of posts in child protection and welfare, compared to other sectors, was highlighted. Simon explained how child protection and welfare for him was a place to learn until the opportunity arose to move to his preferred area of social practice:

> It was where the jobs were … That's the bottom line … Here to learn ... (Simon).

The use of child protection and welfare as a place to build one's experience and learn is interesting: it can be beneficial to the sector as it assists in the recruitment of staff,

but a disadvantage is that these social workers are unlikely to be retained in the long-term as their career preference is for a different practice setting. Roisin, a social worker who left child protection and welfare and is now working in her preferred area of social work practice, points to the role of her college classmates and course design in forming her opinion that child protection and welfare is where you started your career. A move to your preferred area of practice is perceived to be unavailable upon graduation until you first get experience in child protection and welfare:

> … when we were in college the whole two years of the Master's course revolved around child protection ... But I always got the impression from…and I wouldn't even say lecturers, you receive it from other students, that it was the place to go to serve your time and that eventually then you would get something that you actually wanted to do. But that child protection was always going to be something that you just … it filled the gap … it was your two years experience that you needed to move on to something else … There was an idea that no-one is going to walk in after just being newly-qualified into a job in mental health. You are going to have to work your way up to that. And to get that….that would follow child protection (Roisin).

Roisin's quotation underscores a perception held by many social workers in the study that you need to 'serve your time' (another penal and apprenticeship, but also a military metaphor) in child protection and welfare before you can gain access to your preferred career interest. Like Laura earlier, she also described other careers in social work as 'up' from child protection and welfare. She also understood that employers in other practice settings would not employ graduates who had not first served their apprenticeship in child protection and welfare.

The study also identified a group related to the 'transients', and their data is presented separately in the next section. These social workers may have had initial motivations and reasons for entering child protection and welfare which were similar to those of 'transients', but they differ in terms of their retention in one very important way.

Child protection and welfare as a career surprise ('converts')

While these social workers are part of a group who initially entered the sector for instrumental reasons or because they had no 'choice' due to a lack of alternative employment options ('transients'), the experience of doing child protection and welfare work led them to revise their decision to leave in the short-term ('converts'). Nearly two-thirds of the 'transients' subsequently changed their decision to leave as a result of their experience of doing the work (figure 1):

Figure 1: Career decisions and retention in child protection and welfare



Caoimhe, a social worker with a career preference to work in another practice setting but who took a job in child protection and welfare as a 'stop-gap', described how her initial negative or ambivalent feelings about the work changed as a result of doing the work:

> *Interviewer: Was it your preference to take up a post in child protection?*
>
> Caoimhe: No, not child protection! … when I was in college studying to become a social worker, it was probably the area that I would have avoided, at all costs … It was never my intention to become a child protection social worker, but I think it was probably meant for me … I think, once I realised actually, that the crux of the job was protecting children, vulnerable children, then it's like - right yeah - I am in this job for a different reason.

Caoimhe's engagement with the political and professional goals of the work contributed to her revised decision to stay. Similarly, Thomas, a social worker who said that child protection and welfare was a career option at the bottom of his list, grew to like and enjoy the work, and wanted to stay. Thomas initially entered child

protection and welfare as there were no other available social work jobs in the geographical area in which he wanted to work:

> Child protection would have been pretty much at the bottom of my choices, my dream was always [identifying information removed], where incidentally I never worked, but that's how it goes. But I am very happy in my job, I am really interested in what I am doing and I really enjoy it (Thomas).

In his interview, Thomas highlighted the variety in the work, the stimulation and rewards of working children and families at risk, and the quality of social supports with peers as reasons for his change of plans. Charlotte, a 'convert' social worker who worked in child protection and welfare but had no initial preference for this work, raised another theme which I will examine in greater depth in the next section. Like other social workers, she highlighted the perception that child protection and welfare social work is a good place to learn and develop one's skills, but also that there is an element of 'proving' oneself in what she alluded to as a challenging work context:

> I fell into it really. I did enjoy doing it. And I suppose I would have heard that it's the best experience that you will get. And if you can … you know you learn so much there and you can manage … if you can manage to stay there you will manage anything (Charlotte).

