

Searching for Outcomes: How Child Welfare Agencies Describe the Use of Data and the Intended Impact of Systems Change Efforts in their Organizations

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Introduction

As child welfare agencies work to improve their services to children and families, they are under increasing pressure to demonstrate outcomes. Yet the identification of outcomes in child welfare can be challenging given the complexity of the work, the public nature of the organization, limited staff data capacity, and the impact of negative feedback.

Research Questions

1. What types of outcomes are identified by Child Welfare agency staff during large scale system change efforts?
2. What components of data use are described by child welfare agency staff?
3. What facilitates data use, and what are the barriers?

Methods

Child welfare agency staff involved in the design and implementation of projects were interviewed at three points in time: beginning, midpoint, and at the end of the project. Questions included what state agency staff expected to occur as a result of their project, and how they would assess whether improvements had been made. Interviews were coded based on proposed facilitators to evaluation and outcome measurement within community based organizations (Botcheva, 2002) with additional codes developed from agency descriptions of barriers and facilitators in data use, and types of outcomes. Interviews were analyzed using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo).

Types of Outcomes Described



Products

PRODUCTS: Tangible items produced to support agency processes and practices.
Examples include: curriculum, policies, practice guidelines, data systems, tools developed to promote changes in practice.



Process

PROCESS: Events and processes meant to support changes in practice.
Examples include: training to increase staff competence, revision of hiring practices, involving youth in decision making.



Practice

PRACTICE: Changing staff practice, creating consistency in practice across the organization.
Examples include: increasing staff use of data, increased occurrence and quality of supervision.



Agency

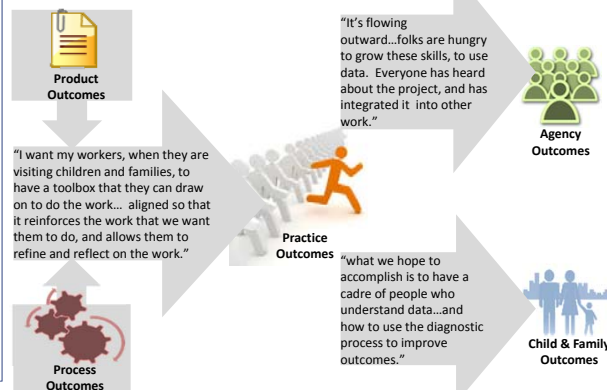
AGENCY: Changes related to the agency's mission, vision and goals, culture that supports new practices
Examples include: curriculum, policies, practice guidelines, data systems, tools developed to promote changes in practice.



Child & Family

CHILD AND FAMILY: How children and families feel the effect of system change.
Examples include: Increasing permanent connections for children and youth, increased reunifications.

Early Outcomes are Linked to Later Outcomes



Components of Data Use Described

Management Support: Executive & mid-level support collection and use of data, are interested in evaluation results, and dedicates appropriate resources

Facilitators:

- A dedicated staff person (in-house position or external evaluator) for research and evaluation
- Commitment of resources for evaluation (IT staff time, incorporating evaluation into meetings)

Barriers:

- Lack of capacity - inability to add research/evaluation tasks to existing staff responsibilities
- Lack of understanding of skills, time resources, and role of evaluator

"Support from leadership and area directors... There were built in check-ins with leadership; that reinforcement meant a lot."

Staff Involvement: Field staff through executive management are aware of how data is used, contribute to data collection, analysis, and/or interpretation of data

Facilitators:

- Clear message from leadership to all staff that agency values data
- Training staff in using data
- Involving staff in data collection
- Using "live", "real" data that is meaningful to the field and day-to-day work
- Collecting and using feedback from staff
- Sharing the results of evaluation activities with staff

Barriers:

- Lack of a quick turnaround between data collection and sharing the results back with the field

"Folks felt like it was present. People could choose to get on the bandwagon, to start to learn about it...having the data there, having it discussed at meetings."

Technology & Infrastructure: Systems are in place to store and access needed data and information, staff have the technical skills and support to utilize the systems

Facilitators:

- Relevant data collection instruments
- A data system for storage
- IT support
- Ability to draw relevant reports from the system
- "Rich" data sets in child welfare

Barriers:

- Lack of resources
- Lack of qualified staff
- Competing priorities for IT staff and the agency overall

"There was also buy-in and support from the technical people...we were learning the technical skills, but also how to bring it back into the offices."

Data Culture: Staff attitudes toward data usage, overall desire to "challenge the status quo" and learn from data to improve practice

Facilitators:

- Management support of data for the purpose of ongoing improvement
- Relationships with funders and federal partners, open and honest communication
- Data is collected and shared back to the field
- Results are used to improve practice and celebrate successes
- Use of a "lets learn together approach"

Barriers:

- Difficulty differentiating between meeting targets and doing quality work
- Changing culture takes time
- Difficulty obtaining buy in to the idea that the CFSR and other data drives practice

"We are open to feedback. We can hear when they give us some suggestions, letting us know what we need to tweak...we hear the feedback, and we can incorporate it."

Conclusions

- All states identified several types of outcomes. Practice change was the link from processes and products to agency and child and family outcomes.
- States differed in the frequency of their descriptions of data use components. States that described more components of a data culture also described a wider variety of data use components; conversely, states describing fewer aspects of a data culture described fewer data use components.
- Assessing an agency's data use components, and data culture, could help identify the likely barriers to using data to improve outcomes. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which these components help agencies achieve their desired outcomes.

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References

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