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An international classification system for child welfare programs

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ABSTRACT

A major challenge in child welfare is whether a program (or service) developed and successfully implemented in one jurisdiction, especially another country, will attain the same outcomes for children and families in another jurisdiction? This paper presents the "DCE Classification System" (Defining, Classifying, and Evaluating), a classification system that facilitates cross-jurisdiction comparisons of child and family services. The paper reviews the cross-national research literature in child and family services as well as literature on classification schemes and typologies. As an example of the issues that arise when importing a promising program, we briefly highlight the exporting and importing of family group conferencing. After tracing the history and development of the DCE Classification System, the paper describes the proposed classification scheme, and provides a brief example of how researchers and practitioners can use the classification system for cross-national comparisons of client outcomes and program costs. Finally, we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, as well as possible benefits for child and family practices.

1. Introduction

Policy makers, program directors and practitioners search broadly trying to find more effective programs than those currently in use, or if not more effective, at least less expensive. By attending conferences, doing library research, reading the literature, talking to colleagues, and other means, we try to learn from one another and avoid reinventing the wheel. The following pattern is far too common: child welfare leaders introduce a new program they discovered from a land far, far away; they secure funding and initiate implementation of the program in their community; and everyone involved feels great excitement over the new program's potential to solve difficult, longstanding social problems. The new setting for the program can be a different jurisdiction within the same country or, as the world gets smaller, the setting may be a different country. New settings include different policy environments, staff, clients, and cultures. Everything might go smoothly for all involved, but all too often, client outcomes for the new program are not as positive as the original version. Additional unfortunate results can include serving fewer clients than expected; per client costs that are higher, and child and family needs only partially met and possibly exacerbated (not to mention other unintended consequences).

Notwithstanding the unfortunate story, above, cross-national comparisons of outcome evaluations in the field of child and family services hold great potential for improvements in effective provision of services in every country. Key differences between child welfare programs, let alone policy and cultural contexts, make comparative studies of client outcomes even more challenging. How does one determine when child welfare leaders should give a distant program serious consideration for importation? What factors should they analyze to determine the suitability of a promising program for a particular locale?

These critical questions are among those that receive attention at the meetings of the International Association of Outcome-Based Research and Evaluation in Child and Family Services (from this point forward called the "Association"). Child welfare researchers from around the world created the Association 10 years ago in order to address these questions (Canali, Maluccio, Vecchiato, & Berry, 2009). The Association – composed of researchers, academics, and administrators – conducted numerous international seminars in order to compare programs throughout the world and reach valid conclusions about the relevance, effectiveness, cost and suitability of particular programs for a given population of clients. This paper presents one outcome of all this work: a classification system that facilitates cross-jurisdiction comparisons.[1]

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As a result of many years of work discussed fully below, the proposed classification system will be referred to as the "DCE Classification System" (Defining, Classifying, and Evaluating). The discussion that follows will highlight some of the cross-national research literature in child and family services as well as literature on classification schemes and typologies. As an example of the issues that arise when importing a promising program, we briefly highlight the story of family group conferencing. After tracing the history and development of the DCE Classification System, the authors describe the proposed classification scheme, and provide a brief example of how researchers and practitioners can use the classification system for cross-jurisdictional comparisons of client outcomes and program costs. Finally, the authors will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, as well as how this approach can benefit child and family practice.

2. Literature review

The extant literature of cross-national comparisons relating to children and families, crime and punishment, income, poverty, health, and education is far-reaching. Therefore, for the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on two specific aspects of the literature: 1) the cross-national child welfare research; and 2) prior work on classification systems. We also discuss an example of a child welfare program that has been replicated all over the world and has achieved the kind of mixed results that might be avoided with a better classification system.

2.1. Cross-national work in child welfare

Numerous scholars have done cross-national comparisons of programs and policies in this area of practice. For example, Ainsworth and Maluccio (2003) discussed professionalizing foster care in three countries, where Ryan and Groza (2004) compared families and children involved in child welfare systems from one country to another. Gilbert et al. (2009) compare child protection policies across national boundaries and Thoburn (2010) uses administrative data, interviews with policy makers, and data analysts in 28 jurisdictions to compare the purposes and rates of children in out-of-home care. In a similar vein, Levy, Lietz, and Sutherland (2007) compared tax benefit strategies to support children in three countries.

