Influencing Policy within the State Child Welfare Agency with (less than) "Perfect" Research

Carol Hostetter, Ph.D., and Gail Folaron, Ph.D., Indiana University

Asked by the state child welfare agency head to conduct "perfect research" on the educational and training needs of child welfare case managers, the authors met with methodological challenges. The article tells the story of their search for relevant information despite multiple compromises. Using advisory groups, focus groups, online and mailed surveys, and administrative data provided triangulation of diverse stakeholders' viewpoints. In the end, using mixed methods resulted in valid findings that were confirmed and supported by the state administration. With the research and help from advocacy groups, the agency changed its hiring and training policies.

In Indiana, a high school diploma plus six years of experience with children and families qualified an individual for a state position as a public child welfare case manager. The job requirement of six years of combined education and/or experience qualified an experienced home, day-care provider or foster parent for employment. In the 1990s, state administrators attempted to upgrade the case manager position by changing the hiring criterian to include a college degree. This request was rejected by the state personnel department based on a federal requirement called a "bona fide occupational qualification."[1] The state personnel department interpreted the bona fide occupational qualification requirement to mean that the case manager hiring criteria could not be changed without empirical backing to support the change.

In an attempt to professionalize Indiana's child welfare system and earn national accreditation, the state agency administration contracted with our school of social work to answer the research question, "What are the educational and training needs of child welfare case managers?" Our goal was to obtain the empirical evidence needed to identify the educational backgrounds that state personnel should require when hiring case managers. The state agency director asked us to conduct "perfect research." Perfect research was defined as "research with findings that no one could dispute."

The charge to design "perfect research" was daunting and we were intimidated by the prospect. We followed Thomas' (1998) advice to be flexible methodologically and let the methods fit the research questions, rather than the reverse. We chose a multiple methods approach.

This article presents some of the challenges involved in the research process, along with the outcomes. Though each of the research methods undertaken resulted in challenges and flawed findings, using multiple methods led to consistent results across samples and data collection methods. We believe that we concluded the project with valid and relevant findings. The findings influenced both practice and state policy.

Review of the Literature

Minkin (1997) suggests that research can be a "profoundly bewildering and disturbing experience" (p. 2). Researchers often base their methodology on established principles and well thought-out standards used by previous researchers (Thomas, 1998). The reality of research, however, is that some flaws are inevitable. Research can be... "confusing, messy, intensely frustrating, and fundamentally nonlinear," unlike the organized product provided in published articles (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 15). Rather than denouncing flawed research, some social scientists see it as necessary for knowledge building (Feyerabend, 1993; Mellor, 2001). Feyerabend (1993) asserts that violating canonical methodology advances science. Mellor (2001) agrees, stating that "total 'error' elimination is perhaps not possible and probably not efficient; it may be better to reconcile oneself, for instance, to repeating a number of items, rather than aiming for 100% accuracy the first time in all aspects" (p. 468).

An increasingly popular social science research methodology, attractive in its ability to address research flaws, is triangulation. The term, adopted from surveyors, describes a technique that develops a more complete picture by viewing data from multiple vantage points (Padgett, 1998). Mixing quantitative and qualitative methodologies is a type of triangulation frequently adopted in social science (Padgett, 1998). Social work authors on research methods have recently promoted the use of the multimethod approach (Bisman & Hardcastle, 1999; Grinnell, 1997; Sherman & Reid, 1993). Roth and Mehta (2002) promote the combining of quantitative and qualitative methods for the discovery of objective truth and multiple subjective truths.

Competing Demands

We acknowledged, at least to ourselves, that our research process would be flawed, messy, and perhaps bewildering. We did take heart in the current movement toward alleviating the flaws in one method by adding a complementary method. However, as we planned the methodology, we soon became aware of feeling pressured and torn in several directions. Our academic institution strongly emphasized the need for faculty to acquire grant income. It was important to our department that the project be successful, not just for the current monies but also for future funding. Plus, we both needed more publications for tenure and promotion. How could we conduct a study that would provide the funder with the needed information, fulfill the requirements of the peer-review process, and not criticize the agency so much that agency personnel were offended? In addition, we could not understand the agency director's agenda for asking for the research, since the results would probably require that more money be spent and the state was already strapped for funds. Nevertheless, we did not want to appear either unqualified or suspicious by asking him what his "true agenda" was. Our attempts to figure out the agenda while juggling competing demands made us rather desperate researchers.