In summary, there are a number of key factors which influenced 'converts' in their decision to stay in or leave this work. Following a period of employment in the sector, they developed a different outlook: they began to enjoy the work, feel that they were making enough of a difference, had good peer supports and/or experienced their supervisor as supportive and intended to stay in the job. A decision to leave is now less straightforward and a matter of weighing up the pull factors (such as team atmosphere, job satisfaction, stimulation, making a difference, growth opportunities, employment conditions, and so on) which for the moment outweigh the push factors (job stress, availability of resources, job insecurity, and so on).

The next section examines in greater depth a question identified in this section, namely whether child protection and welfare serves as a 'proving ground' for newly-

qualified social workers in Ireland, and the potential implications for retaining social workers.

Child protection and welfare as a 'proving ground' for newly-qualified graduates

Most of the social workers interviewed in the study expressed the view that all social workers were expected to spend time in child protection and welfare and that this time would range from somewhere between 2-5 years. An analysis of the language used by social workers in these parts of the transcripts identified how social workers employed 'military', 'apprenticeship' and 'prison' metaphors to emphasise their perceptions of child protection and welfare as an employment 'choice', particularly for newly-qualified graduates. Metaphors used to highlight this point illustrate the often transient nature of social workers' employment in this sector:

> do your time (Kelly)
> serve your time (Roisin)
> your stint (Tara/Charlotte/Nicole/Claire)
> do your dues (Jenna)
> under my belt (Nicole)
> I never saw myself as a life timer in child protection (Abbey)
> earn your stripes (Mya)
> a stepping stone (Isabelle).

As one example, Caitlin underlined the perception that employment options are limited for newly-qualified graduates and that child protection and welfare is the only 'choice':

> I just feel I have kind of done my time you know within that area [child protection and welfare]. It seemed to be the only area really that was recruiting straight, do you know, people straight out of college and that other areas were looking for people with maybe more experience or whatever (Caitlin).

Mya, a social worker who wanted to stay in the sector, described how she was told that child protection and welfare was where you went to 'earn your stripes'. Significantly, the message also indicated that your length of tenure was short-term;

you left before something negative happened to your health, suggesting that it is a challenging practice environment:

> I'd heard you know from various sources [fellow social work students and from probation workers while on a placement] that child protection was where you go in to, you earn your stripes, so to speak, and then you leave before it burns you out [social worker laughs] (Mya).

Indeed, social work is often considered to be one of the occupations with the highest risk of job stress (Millet *et al.*, 2005), 'with large caseloads, intense responsibility and heavy administration work' (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2006, p. 566). In the interviews, perceptions that child protection and welfare is 'tough' work and a good place to learn and to 'prove' oneself were raised by social workers, where Caitlin's quote is representative:

> I think it's a very good grounding. And I think…you know, and I think realistically no other area of social work could be as crisis-driven or as tough or as high caseloads … it is kind of throwing you into the deep end … generally people need to kind of do their time in child protection to get the background, to get the experience, and that that's…kind of I suppose it would have been seen as the toughest area (Caitlin).

However, other social workers such as Jane and Tara sought to challenge the normative expectation that one should leave after one's 'time' is served, thus challenging one of the dominant views held by the previously quoted social workers that everyone wants to, or should, leave child protection and welfare:

> That we can move away from I have done my stint now, four or five years and it is time to move on. Why can't we stay there [child protection and welfare]? (Jane).

> I know they say that two years is your stint and you can move on but I wouldn't see that because I still enjoy, I would say, I enjoy 90% of aspects of the work (Tara).

