



Using concept mapping as a planning tool: Child welfare citizen review panels



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ABSTRACT

Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) are groups of citizen volunteers authorized by U.S. federal law to examine state child welfare agencies. These groups inspect policies and practices related to child protection responsibilities and are tasked with making recommendations for systemic improvement. Despite the federal mandate for each state to develop a CRP and the potential of these groups to positively impact child welfare practices, there is a dearth in the literature related to CRPs. Consequently, planning and evaluation processes of these groups vary widely. This study reports on the use of concept mapping (CM) to outline a framework for planning and subsequently evaluating the CRP in one southeastern state. CM is a mixed-method research approach that uses multi-dimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analyses to explore an area of study. Through these analyses, the method creates visual depictions of conceptual relationships between ideas. Data yielded a seven cluster concept map that CRP members ($N = 36$) utilized for planning processes, and subsequently for developing an internal evaluation tool. Results from this study offer a unifying framework by which CRPs, and similar groups in other areas can utilize for planning and evaluation purposes. After a review of pertinent literature on CRPs, this article explicates CM processes utilized in this study, describes results, discusses lessons learned, and outlines apposite areas for future CRP research.

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1. Introduction

Participation of an engaged citizenry has long been recognized as a pertinent part of planning governmental programs and interventions (e.g., Kinney, 2008; Roberts, 2004; Stivers, 1990), specifically in the area of child welfare (Bryan, Jones, Allen, & Collins-Camargo, 2007; Blome & Steib, 2007; Schorr, 2000). One way this participation has manifested in child welfare is through the formation of Citizen Review Panels (CRPs). CRPs are groups of citizen volunteers authorized by U.S. federal law to examine state child welfare agencies. These groups inspect policies and practices related to child protection responsibilities and are tasked with making recommendations for systemic improvement (U.S. Department for Health & Human Services, 2014).

Despite the federal mandates for CRPs, the millions of dollars of resources allotted to these panels, and the potential that these panels have in improving the child welfare system, little research has explored planning processes and evaluation related to CRPs (Bryan, Jones, & Lawson, 2010). Divergent CRP planning and

implementation processes between states and a lack of evaluation models and tools have undoubtedly contributed to this absence of published literature. This paper seeks to uniquely contribute to addressing limitations in the current literature.

This study reports on the use of concept mapping (CM) to outline a framework for planning and subsequently evaluating the CRP in one southeastern state. CM is a mixed-method research approach that uses multi-dimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analyses to explore an area of study (Kane & Trochim, 2007). Through these analyses, the method creates visual depictions of conceptual relationships between ideas (Anderson et al., 2006). After a review of pertinent literature on CRPs, this article explicates CM processes utilized in this study, describes results, discusses lessons learned, and outlines apposite areas for future CRP research.

2. Literature review

2.1. History of Citizen Review Panels

The origins of CRP can be traced to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (P.L. 93-247), or CAPTA. This seminal piece of child welfare legislation, passed by Congress and then signed into

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law by President Nixon in 1974, was the first substantive federal response to improve responses to child maltreatment in the United States ([National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project \[NCANTPP\], 2014](#)). CAPTA mandated the creation of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, offered states financial assistance for maltreatment prevention and identification initiatives, and allocated monies for research and demonstration projects, among other mandates.

In 1996, Congress reauthorized CAPTA (P.L. 104-235). During the reauthorization, legislators focused particular attention to the public oversight of child welfare policies and practices. To this end, the amendment mandated that states seeking federal monies under CAPTA create Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) ([Collins, 1998](#)). CRPs were created as groups of volunteer citizens who were federally mandated to provide an evaluation of states' public child welfare system ([Kot, Bruner, & Scott, 1998](#)). CAPTA required CRPs to be comprised of a representative sample of individuals from the community, submit annual reports to state and federal governments that document their activities and efforts, meet at least once every three months, and be formed and implemented by July 1999. These panels were charged with ensuring state compliance with CAPTA law, oversee coordination between Title IV-E foster care and adoption programs, review child fatalities, and evaluate other parts of the child welfare system, at the discretion of the panel ([NCANTPP, 2014](#)). In discussing the scope of CRPs responsibilities, [Jones and Royse \(2008a\)](#) explained that panels were created to be an accountability mechanism for state child welfare agencies and be "the means by which to comment on and possibly improve child protection policy and practices" (p. 919).

