Children and Youth Services Review 44 (2014) 56–64

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Understanding worker–parent engagement in child protection casework

James Gladstone [a], Gary Dumbrill [a,*], Bruce Leslie [b], Andrew Koster [c], Michelle Young [d], Afisi Ismaila [a]

[a] McMaster University, Canada
[b] Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Canada
[c] Brant Children's Aid Society, Canada
[d] Niagara Health System, Ontario, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 31 December 2013
Received in revised form 1 June 2014
Accepted 1 June 2014
Available online 11 June 2014

Keywords:
Engagement
Casework
Working alliance
Treatment

ABSTRACT

This study examines the way casework skills relate to parent and child welfare worker engagement. Quantitative data were gathered through personal interviews with 131 worker–parent dyads from 11 child welfare agencies in Ontario, Canada. Four key casework skills explained much of the engagement that parents had (or lacked) with their workers: The extent workers ignored problems perceived by parents to be important; the extent workers asked parents to do things that the parent did not feel would be helpful; worker's skill locating appropriate services; and workers making or returning telephone calls. Three key skills explained worker engagement: Workers including parents in planning; workers being caring and supportive; and workers praising parents for their efforts, ideas or achievements. The use of particular casework skills were also related to the severity of the case, worker experience, work environment, worker stress, and worker burnout. Findings suggest that certain casework skills should be emphasized in child welfare practice with parents. Relationship-building skills appear to be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, for engagement to come about. Needed are skills that contribute to a collaborative relationship and an anti-oppressive approach with clients.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Many practice theories used by social workers emphasize the importance of minimizing the power imbalance between workers and clients (Coady & Lehmann, 2008). The process of addressing this power differential is associated with the way that engagement is established between workers and clients in their interaction together (Dumbrill, 2006a). While power and authority may be inherent in the social work role, and particularly in the field of child welfare, the way that workers use power and establish trust is a critical element as to whether clients become engaged in the helping relationship (Yatchmenoff, 2005). Engagement, in turn, is an important part of the change process. Findings show that engagement is related to positive case outcomes and, in fact, might be a greater predictor of outcome than any particular therapeutic approach drawn upon by the worker (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004; Graybeal, 2007).

The overarching approach that we took in this study was to look for ways that social work practice could be conducted in an anti-oppressive manner. This approach rests on the ability of workers to engage with clients and employ skills that reflect the "judicious use of power" (De Boer & Coady, 2007) in their interaction with clients, regardless of the way that power is distributed in the larger systems which embrace their work.

This paper examines the casework skills used by workers in child protection and how these skills are related to both parent and worker engagement. As pointed out by Yatchmenoff (2005), there is no clear definition of engagement in the literature. Engagement, for example, has been defined in terms of "involvement" (Randolph, Fincham, & Radey, 2009), "collaboration" (Altman, 2008), "compliance" (Littell, 2001) and "participation" (Darlington, Healy, & Feeney, 2010). Our operational definition of parent engagement was based on Yatchmenoff's (2005) conceptualization of this construct as falling along 4 dimensions, "buy-in," referring in part to the expectation that service will be beneficial, "receptivity," referring to clients' being open to receiving help, "working relationship," which refers to the interpersonal relationship between workers and clients, and "mistrust" of the agency or worker. Our conceptualization of worker engagement was based on factors attached to positive client relationships by workers (Gladstone & Brown, 2007).

We were interested in finding out what casework skills contribute to parents' being engaged with their workers. Furthermore, our previous research (Gladstone et al., 2012) suggests that worker and parent engagement is correlated. Therefore, we also wanted to learn whether the casework skills that explained parent engagement also explained worker engagement.

Studies, to date, have examined the impact of engagement on case outcomes, as well as the factors that lead to its development. Numerous

---

* Corresponding author at: School of Social Work, McMaster University, 1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4M4, Canada. Tel.: +1 905 525 9140x23791; fax: +1 905 577 4667.
E-mail address: dumbrill@mcmaster.ca (G. Dumbrill).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.06.002
0190-7409/© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

studies have indicated that client engagement in the intervention process is associated with positive case outcomes. Findings come from both quantitative studies (Gladstone et al., 2012; Lee & Ayon, 2004; Littell, 2001), as well as meta-analyses (Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Shirk & Karver, 2003).

Several variables related to client engagement in child welfare services have also been identified. These include: client factors, such as the presence of family conflict and client motivation; worker factors, such as education and attitudes toward clients; and organizational factors, such as size of worker caseload and client access to services (Darlington et al., 2010; Littell & Tajima, 2000; Okamoto, 2001).

The severity of and attitude toward problems also plays a role in engagement. A study by Randolph et al. (2009) suggests that parent engagement is related to the potential severity of problem behaviors and their understanding as to how these behaviors may put their children at risk; the benefits and barriers to taking action; and expectations that their action will be successful. Altman (2008) found that client engagement in child welfare services was related to clients' acknowledging problems, being motivated to change, having a sense of hopefulness, feeling that workers were respectful, participating in collaborative goal setting, and receiving clear communication. Gladstone et al. (2012) found parent engagement related to parental perception that workers were more experienced in their jobs, likely because more experienced workers were perceived to have greater understanding of their problems.

