Identifying sensitive outcomes of interventions in community-based centres

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Abstract

This paper introduces a special collection of this edition of the International Journal based on a series of international pilot studies designed to explore the messages and methodological challenges derived from attempts to understand proximal or sensitive outcomes as steps on the way to more distal or long term outcomes in community and family based centres. This paper gives background and summarises a collection which has a theoretical introduction followed by seven case studies compiled by scholars from seven different countries representing the International Association for Outcomes Based Evaluation and Research in Child and Family Services.

Key words: sensitive outcomes, commmunity centres, family support

Introduction

In 2003, a group of scholars of children's and family services from around the world was assembled in Malosco, Italy, under the direction and support of Professore Tiziano Vecchiato, of the Fondazione Emmanuale Zancan, Padova, Italy, and Professor Anthony Maluccio, of the Boston College Graduate School of Social Work, USA, to encourage and guide comparative international research. At that meeting, the members discussed ways to further and refine an international research agenda.

This special issue of the *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare* is devoted to describing the results of one of the comparative international studies begun at that Italian Seminar. At that Seminar, several scholars – those included in this special issue – participated in a deliberate and thoughtful discussion of transnational comparisons of services to children and their families: national and cultural definitions, programmes, comparisons, and difficulties. Taking place over several days, this group wrestled with the thorny problems and rich opportunities inherent in the study of social/educational/community work practice with children and families, complicated even further by the complexities of varied national contexts.

By the conclusion of our week we had formed a proposal to study child and family community based centres, by conducting case studies in each of our respective countries and communities

of origin. We left the Dolomites with agreed-upon foci of study, research aims, a case study methodology, and the components to be compared across communities, countries and cultures. After two years of study and refinement, this special issue of the *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare* is excited to present the results of these many and varied case studies of community based centres, and what we can learn by comparing internationally what happens within their walls and the communities they inhabit.

The opportunity of international collaboration

We write at a time when many, despairing of contemporary practices, are turning to explore new visions about developing child-centred communities (*Serving Children Well*, 2002). The territory of child welfare is dominated by procedure, defensiveness, protection and policing, and a loss of faith in practice (Parton, 1997). Centre-based programmes in the community on the other hand are a reportedly successful mechanism in supporting the well-being of children and their families in neighbourhoods.

The community-based centre is one of the few success stories in family and community work in the past twenty years, supported by a growing research base (Berry, 2998; Berry & Cash, 1998; Blank, 2000; Cash & Berry, 2003b; Hess, McGowan & Botsko, 2000; Layzer & Goodson, 2001; Lightburn & Kemp, 1994; Warren-Adamson 2006). Such intense programmes, with continua of care, produce stronger outcomes (Berry, Cash, & Brook, 2000; Hess, McGowan & Botsko, 2000; Layzer & Goodson, 2001; Nelson, Landsman & Deutelbaum, 1990; Pithouse, Holland, & Davey, 2001) than more didactic and periodic interventions. These centres, variously described in different countries, are essentially integrated centres, which provide community-based, multi-faceted, flexible and responsive programmes for all families and children who are most vulnerable. Moreover, such centres play a key role in that space between supporting families and the central construct in child welfare, child placement (Maluccio & Whittaker, 2002).

Centre-based programmes in the community operate in an ongoing and day-by-day interaction with the children and families in the community. The goals of a centre-based community programme are to attain positive outcomes and reduce negative outcomes in the area of child well-being. The attainment of these crude goals, which can include promotion of family functioning, child health, prevention of teen pregnancy, increased civic involvement, and so on, are only achieved through a helping and collaborative relationship between professional and parent and/or child. This collaborative relationship manifests itself in a number and variety of sensitive, intermediate outcomes, or steps-on-the-way to the larger, ultimate programmatic outcomes. We are most interested in these sensitive outcomes: how they develop, what they are, and how they contribute to larger outcomes of well-being.