A 2003 congressional reauthorization of CAPTA, under the new name Keeping Children and Families Safe Act (P.L. 108-36), explicated further mandates for CRPs. Specifically, this law mandated that state child welfare agencies provide a written response to the annual report of CRPs within six months of their submission. Further, P.L. 108-36 required the CRPs to engage in public outreach related to child welfare ([Buckwalter, 2014; Jones & Royse, 2008a](#)). For example, CRPs may host public forums, conduct focus groups, or survey larger community groups such as teachers or judges in order to fulfill this mandate. Today, all states and the District of Columbia have some sort of CRP ([Administration for Children & Families, 2013](#)).

2.2. Research on CRPs

There is nominal research literature related to CRPs. In discussing this dearth, [Jones and Royse \(2008a\)](#) explained that there is minimal literature on CRPs. Sharing a similar sentiment, [Bryan, Collins-Camargo, and Jones \(2011\)](#) aptly noted that "more research is needed" to investigate volunteer citizen groups, namely CRPs, associated with child welfare systems and [Buckwalter \(2014\)](#) described research literature about CRPs to be "limited [in] scope" (p. 4).

In part, this lack of research can be attributed to divergent processes between states. While all states have CRPs, CAPTA legislation does allow for flexibility in how states implement and develop CRPs. [Jones and Royse \(2008b\)](#) described that the implementation of these panels has been "extraordinarily varied" (p. 145). Further, evaluating the work, or impact, of these panels can be somewhat complex. Undoubtedly, these issues have contributed to the lack of literature in this area.

Challenges aside, a handful of studies have looked at the perceptions of CRP members with regard to the effectiveness of their work. For instance, [Jones \(2004a\)](#) and [Jones and Royse \(2008b\)](#) concluded that members tend to perceive their work as more effective when they are given the tools that are needed to carry out their federal mandate. Additionally, [Bryan et al. \(2010\)](#)

developed a conceptual model to examine the influence of variables such as administrator's attitude toward the panels on outcomes. This model considered factors such as shared goals and vision among members, agency demands on child protective workers, and access to needed data. These authors surmised that additional research, including testing the model, is pertinent to garnering a better understanding of how these variables impact CRP outcomes.

2.3. Challenges facing CRPs

The challenges that face CRP groups are unique and multifaceted. CRPs are not immune to the traditional challenges that face groups in general, and citizen volunteer groups, specifically. For instance, [Tuckman's \(1965\)](#) group development stages (e.g., forming, storming, norming, and performing) outline several areas in which challenges may arise. Further, due to unique contextual factors, uniformed methods that discuss planning and evaluation practices are few. Other challenges facing CRPs documented in the literature include ensuring a diverse CRP membership ([Bryan et al., 2007](#)), inadequate communication among members ([Jones, 2004b](#)), strained relationships between CRPs and state governmental entities ([Bryan et al., 2011](#)), and tokenism ([Bryan et al., 2007](#)), to name a few.

2.4. Purpose of the study

This paper captures the process of utilizing concept mapping (CM) to develop a conceptual framework germane to planning and subsequently evaluating the CRP in one southeastern state. This state utilizes a model whereby the panel is divided into three subpanels: two regional panels and a statewide panel. This study was undertaken for two primary reasons. First, the groups recognized the need to develop a strategic planning model whereby the panels could be more effective in their mandate to evaluate the policy, practice, and procedures of the state public child welfare system (e.g., [Kot et al., 1998](#)). This study occurred toward the end of one planning cycle and was to be the foundation for upcoming planning exercises for a new work cycle (the panel operates on work cycles that last two years).

Additionally, the panels recognized the need to begin to develop internal evaluation tools to assess their ability to carry out their work. As previously discussed in this article, due to the lack of research on CRPs, no such evaluation models exist. The researchers hoped that this work could provide a uniformed planning strategy and mechanism for developing evaluation tools, thus informing the future work of CRPs. This study uniquely builds on the existing, albeit limited, research literature on CRPs.

3. Method

To delineate a planning framework for a CRP in a southeastern state this study employed concept mapping (CM). CM is a participatory, mixed-method research approach that utilizes quantitative processes to analyze qualitative data ([Brown, 2008](#)). This approach pairs multidimensional scaling with hierarchical cluster analysis to create clusters in a two-dimensional space (along *x* and *y* axes). Through these analyses, pictorial representations of the data are created. These visual representations allow for the examination of relationship patterns among data ([Anderson et al., 2006](#)).

CM is explicitly useful in planning procedures ([Jackson & Trochim, 2002](#)). For instance, [Miller et al. \(2012\)](#) utilized CM to conceptualize a framework germane to planning a diabetes health coalition funded by the Center for Disease Control. In discussing the use of CM for planning purposes, these researchers reported that CM is a "very useful methodology" (p. 451). [Ridings et al.](#)

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