In her interview, Tara bemoaned the high levels of bureaucracy and low frequency of supervision, but found greater reward in protecting children, and receiving and providing support to colleagues, which contributed to her decision to stay. In addition to social workers entering the profession to do their time, they also explained their entry motivation in terms of 'proving' themselves as professionals. Tara, a career preference social worker that wanted to stay, identified that a perceived function of entering child protection and welfare was to 'prove' oneself: one could show one's ability to work in a demanding practice setting without 'breaking down'. Also of note again is the short-term nature of the expected tenure – one proves oneself and then one leaves:

> People kind of say - I have done that, ticked the box, proved yourself to be able to be in child protection, without completely breaking down, two years tick the box and off you go (Tara).

Isabelle explicitly described how a social worker who has not 'proved' themselves in child protection may feel inadequate before his/her peers and employers: in some way, they would be 'less' of a social worker if they had not done child protection and welfare:

> I felt I had to have child protection experience. I felt on a level I couldn't take myself seriously, nor would other colleagues take [you] … seriously, if you hadn't done child protection (Isabelle).

This point was also stressed by Hannah who employed a military reference, a tour of duty to a conflict zone, to highlight the unspoken expectation that an employment period in child protection is crucial to prove one's *bone fides* as a social worker (see , 2003 for a discussion of social workers use of miliarty metaphors in their spoken language) Again, we note the transient and short-term employment choices of social workers, and the suggestion from Hannah that newly-qualified social workers may reluctantly decide to enter because of expectations created by others while at college that working in child protection and welfare is a prerequisite for professional social work practice:

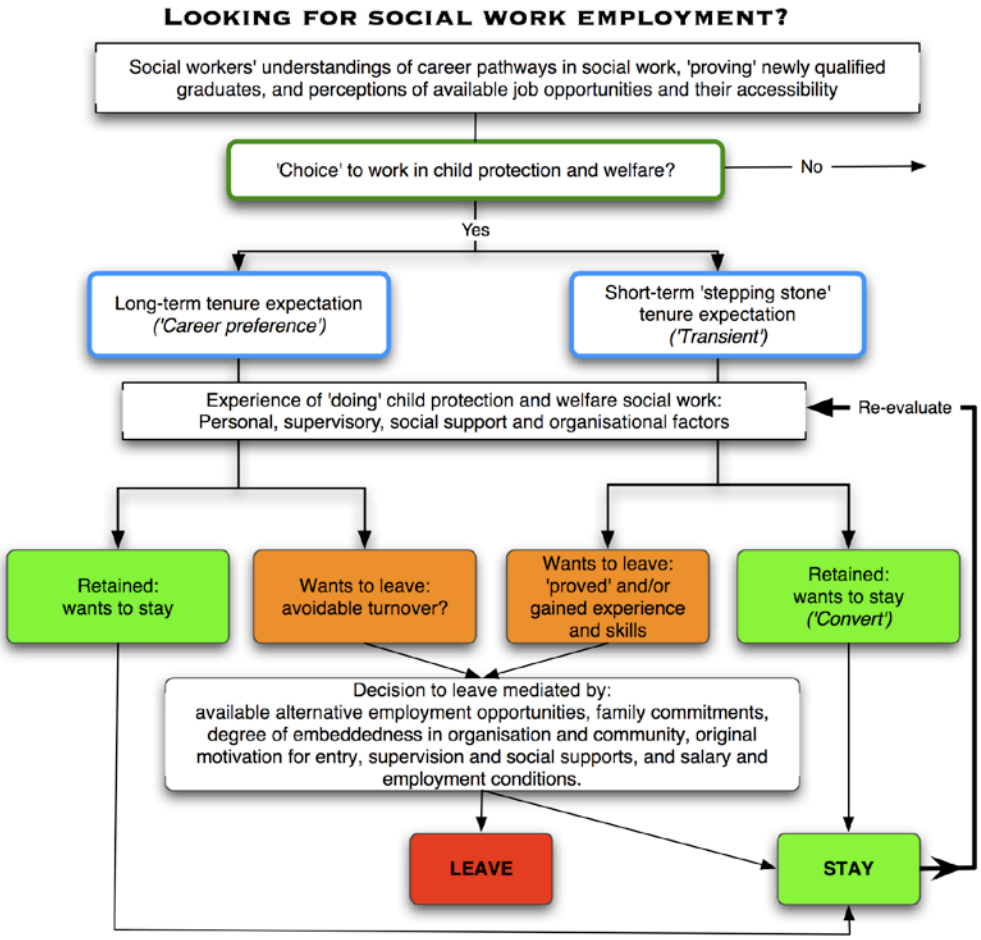
> … you were very much told that [while at university] it was like Beirut, you do a year in child protection and then you get out and

you need to do it because no one will take you seriously and really you were kind of frightened into it (Hannah).