Multimethod Research Design

We established two advisory groups to guide our research on the educational and training needs of public, child-welfare case managers. One group consisted of case managers, supervisors, county directors, the training director, union representatives, and management personnel from within the state child-welfare agency. The second group included stakeholders from outside the state agency, among them representatives from the state legislature, judicial system, clergy, child advocacy organizations, family service agencies, community colleges, and school social workers. A research subcommittee was established from the latter group to provide input for the research plan.

The advisory groups recommended that we focus our efforts on the educational and training needs specific to the case managers in Indiana. To achieve the dual goals of "perfect" research and relevance, we included both qualitative and quantitative methods in the research design. We hoped to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings through triangulation of data and to report findings that had both breadth and depth. We triangulated the diverse views of people involved in our child welfare system and used multiple data gathering tools, such as focus groups, surveys, administrative data, and advisory groups, to provide a more complete, meaningful picture. All research methods were approved by the university's human-subjects committee.

Qualitative Methods

Our research began with six focus group discussions involving a total of 28 case managers and 4 supervisors to identify case managers' learning needs and the most effective methods of delivering content to them. The focus group participants were a purposive sample of both highly respected, competent case managers and new, inexperienced case managers. Participants were hand picked by the state deputy director, juvenile court judges, and local agency directors.

A DACUM model was used to identify case managers' learning needs. DACUM, an acronym for Developing A Curriculum, is an occupational analysis technique involving focus group discussions with line staff (Norton, 1998). The DACUM focus groups yielded rich information, which was used in conjunction with state training documents and literature to develop multiple surveys. In the focus groups, we asked participants to identify the duties, tasks, knowledge, skills, and values of the case-manager position.

Quantitative Methods

Four quantitative surveys were developed to gather data from case managers, supervisors, juvenile court judges, and foster parents on the learning needs of child welfare line staff. The goal of the multiple survey approach was to understand the perspective of each stakeholder and to identify commonalities in regard to the case managers' learning needs.

The case managers' and supervisors' surveys were constructed to include similar questions and format so that the data from each group could be compared and contrasted. All 704 case managers and 136 supervisors from throughout the state were invited to participate in a survey. The survey was posted on a secure website created with the Flashlight Program (Flashlight, 2003). Participants had the option of completing the survey online or printing the survey and mailing it back through postal mail. The Flashlight Program does not collect "cookies" and we did not request identifiable information, ensuring anonymity for participants.

The surveys included questions on knowledge, skills and values, barriers to formal learning, the best methods for delivering training content, the best timing for obtaining the content, case managers' confidence in their abilities, and the most effective methods of supervision. We included both forced-choice and open-ended questions.

The foster parents and the judges were sent surveys by mail. The content of these surveys included the learning objectives from the state curriculum for case managers. Each group was asked to rate the perceived importance and urgency of each training objective. Importance was evaluated in two ways: 1) each group was asked to rate importance on a scale of 1-5; and 2) each group rated whether the lack of knowledge or skill by a case manager would impact a child's safety or movement toward permanency. Urgency was examined by asking when it was necessary for case managers to acquire the knowledge or skill.

Research Challenges

Methodological compromises were necessary throughout the life of the project. There was high turnover affecting the composition of the advisory board, the participation of line staff and foster parents, and the commitment of the administration to the research endeavor. The top administrators of the state agency turned over three times while we conducted the research, with each administration suggesting different avenues of study. We made continual modifications. Not one of the data collection methods, by itself, met the goal of "perfect research." We consistently had a less-than-desirable response rate.

Challenges and Results of the DACUM Focus Groups

The first compromise in the research plan was limiting the DACUM focus groups from the ideal two days of meetings to one day. Strict adherence to the DACUM model would have required participants to gather for two days of focus group discussions on the duties, tasks, knowledge, skills, and values of their occupation (Norton, 1998). Due to the time constraints on the case managers, we were asked to limit the focus groups to one day. To compensate for any potential loss of data, we conducted six separate day-long focus groups, one in each region of the state. The data collected in each focus group were reviewed after each meeting and compared to the list of state-identified training competencies. Conflicts or gaps that existed between the focu-group data and the state-identified competencies were brought to the next focus group for discussion.

