

EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE

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ABSTRACT

This research is about evidence based practice, which is an area of increasing interest and emphasis in social work today. Initially apparent in medical and health care settings, evidence based practice now has widened applicability to a broad range of contexts and professional disciplines. The ways in which research evidence is translated into policy and practice is itself a topic area for social work research.

The study investigates evidence based practice in child welfare, specifically the out-of-home care system. Out-of-home care provides alternative placements for children and young people who cannot live with their families because of abuse and neglect, and generally consists of placement with foster carers or in a residential/group care setting. This research is an exploratory study which investigates through individual interview how nineteen out-of-home care Senior Managers and Team Leaders in the states of New South Wales, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory interpret and understand evidence based practice, and the degree and depth of knowledge they transfer from research awareness into out-of-home care practice and policy development.

The research has three main objectives. Firstly to investigate the understanding of out-of-home care managers of evidence based practice, secondly to determine the influence of relevant research on practice and policy in out-of-home care, and thirdly to explore potential barriers to evidence based practice.

Looking After Children, a social work case management system for children and young people in out-of-home care, provides the context for this research, in which evidence based practice is critically examined.

A thematic analysis of the interview data identified five major themes. These included: the benefit of broadening definitions of evidence based practice to include a wide range of influences on practice; the value and importance of

considering a broad range of research approaches in connecting research with policy and practice AND the potential for influencing outcomes of social work intervention via research based and influenced guided practice systems and techniques; factors which constitute barriers and also those that enhance the implementation of evidence based practice; the potential for instigating and supporting new research via the use of evidence based practice for purposes such as data aggregation, in addition to practice development and enhancement of client outcomes.

Implications and conclusions are drawn from this study in relation to out-of-home care policy and practice, with particular reference to use of the Looking After Children case management system in the Australian context. These include the potential of a consistent system such as LAC to provide common language and assessment tools and procedures in a welfare sector that is fragmented by lack of national legislation, and the potential for development of national out-of-home care research projects as a result of cross agency LAC implementation resulting in data aggregation opportunities.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

- I this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Social Work Degree
- II due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
- III the thesis does not exceed the word length
- IV no part of this work has been used for the award of another degree
- V this thesis meets the *University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.*

Signature:

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Date: 31st March 2006

*...what we need is a system that
rewards evidence based practice.....
and uses valuable work already undertaken.*

Robert Fitzgerald AM
New South Wales Community Services Commissioner

Launching the final report of the
Inquiry into the Practice and Provision
of Substitute Care in New South Wales,
1st November 2000

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INTRODUCTION

The care and protection of children is an issue of concern for modern societies. The effects of culture, geographic location, economics and other factors influence the role played by children and the relative value placed on childhood. In western societies with systems of government which legislatively define what constitutes acceptable standards of child care and parenting, child protection is an area of public concern.

This study is about evidence based practice, which provides the theme and principal topic area for the research. Evidence based practice is critically examined with reference to the case example of a social work case management system called Looking After Children (hereafter referred to as LAC). LAC is a system originally developed in the United Kingdom for the purposes of assessment, case management and improvement of outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC). The term OOHC refers in this study to the group of children and young people cared for by adults other than their own families, as a result of care and protection concerns.

Qualitative methodology has been used in the research. Individual interviews were conducted with nineteen OOHC Senior and Middle Managers, who had knowledge of LAC. Participants in the research were professionally qualified managers involved directly at the time of interview in the provision of OOHC services for children and young people in New South Wales, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The sample comprised ten Senior Managers and nine Team Leaders employed by government and non-government OOHC agencies, and with an awareness of and/or involvement in implementation of the LAC system. The opinions held about LAC by managers in the study sample are explored, incorporating views about LAC as evidence based practice in OOHC. Implications for agency implementation of LAC are discussed and conclusions drawn concerning its potential role in OOHC systems in the Australian context.

Study Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of the study is to explore evidence based practice in relation to out-of-home care for children and young people, in Australian social work policy and practice. The three principal study objectives are outlined as follows.

Firstly, **to investigate the understanding of a sample of OOHC managers of the terms “evidence based practice” and “guided practice”**. Given the lack of existing Australian research in this area and the increasing use of the term evidence based practice, this was seen as important in furthering understanding of what professionals interpret as constituting research evidence in relation to OOHC.

The second objective was **to determine the influence of relevant research in informing the effectiveness of policy and practice for children and young people in OOHC**. Middle and Senior Managers provide agency leadership and also new practice initiatives and directions. Additionally they hold responsibilities in relation to decision making for organisational change. An understanding therefore of the role and influence of relevant research on OOHC managers is important when examining the link between practice and research in this field.

The third objective was **to explore implementation issues related to evidence based practice systems**. It was anticipated that this exploration may indicate organizational and/or individual factors which assist and/or impede the implementation of evidence based practice. The use of LAC as a case example was particularly relevant to this third objective, as all managers participating in the study had experience of LAC.

At the time of study commencement LAC had been subject to pilot implementation and review in the Australian States of Victoria and Western Australia, and fully implemented by a small number of non-government agencies in New South Wales. ACT was at the beginning phase of Territory-wide LAC implementation with all children and young people in OOHC following a comprehensive review of the care system in that jurisdiction (Clark, 1998). The researcher’s position as Senior Manager responsible for LAC implementation in the non-government child welfare organisation Barnardos Australia provided detailed knowledge of the LAC system and impetus for the project.