Examples of other cross-national work in child welfare include the following articles. Berry and colleagues (Berry, Brandon, Chaskin, Fernandez, Grietens, Lightburn, et al., 2006) compared sensitive outcomes in studies of family centers in several countries. Barni, Leon, Rosnati, and Palacios (2008) examined the extent to which cultural context influences the adjustment of Spanish versus Italian adoptees. Rather than studying children from different countries, Coughlan and Ainsworth (2000) shifted perspectives and compared staff in several children's homes in the United States and South Africa to assess how they facilitate ongoing relationships between child residents and their parents.

In another recent study, researchers presented a case vignette to child welfare workers in Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Britain, and the USA (State of Texas) to assess the level of cooperation among social workers and agencies on an abuse case (Glad, 2006). The research documented several similarities and differences as well as the observation that an important factor influencing levels of cooperation was the manner in which social services are organized in different jurisdictions. This factor may also be important in the proposed classification system either as a dimension or a key consideration.

Finally, two cross-national studies completed at the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the University of London bear mentioning. First, Boddy et al. (2009) studied parenting support in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands in order to inform practice and policy in England. Among the many important findings, they found the level of program standardization varied by country where some countries were more likely to implement well-known models while other countries tended to embed programs within existing services. The other study (Boddy, Statham, McQuail, Petrie, & Owen, 2009) examined policy and practice in Denmark, France, Germany, and England relating to youth ages 10 to 15 that are near the point of requiring accommodation outside the family. Notwithstanding the challenges associated with cross-national study, the researchers were able to draw on the experiences of other countries to make several recommendations for the English care system.

2.2. Literature on classification systems

Virtually all scholars who propose classification systems assert their value for one or more purposes. A representative example would be the work of Salamon and Anheier (1997), who proposed a typology of nonprofit organizations. They assert that a classification system provides a method to *identify differences* among organizations, to create a *basis for grouping programs*, and to establish a *common language* [emphasis added] to be utilized when discussing the wide range of programs, services, and interventions. These are the three primary objectives we sought to achieve when developing the classification system proposed here.

On a broad level, Boushel (1994) proposed a cross-national framework to classify child protection *environments* [emphasis added] that is useful when considering the cultural and policy context within which programs function. However, Hearn, Pösö, Smith, White, and Korpinen (2004) point out that historical, social, cultural and linguistic influences on child welfare practice make comparisons across borders problematic.

Mays, Scutchfield, Bhandari, and Smith (2010) used an empirical method to develop a typology of public health delivery systems in the United States. Their purpose was the same as that proposed here, to "facilitate comparative studies to identify which delivery system configurations perform best in which contexts" (p. 81). Lastly, the typology of behavioral health care financing and delivery proposed by Rosenthal, Minden, Manderscheid, and Henderson (2006) is noteworthy not only for the three dimensions that can be used for classification, but also for the methods they used to develop the typology. The researchers circulated a draft of their typology to experts in the field. They subsequently conducted focus groups of these experts "to test the salience and consistency of the constructs defined by the typology" (p. 462). A somewhat similar methodology was used in this project.

There does not appear to be an existing system for conducting cross-national comparisons of programs in child and family services. The DCE Classification System not only fills this gap but also may assist practitioners when they closely examine the feasibility of importing a practice model — by providing a concrete format to compare and contrast services in different jurisdictions.

2.3. Example of exporting a program

An important example of a popular practice model exported to several countries with mixed results is family group conferencing (FGC). The native people of New Zealand, the Maoris, originally developed and used family group conferencing. It was then adopted by mainstream child welfare practitioners in New Zealand, and mandated as a practice model in 1989 through the Children and Young Person's Act. It has since been adopted in various forms in many other countries and settings (Connolly, 2006). One of the key goals of FGC is to involve the family and other individuals in the community with decision-making and the provision of care and support in child welfare cases.

Evaluation of FGC programs has, to date, been mainly descriptive of service users and processes, with the provision by some researchers of mainly short-term outcome data and data on client and agency satisfaction. These have been conducted in several countries and report that this approach has been successful in achieving positive outcomes for families and is