As researchers we chose to study these center-based, or community programmes that support children, youth, and families that exist to enhance well being. While many outcomes are described in studies of such community programmes, we agreed that we needed a term that was comprehensive, to encompass all aspects of the child's and family's lives, including physical and mental health, social and emotional development, and education and skills. We agreed that "well being" was such a term. We expected that choosing which social indicators are the most important to track within each of the domains of well being will be informed by existing scientific research and also by the values of the community or communities in which they are to be used.

Many reports on child and youth well-being include measures of family characteristics, peers, services received, and the school and community context (Cash & Berry, 2003a; Diehl, 2002; Warren-Adamson, 2002b). While important to children and families, strictly speaking these are not measures of well-being, but of the social contexts that promote or inhibit well-being (Maluccio & Whittaker, 2002). Well-being includes both positive attributes to be cultivated,

like civic involvement, and negative outcomes to be avoided such as drug abuse and teen pregnancy. Well-being is best defined in a developmentally sensitive way, with measures that reflect the needs, challenges, and accomplishments of each developmental stage (e.g., early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, and adulthood).

The starting point of our international collaboration, therefore, was the centre-based programme in the community or family resource centre (Lightburn & Kemp, 1994; Warren-Adamson, 2002) that functions like a single site system of care (Stroul, 1996). This centre arguably has an important role in the well-being of children and families, the development of safe communities and new visions for children's services.

Internationally, centres appear to be a healthy phenomenon, making sense of principles of social inclusion (Durand, 1996; Warren-Adamson, 2002a). Centres have developed as central resources in impoverished communities (Halpern, 1999; Schorr, 1997). There is much to be learned from international comparisons of the formulations of professional relationships, community supports and developments of blended funding and shared responsibilities for protecting children.

Area of study

We set out to study *community-based centres* that provide interventions that are *preventive* of problems and *promotive* of positive outcomes for children and adolescents. These kinds of community-based interventions focus on assessing the vulnerabilities of families, reducing risks, and increasing children's and families' well-being by providing services that are highly variable, flexible, and responsive to family and community needs.

What might be called a "treatment protocol" in other, more remedial or problem-focused interventions has not been established to any great extent among community-based programmes, beyond general tenets and principles, for example:
• individualised and variable services,
• a mix of formal services and informal supports,
• collaborative partnerships between agencies and actors,
• centres embedded in the community to respond appropriately and respectfully to community needs and priorities and to meet individual and family need and promote social change.

Therefore, in the absence of a fixed "treatment protocol", cross-site and international comparisons of the broad outcomes achieved by such programmes are probably misleading, leading to erroneous conclusions about the link between the intervention (usually broadly defined) and broad outcomes. We need to first understand the structure and nature of the interventions provided, and to develop more sensitive indicators of the "steps-on-the-way" to the broader, longer-term outcomes sought by these programmes.

Aim of the research

The aim of our research was to conduct several case studies in a range of countries around the world, examining the sensitive outcomes achieved by community-based services in a variety of settings. The value of comparative international research on these kinds of interventions lies in its ability to draw out lessons from a broader array of experience and approaches. This includes an ability to understand the relevance of similar and different approaches to reaching similar goals across different contexts.

Our network of researchers is accomplished and varied (see Figure 1).

Prof. Marianne Berry	University of Kansas, USA
Marion Brandon	University of East Anglia, UK
Prof. Robert Chaskin	University of Chicago, USA
Elizabeth Fernandez	University of South Wales, Australia
Prof. Hans Grietens	University of Leuven, Belgium
Prof. Anita Lightburn	Fordham University, NY, USA
Patricia McNamara	La Trobe University, Australia
Prof. Robyn Munford and Jackie Sanders	Massey University, NZ
Prof. Ercilia Palacio-Quintin	Universite de Quebec, Canada
Chris Warren-Adamson	Southampton University, UK
Prof. Anat Zeira	Hebrew University, Israel