Evidence Based Practice and Social Work

The concept of evidence based practice appears in an increasing volume of literature related to determining the effectiveness of social work and welfare interventions. Evidence based practice is most commonly taken to mean the application of the best evidence by way of research results that are currently available in a particular field, to practice in that field at a

particular time. In Australia, evidence based practice in social work is an area of increasing interest and emphasis, reflecting overseas experience and trends. The influence of evidence based practice was initially most apparent and widespread in the field of social work in health care and services, perhaps because of the ready transfer of concepts and knowledge base from evidence based practice in medicine, to the context and practice of social work.

In NSW the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW NSW Branch) Directors of Social Work Services in Teaching Hospitals Group has auspiced a special interest group called the Evidence Based Practice Working Group. This group has undertaken considerable work both in broadly tracking the use of evidence based practice and also assessing its influences on social workers and social work practice in NSW. This Working Group also attempts to disseminate knowledge about what constitutes evidence based practice, and its potential to influence the daily tasks which social workers undertake. This embraces issues related to direct social work practice with clients in addition to organisational and structural activities, for example policy development.

The Out-of-Home Care Practice Field

In relation to the social work practice field of child welfare, care and protection and specifically OOHC, the impact of evidence based practice is driven by multiple factors. Such factors include research results in relation to outcomes for children removed from parental care, economic pressures faced by government and non-government agencies (the cost of care), and increasing policy requirements for transparency and accountability to clients or service consumers, and also funding providers. Such pressures have led to changes in the way OOHC services for children and young people are delivered. Because evidence of what produces good outcomes for children and young people as a result of being placed in care has been generally scarce, OOHC agencies have increasingly sought new ways to deliver improved services and ensure better practice.

An increasing number of research publications have appeared over the last decade about what works in social work interventions in a range of settings, both within individual countries and also as comparative and international studies and research compilations. In the UK, the proclamation of the 1991 Children's Act was associated with large scale government funded research programs which examined the needs of and outcomes for children and young people

placed in care. One such research initiative resulted in the development of Looking After Children (Parker, Ward, Jackson, Aldgate & Wedge, 1991; Ward, 1995).

Each year in Australia many thousands of children and young people are looked after in the OOHC system (Bath, 1994, 1997). In NSW out-of-home care statistics include children subject to Orders made by the Children's Court, who may be living in foster care or residential care with carers who are unrelated to them or with extended family or kin. The NSW statistics also include children on Orders, who may be living at home with their own families under the supervision of the statutory welfare department. Other Australian States and Territories use different counting and reporting rules for out-of-home care (Bath, 1997), which makes analysis of exactly how many children and young people are in OOHC across Australia extremely difficult. Social workers generally maintain that responding to the needs of the population of children and young people in OOHC requires best practice in service delivery, however the lack of available and reliable Australian data and statistics in this area is an obvious disadvantage to developing an evidence based practice approach. Without good information about numbers of children and young people in care it is extremely difficult to formulate a research agenda focussing on identifying practices which are of primary importance in ensuring good outcomes for this group of children and young people (Wise, 2003).

Looking After Children

LAC was chosen as a case example for this study because of the way in which it links research evidence with OOHC direct practice. Originally developed in the UK and subsequently adapted to child and family welfare legislation and practice conditions in a number of Australian States and Territories, LAC provides a comprehensive system of information collection and child focussed assessment, with a view to facilitating ongoing care plans and promoting positive outcomes of care.

Standardised LAC materials incorporate research evidence and provide OOHC practice guidance on the actual LAC forms themselves. LAC is designed to guide case planning and review processes for children and young people in care, in addition to associated social work interventions with parents and direct carers (foster parents, child/youth/residential care workers). Research guidance is incorporated throughout the LAC system via practice notes contained on the forms, advising practitioners of the reasons for particular requirements and

the likely outcomes of particular actions and interventions. For example, when recording the frequency of worker visits to a care placement, or making child/parent contact arrangements, research evidence is provided on the LAC form about research outcomes in relation to frequency of child/parent contact, and the relationship between contact frequency and the likelihood of successful return of a child to the care of family following OOHC. Viewed thus, LAC provides a research evidence basis for practice - that is, evidence based practice in a professional guidance format and system.

Although not all agencies represented by managers in the study were actively using or in the process of implementing LAC at the time of this research, all participants had some contact with the LAC system and had been actively investigating if not actually using it in their workplace. Therefore factors which assisted or impeded decision making for agency change with respect to the incorporation of evidence based practice, as well as plans and procedures for organisational change, were able to be considered.

Using the LAC system as a case example for the research underpins this report, generating and tracking common themes for discussion and implications for OOHC practice. Whilst LAC may not fit definitions of evidence based practice according to some critics, it does provide a clear illustration of how research evidence can be provided to practitioners as part of an integrated case management approach. Critiques of LAC and the approach it provides to evidence based practice will be discussed and elaborated upon in chapters two to four of this report.

When the study was initially commenced in 2000, the LAC system was in limited use in Australian States and Territories. Over the past five years, as interest in and use of LAC in Australia and internationally has grown, the body of literature and LAC implementation experience has correspondingly expanded. This has contributed to the complexity of debate regarding evidence based practice and guided practice. The discussion and conclusion chapter at the end of this thesis has been informed by this expansion of knowledge as a result of research and practice.

Contributory and related material from this research has been presented throughout the duration of the study in a variety of settings, see Appendix E at the conclusion of the report.

In the following chapters a critique of relevant literature and research on evidence based practice will be presented including a detailed description of the LAC system. A description of the research approach and method in chapter five is followed the study findings. Discussion, including implications for policy and practice, provides a conclusion for the research.