The extra cost in organizing, attending, and traveling to six focus groups was not inconsiderable. It is unclear whether two days with the same participants would have yielded different data, but the consistency of the data across focus groups was striking. In the end, each topic in the state list of competencies had been identified and discussed by at least two focus groups. Learning needs related to home visits, personal safety, and computer competence were also introduced and discussed in at least two focus groups. Additionally, participants expressed concerns about the methods of delivering training content and supervision.

Challenges and Results of the Online Surveys

We used the online format for collecting survey data because we thought it would be an efficient way to collect data from busy case managers and supervisors. The benefits would include a faster turn-around time as well as the reduced expense of disseminating the survey. We anticipated that case managers would find the point-and-click method of responding to a web-based survey engaging and easy although we also offered the option of sending the paper copies through the mail.

The invitation to participate was sent to the case managers via e-mail through a listserv constructed for this purpose. We were unaware of the pop-up nature of the case managers' email system. Whenever a message was received by a case manager, a notice popped up on the screen. This pop-up alert system interfered with the ability of case managers to enter data or complete word processing tasks such as writing court reports. The listserv had a few incorrect addresses due to case manager turnover. All bad addresses produced e-mail messages that bounced to all members on the list. Irritated case managers blasted the list with questions and complaints. Each of these messages was also sent to the entire listserv, generating more pop-ups and further angering the case managers. They were not only getting our messages but messages from their colleagues such as, "I am getting all kinds of emails and they won't stop! Help!" It took 45 minutes to shut down the listserv and stop the messages.

Alienating respondents is not an auspicious beginning to a survey. The response rate was 32% for case managers and 46% for supervisors, somewhat less than anticipated. However, case managers and supervisors submitted consistent responses about both the content needed to do the job effectively and the process of training and supervision.

Survey Challenges and Results of the Judges' Survey

The difficulty with the judges' survey began with an attempt to pilot the survey instrument with a subgroup of juvenile court judges. We presented the study and survey to the judges in a face-to-face meeting. After circulating the survey, we were informed that judges "do not pilot surveys." Rather than completing them on the spot, the judges took the surveys home with a promise to mail them back. Although it was helpful to receive a few in the mail as promised, this change in plans inhibited our ability to obtain feedback and revise the instrument.

The surveys were later mailed to all juvenile court judges in the state with a request to fill out the survey "if they had not already done so." A total of 40 completed surveys were returned, for a response rate of 29%.

While disappointed in the response rate, we were pleased that the meeting with the judges became a teachable moment. It was at this meeting that several judges became aware of some of the systemic problems plaguing the public system, including the fact that no college degree was required for the case manager position. One of the judges at the meeting became an active advocate for a change in the current hiring criterian.

A prominent finding of the judges' survey was that respondents felt strongly that case managers should be trained before starting a caseload. The majority of judges believed it is urgent that case managers know the state's legal definition of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, dependency, and endangerment. They also believed it essential that case managers gather evidence and provide effective testimony in court. In their views, a lack of competencies in these areas presented the most risk to safety and permanency for children.

Challenges and Results of the Foster Parents' Survey

The foster parents' survey, sent by U.S. mail to 600 homes, was marred by the typical problems associated with mass mailings. Low response rates and bad addresses required multiple mailings. The time and expense of this method was greater than the results received. Surveys were returned months after they were sent out due to bad addresses. The last return came back six months later with "addressee unknown" stamped on the envelope. In the end, a response rate of 32% was garnered. A response rate this low lessens our ability to generalize to the population of foster parents in the state. However, the foster parents who did respond agreed with juvenile-court judges that pre-service training should be required for all case managers.

Quiet Desperation

The tension induced by the challenges caused us to lead research lives of quiet desperation. The organization and travel for the extra focus groups were tiring, and being responsible for the online pop-up annoyances for already overworked case managers brought us chagrin. The low response rates were frustrating but not overly upsetting, since we knew that survey research often had this challenge. Perhaps what was most trying was the turnover in the state agency. With each new administration, we needed to gain entry, explain the study, and adjust to the change in focus required by the new administrator. This led to weeks of extra work that was generally discarded by the next person. The goal of producing a useful, timely report seemed, at times, out of reach.