Figure 1
Research team

While we were generally interested in community-based interventions, we were focused on different types of problems and programmes to enhance child well-being, including:
• the treatment and prevention of child maltreatment;
• the promotion of family well being, addressing family poverty and family violence;
• the treatment and prevention of juvenile delinquency;
• the promotion of adolescent health, and;
• the promotion of healthy family relationships, particularly in vulnerable families.
We sought to develop sensitive outcome indicators that might be precursors to understanding the broad outcomes that are often the focus of broad outcome evaluations. What are the more incremental outcomes, or steps-on-the-way, the evolving gains made by families and practitioners, and how are these common or different across communities and countries?
Such a detailed description is an important preliminary step in comparative international outcome evaluation, so that we know:
• *whether* we are comparing similar interventions when we talk about community-based preventive and promotive interventions across countries,
• *how* crude outcomes might be achieved. What are the small steps by which we help children and families to these large goals of prevention and promotion?

Our primary research question

What are the sensitive indicators or steps-on-the-way of community-based programmes with the above characteristics?
To develop answers to that research question, however, we needed to answer the following questions:
• What is the national and local context (e.g., culture, policy, economics, etc.) within which the centre is embedded?
• What is the organizational structure and goals of the centre?
• What are the needs and goals of the children and families served?
• What is the theory of change for the centre and its approach to goals?

- What are the inter-organisational relationships and partnerships in and around the community centre?
- What are the operating characteristics or structural/logistic parameters of interventions?
- What is the nature of the helping relationships developed between the centre and the children and families served?
- What are the ways in which the centre seeks to make use of informal supports?

Design

The principal research question is to unearth sensitive outcomes in each family/community centre. As well as accepted longer term outcomes – for example, changed behaviour in child, confident parenting, avoiding or establishing more appropriate foster care, developing improved contact between absent parent and child, helping child to return to parent – the researcher is required to negotiate with the practitioner to look at outcomes that are rarely looked at. We are calling them steps-on-the-way.

Method

Between 2003 and 2005, we conducted case studies of community-based centres in each of our respective countries, to provide thick descriptions of the intervention and the sensitive indicators of one outcome of the intervention. Each researcher conducted a case study of a community-based intervention that meets the defining characteristics enumerated above. The unit of analysis was the centre, but the data collection involved a variety of sources: practitioners, families, community partners, and others.

This multi-site study sought, through the capture of sensitive day-to-day outcomes, to paint a picture of needs and responses, which are negotiated through practitioner and user. Within the limits of this international study, we believed we could derive a more accurate picture of the discrete and negotiated, 'containing' world of the centre (McMahon & Ward 2001) as well as encourage international co-operative enquiry as an increasingly accepted empowering research design in this domain (See Diehl, 2002).

Measures

Each researcher agreed to assess the following in their case study, through qualitative or quantitative means:
- Assessment of parental risks and strengths
- Assessment of children's risks and strengths
- Goals of services
- Formal services provided
- Informal services arranged
- Structure of services (logistics)
- Nature of services (theoretical underpinnings, types of "helping")
- Agency-level factors (funding, supports, collaboration)
- Description of the helping relationship
- Sensitive Outcomes: identified through collaborative enquiry
- Broad Outcomes:
  - Child well being
  - Family preservation

- Employment
- Staying in school
- Absence of maltreatment
- Child health

Sites of enquiry

In the interest of the development of sensitive indicators across nations and across community-based interventions, we narrowed our focus to interventions with the following common characteristics:
- A centre located in an urban neighborhood.
- Serving families with children in the home.
- Seeking the crude outcome of child well-being.