Several studies have referred to clinical skills that will enhance engagement among clients in child welfare settings. These include being honest and straightforward while remaining sensitive to clients and their situations, providing information, and being able to listen and empathize (Platt, 2008), being flexible and focusing on client strengths (Gockel, Russell, & Harris, 2008) and providing concrete services (Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009). Positive working relationships also come about when workers clearly communicate the purpose of child welfare involvement, respond to calls in a timely manner, and follow up on tasks as promised (De Boer & Coady, 2007; Drake, 1994; Maiter, Palmer, & Manji, 2006).

It can be seen, therefore, that considerable knowledge exists about the relationship between client engagement and positive child welfare intervention outcomes. Several factors related to engagement, including the use of casework skills, have been identified in the child welfare literature. These studies, however, have largely been qualitative and based on small samples. Additionally, little is known about worker engagement in child welfare settings. One exception is the study by Gladstone et al. (2012) who found a significant correlation between parent and worker engagement: more engaged workers were found to be more satisfied with the outcome of their work, as well as the way that service was provided to their clients. The study reported in this paper contributes to this knowledge by drawing on a larger sample and uses quantitative data to identify key skills related to both parent client and worker engagement.

To explore the above issues we undertook an Ontario study into the child welfare casework relationship and in this paper we report findings that address the following questions:

1) What key casework skills explain parent client engagement?
2) What key casework skills explain worker engagement?
3) What contextual factors are related to the use of casework skills?

The study took place in the context of “child welfare transformation” which was the Provincial Ontario Government's plan to administer a differential response model in its assessment of risk (Dumbrill, 2006b). In this model, a distinction is made in terms of the protection of children who may be at varying degrees of risk. Children at a high level of risk receive a traditional full protection investigation while those at a lower level of risk would receive a customized more flexible response. The intent in both responses is for child welfare workers to develop a collaborative relationship with families in order to bring about positive outcomes for children at risk, although of course one assumes that the customized response lends itself more to the development of such collaboration. The philosophy, in either case, is to use a less coercive form of power in order to bring about more positive outcomes for children at risk.

2. Method

2.1. Design and sample

Following ethics approval from our University-based Ethics Review Board, we gathered quantitative data through personal interviews with child welfare workers and parents receiving child protection service from 11 child welfare agencies (CAS) in Ontario, Canada, which ranged in size from small to large agencies with jurisdiction over urban, suburban and some rural settings. Our sample consisted of 131 worker–parent dyads. Each child welfare worker included in the sample was in a working relationship with one of the parents. Data were gathered from an additional 28 parents and 19 workers (in these cases, one party had declined to participate after the other had been interviewed).

The sample of parents was composed of 147 mothers and 12 fathers comprised of both voluntary and non-voluntary clients who varied in terms of severity of risk as perceived by workers. The mean age of parents was 36.7 years (range 18 to 62 years). Most (74%) were Caucasian; 6% were African-Canadian and Aboriginal. The sample was fairly evenly divided between parents who were married (22%), co-habiting or in a relationship (20%) or single (21%). About one-third (31%) said that they were separated or divorced. Parents were relatively well-educated (67% had finished at least high school). About one-third (34%) were employed full- or part-time with the majority (79%) stating that their annual income was $30,000 or less.

The mean age of the workers was 39.8 years (the range was 23 to 63 years). The majority (71%) was Caucasian, 11% was African-Canadian and almost 4% was Latin Canadian. Every worker had a university or college degree; most degrees (61%) were in social work. Most (69%) had worked in child protection for at least 4 years and most (70%) had children of their own.

2.2. Measures

Our measure of *casework skills* was based on the work of Trotter (2002) who organized casework skills into four groups: role clarification, collaborative problem-solving, pro-social modeling, and relationship skills. Trotter's (2002) work was particularly relevant to our study, not only because it is rooted in the child welfare context, but also because he found the use of these skills, as perceived by clients, to be associated with positive client outcomes. Specific questions associated with these measures included: “Has (worker) talked to you about part of her/his role being to help/support you and your family?” (role clarification), “How skilled would you say your social worker is at including you in planning?” (collaborative problem-solving), “To what extent does your social worker praise you for your efforts/ideas/achievements?” (pro-social modeling), and “How skilled would you say your social worker is at listening to your views/problems?” (relationship skills). The same questions, with personalized wording, were asked to both workers and parents. Workers and parents were asked to rate the extent to which these skills were used on a 5-point scale anchored at one end with “not at all” and at the other end with “a lot” or “very clearly.”

Parents were asked questions designed to ascertain whether skills were not being used by workers. These questions reflected the absence of pro-social modeling on the part of the worker (Trotter, 2002) and included: “To what extent does (worker) ignore your efforts or achievements; show criticism; ignore the real problems as you see them; make arrangements that are difficult for you to keep; ask you to do things you do not feel would be helpful; not follow through with

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6834207

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/6834207

Daneshyari.com