Benefits of Mixed Methods

Despite all the challenges and low response rates in almost every method used, the strengths of these multiple methods approach proved invaluable. The results across methods and respondents were surprisingly consistent. Our findings provided the state administration with comprehensive data about the educational content and training needs of child-welfare case managers. Consistent with the use of qualitative methods, there were also unexpected findings. A summary of these findings is presented below.

Unexpected Results

Beyond learning about the educational content case managers need to be effective in their jobs, we also gained information about the process of learning the content. The participants spoke of the organizational problems of training delivery that interfered with the goal of professionalizing the agency staff, such as gaps in preparatory training. Many experienced case managers felt the need for more training in order to feel competent in their jobs and revealed concerns about training methods.

One such gap was that pre-service training was encouraged but not required. Thirty-five percent of the case managers who completed the survey worked for six months before attending any of the core training modules, and more than ten percent did not attend training for over a year after starting a caseload. This stood in conflict with the desire of judges and foster parents that case managers have pre-service training.

Barriers were also in place for case managers who were interested in attending in-service training. Across the state, case managers were required to pay for their own expenses while attending trainings. Expenses could include hotels, transportation, and food. Case managers submitted their bills to the state, but the state was often slow to reimburse them. As a result, case managers accrued interest on their credit cards, a personal expense which was not reimbursed. This posed a particular hardship on new case managers interested in attending pre-service trainings and served as a deterrent to experienced staff who felt a need for additional training.

Not surprisingly, given the barriers to training, the majority of case managers described themselves in the survey as less than competent in important skill areas. One such skill area included working with sexual-abuse perpetrators and non-offending parents. Even among the case managers with six or more years of case management experience, noneteen percent rated themselves as only minimally competent.

The agency's approach to core training was also revealed to be problematic. Sixty-one percent of the supervisors and twenty-six percent of the case managers suggested that six consecutive weeks of core training was overwhelming. Core training offers an intense and exhaustive exposure to content, but lacks strength in skill development. Case managers wanted more support for transferring their learning from the classroom to the field. When asked to rate the best training methods for *new* case managers, both case managers and supervisors agreed that one-on-one coaching and supervision was more helpful than classroom training. Both groups ranked the teaching methods similarly with mentoring, shadowing, case staffings, and regular supervision all rated highly. Over half of the respondents did not mark core training as effective.

Perhaps the biggest surprise among the findings was the unintended consequence of the agency hiring requirement of six years of combined education and/or experience. In this county-administered system, county directors had interpreted the requirements in a variety of ways. The state director was surprised to discover that most county directors believed that the requirement eliminated traditionally aged B.S.W.s from consideration, even if they had field placements at the county agencies.

Recommendations and Actions

After receiving the report, state employees and leadership said the findings rang true. They supported the recommendations. The newly appointed state administrators accepted the report, disseminated the findings to each county director, and took administrative actions in response to the recommendations. Within one year after submitting the report, significant changes were made within the state agency, including mandatory pre-service training with field experience, increased internal supports to dismantle barriers to training, and professionalization of the hiring criterion. There were four primary recommendations on which the state agency took action.

First, we recommended mandatory pre-service training. Participants in all aspects of the study tended to believe that case managers should attend the full continuum of core training before assuming a caseload. The agency responded by developing a written policy to this effect. Case managers statewide are now required to attend six weeks of pre-service training before beginning a caseload.

Second, we recommended that field experiences be integrated into the pre-service training through worker shadowing, close field supervision, exposure to the juvenile court and local service providers, and hands-on experience in documentation and data entry. We felt this would provide a more integrated approach to learning and improve the case managers' retention of material and skill development. We suggested that attention be given to the Michigan model, which integrates classroom and field experiences (Family Independence Agency, 2004). The agency took action to adopt the Michigan model and to add supervisory positions to serve as mentors for new case managers.

Third, we recommended that a system of financial supports for case managers who attend trainings. The agency decided to pilot a new fiscal arrangement by which case managers can bill their hotel expenses directly to the state. This arrangement is currently in place in three of the six regions of the state and has resulted in improved morale and increased participation in training.