Discussion

In summary, social workers in this study suggest in many instances that child protection and welfare is used as the 'proving ground' in social work. A 'proving ground' is a military term used to describe a place where machinery and weapons are tested/proved prior to general use. This definition has widened with usage to incorporate an area or situation where a person is tested or proved. Hence, they are also suggesting that there are implicit assumptions about career paths for newly-qualified social workers in Ireland, and this provides an interesting insight into staff retention in this sector. Figure 2 provides a graphical view of how these social workers' understandings of a career in social work influenced their decisions to stay or leave:

Figure 2: Social workers' career decisions flow chart



While all of the social workers in the study ‘chose’ to enter child protection and welfare, there are differing motivations for so doing, which in turn influence the length of social workers’ tenure expectations and the likelihood of their retention. These decisions to stay or leave appear to be influenced by four key perceptions.

Firstly, social workers highlighted the fact that they understood there was an expectation within the profession that newly-qualified social workers should first ‘prove’ themselves in child protection and welfare. These views were generated from their placement experiences, practice teachers, conversations with peers, university courses, and from social work employers. By working in what social workers described as a challenging and ‘tough’ area of social work practice, one ‘proves’ to oneself, employers and the profession that one is competent and able to ‘cope’, thereby becoming ‘eligible’ for a preferred area of social work practice. Secondly, if newly-qualified social workers perceived that their preferred career in social work (for example, older adults, or mental health) was accessible directly following college, it is unlikely that they would have ‘chosen’ to enter child protection and welfare, which may be a characteristic specific to Ireland where child protection and welfare is such a large component of the profession. Thirdly, some social workers indicated that they ‘chose’ to enter for pragmatic reasons: it was the sector recruiting, but also there was a perception of it being a good place to develop one’s skills and get a good ‘grounding’ in professional practice. Fourthly, social workers believed that social work employers preferred applicants with child protection and welfare experience. However, as illustrated in figure 2, social workers may re-evaluate their initial motivations for entry and career plan expectations in light of their experience of child protection, which influences the likelihood of their retention.

Whether this ‘proving ground’ phenomenon is specific to Ireland is unclear, although two non-Irish born and trained social workers interviewed in the research also spoke about a similar process in their home countries which suggests a need for further research. It is possible that social workers in Ireland describe the area in this manner as child protection and welfare is the largest area of employment and other areas of social work, which could provide alternative career pathways, are not as developed here as in other countries. It is also possible that the generic method of training in Ireland contributes to this issue by not producing graduates with a specialism that

could enable graduates to access non-child protection and welfare posts straight from university.

Concluding comments

Social workers' understandings of career paths for newly-qualified social workers and the related perception that child protection and welfare is 'used' both by social workers and employers as a 'proving ground', provides another layer to our understanding of how social workers make decisions to stay or leave this area of social work practice. While all of the social workers in the study 'chose' to enter child protection and welfare, there are differing motivations for entry, which in turn influenced expectations of the length of their 'time' in this setting and the likelihood of their retention.

Whether child protection and welfare is actually used within the profession as a 'proving ground' for newly-qualified social workers requires further research. However, social workers' assumptions about this 'practice' affected their behaviour, their decisions to stay in or leave the sector and the length of time they expect to practise there. Further research is required to explore these assumptions and the implications for social workers' retention with a more diverse range of research participants and stakeholders. The 'story' of social workers' retention is a complicated one and approaches to address it should be developed with reference to social work career pathways, particularly for newly-qualified social workers.

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