These parameters resulted in the inclusion of the following community-based centres:
- *Rainbow Family Centre, England* (Marian Brandon, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England)
  This family centre is state funded and is based in the suburbs of a medium sized town close to London. Families are normally referred by social workers but the centre has found that the best way to offer families a quality service is to work closely with local schools, health centres, NGOs and other community services.
- *Children's Family Centre, Australia* (Elizabeth Fernandez, University of New South Wales, Australia)
  The Children's Family Centre is an integrated set of family support programmes developed by Barnardos Australia to meet the needs of families identified as being at risk of child abuse and neglect. The emphasis is on strengthening families and engendering a sense of empowerment. Interventions are multi-dimensional and include home-visiting, semi-supported accommodation, child care, respite care, counselling, group work, and crisis intervention.
- *Berry Street, Victoria, Australia* (Patricia McNamara, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia)
  Berry Street Victoria is one of the largest and longest established non-government organizations in the State of Victoria. The service began as a foundling hospital over a century ago. It now operates a wide range of programs throughout the State and is generally perceived locally and indeed nationally to be a key service provider in the field. The family recruited for the study has been receiving services from the *Matters* program, which is based in a regional office of Berry Street Victoria and offers a wide range of services to adolescents and their families.
- *Te Aroha Noa Community Services, New Zealand* (Robyn Munford and Jackie Sanders, Massey University)
  This is a community based family service providing a diverse range of services including early childhood, parenting programmes, counselling, programmes for youth and community development. It is a very well established centre with a significant history of involvement in the local community. It is situated in a neighbourhood that has experienced the effects of economic restructuring and where families constantly face the challenges that arise from having inadequate material and social resources. The agency has a strong commitment to working in partnership with families and with the community in order to bring about positive and sustained change for families and children and young people.
- *Family House, Canada* (Ercilia Palacio-Quintin, Université du Québec)
  The Family Houses (Maisons de la Famille) are distributed all over the Québec territory. They are community-based agencies run by non-professionals. The size of these independent centres and their services vary, but all are focused on services towards children and parents. They are completely independent from each other. They receive financial support from various sources, frequently from different governmental special fundings.

- *Clayhill Family Centre, England* (Chris Warren-Adamson, University of Southampton, Southampton, England)
  Clayhill Family Centre is a local state centre working with families in great need. It provides a number of programmes from formal to informal with a strong professional culture of social work intervention. Families are referred from the neighbourhood and beyond and can be found engaged in child care activities, formal therapeutic endeavours, recreational and broader forms of social action.
- *Jerusalem House, Israel* (Anat Zeira, Hebrew University of Jerusalem)
  Jerusalem House is a neighborhood social welfare agency operated by the department of social services in the municipality of Jerusalem. This community-based centre provides in-house services to children and their families and refers to other community-based services (e.g., home-based services like HomeStart for parents and a multi-purpose day care centre for children).

Anticipated results

This collection of case studies of community-based interventions and the sensitive outcomes achieved, leading to the broad outcomes of child and family well-being, will provide a basis for the development of sensitive, interim outcomes. We envision the development of a list of sensitive indicators that may be meaningful to comparative international outcome evaluation. The measurement of similar sensitive outcomes in future outcome evaluation will make international evaluations and comparisons of programmes more meaningful and precise.

This international study gives us more clues about the nature of 'centres' of practice, the nature of the whole and the detail of process, a contribution to the 'what works' enquiry and therefore enables us to contribute to the emerging contemporary search for new visions and structures for children's services. This study therefore, is itself a step-on-the-way. But it is a critical step in the development of cross-national efforts to evaluate programmes. Without some explication of the change process in these programmes, and the cultural context in which they occur, we can have little comfort in our collective cross-national certainty about populations, problems and programmes (Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja, 2000). We hope this groundbreaking international study helps to inform current practitioners and future researchers in the complexity and simplicity that is the community-based centre for children and families.

Steps-on-the-way to an international outcome study of community-based centres

After two years of conducting and discussing these in-depth case studies of community-based centres in a variety of countries, we have accomplished the following:
- Developed cross-national protocols of common practice for better evaluation;
- Examined the rarely looked at, process or steps-on-the-way outcomes in a range of family centre interventions;
- Gained a greater understanding of the 'whole' of family centre practice, examining such concepts as 'a theory of change', 'developmental systems', 'synergy' and 'containment';
- Contributed to a cross-national re-examination of the role of centre-based programmes in the community as underpinning resources in new visions for child-centred communities;

- Developed skills and understanding in, and evaluated the empowerment capacity of, out-come-focused participative inquiry which is undertaken with children and their parents and centre practitioners.

Acknowledgments

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