Finally, we recommended that the state professionalize the case-manager position by requiring an appropriate educational background and/or a child welfare certificate. The agency's response was to revise the minimum qualifications for the case-manager position to require a bachelor's degree in a variety of human service fields, plus either two years' experience or the agency's six-week training program.

Conclusions

Our research was not done in isolation. We worked closely with the state agency throughout the life of the project. We listened to concerns and modified our research design in an attempt to keep our study relevant to their needs.

Within one year of submitting our report, all but one of our recommendations had received action by the state administration. It is important to note that not all of the administrative changes were initiated by our report in that several of the changes were evolving as we conducted the research. In some cases, the findings from the research served as outside evidence to support changes that already were in process or being proposed within the agency.

At the conclusion of the study, the director who asked for "perfect research" was no longer with the agency. The methods used in our study were generally imperfect, but the results were recognized by state personnel as an accurate reflection of the educational and training needs of the case managers and the barriers to effectively meeting these needs. The value of mixing methodologies is apparent: from the multiple viewpoints came meaningful findings and an in-depth understanding of the problem. As Padgett states, "... rigor without relevance produces research that is mechanistic and devoid of meaning …" (1998, p. 103). Hearing the multiple voices in a variety of forums provided relevant results and policy changes.

In the end, we established research findings that rang true to the state employees and the administration. We were excited that despite its problems, the study was used to push for change both administratively and legislatively and by the executive action of the governor. With all its flaws, the research was almost "perfect," if perfect can be defined as "research with findings that *few* could dispute."

References

• Bisman, C.D., & Hardcastle, D.A. (1999). A model for using research Methodologies in practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 19*(1/2), 47-63.

• Family Independence Agency. Training for both FIA and private agency staff. Accessed 11-20-04 from http://www.michigan.gov/fia/0,1607,7-124-5455_7337-15714—,00.html.

• Feyerabend, P. (1993). *Against Method* (3rd Ed.) New York: Verso.

• Flashlight. http://www.tltgroup.org/programs/flashlight.html. Accessed January 2003.

• Grinnell, R.M., Jr. (1997). *Social Work Research and Evaluation: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches.* Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock.

• Marshall, C., & Rossman, G.B. (1995). *Designing Qualitative Research.* (2nd Ed.). London: SAGE Publications.

• Mellor, N. (2001). Messy method: The unfolding story. *Educational Action Research, 9*(3), pp. 465 – 484.

• Minkin, L. (1997). *Exits and Entrances: Political Research as a Creative Act.* Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press.

• Norton, R.E. (1998). *Quality Instruction for the High Performance Workplace: DACUM.* Columbus, OH: Center on Education and Training for Employment, College of Education, The Ohio State University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 419 155).

• Padgett, D.K. (1998). *Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research: Challenges and Rewards.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

• Roth, W.D., & Mehta, J.D. (2002). The Rashomon Effect: Combining positivist and interpretivist approaches in the analysis of contested events. *Sociological Methods & Research,* 31(2), 131-173.

• Sherman, E., & Reid, W.J. (Eds.) (1993). *Qualitative Research in Social Work.* New York: Columbia University Press.

• Thomas, G. (1998). The myth of rational research. *British Educational Research Journal, 24*(2), pp. 141-162.

• *U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2005).* Accessed 2-6-05 from http://www.eeoc.gov/abouteeo/overview_practices.html.

The authors would like to acknowledge the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, Division of Family and Children for funding grant #49-1-UF-0371. In particular we want to thank James Hmurovich for his vision and foresight in initiating this project and Jane Bisbee and Steve DeMougin for all their hard work in implementing the recommendations for change.

Carol Hostetter, Ph.D., and Gail Folaron, Ph.D., are Assistant and Associate Professors respectively at the Indiana University School of Social Work. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: chostett@indiana.edu.

(Footnotes)

[1]Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed to ensure that employers would not discriminate in hiring on the basis of race, religion, sex, or national origin (*U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2005).* Age, disability and other aspects were added later. Exceptions are allowed in the case that the hiring practice is a "bona fide occupational qualification," a necessity for the position.