Protecting Children

Revising the Peer Quality Case Review Process for Child Welfare: A Research-Based Collaborative Model

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Child welfare supervisors, administrators, and managers continue to search for new ways to assess their agencies’ success in working with vulnerable children and families. These professionals are seeking better ways to evaluate agency performance, make decisions, and communicate agency practices to both staff and external stakeholders — activities typically...
called quality assurance. In recent years, numerous efforts have been made to enhance the provision and monitoring of social services to families (Courtney, Needell, & Wulczyn, 2004; Kautz, Netting, Huber, Borders, & Davis, 1997; U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). In fact, quality assurance has begun to evolve from a compliance monitoring system to a process of “continuous” quality improvement as agencies work toward gathering and assessing a range of information based on quality and making ongoing, needed improvements. The purpose of this article is to describe a revision to California’s framework for conducting peer quality case reviews, a state-mandated, county-driven quality assurance practice. This revised framework, developed and tested with key stakeholders involved with child welfare services in Northern California counties, parallels the new federal Child and Family Services Reviews by focusing on outcomes, but does so with a standardized, research-informed, and more collaborative process. In particular, the revised peer quality case review framework actively integrates research evidence into determining what constitutes best practices when examining outcomes of quality assurance. The current study used rich qualitative data gathered from interviews with and written feedback from state consultants, direct service providers, regional academy trainers, and community partners to evaluate satisfaction with and effectiveness of the revised process. While the target population was the child welfare system in California, the authors believe that the utility and benefit of the revised framework includes broad elements that all agencies should consider in creating new and meaningful continuous quality assurance systems within child welfare services.

**Background**

Despite the best intentions and dedication of social workers, community health partners, court-appointed attorneys, probation workers, and others in the child welfare system who work to achieve positive outcomes, California is falling short of achieving state and federal outcome goals. In order to improve outcomes for children and families involved with child welfare services, the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) was instituted in California in 2001. Under the act, individual county child welfare systems are responsible for working with other community partner organizations to develop and implement strategies that improve the safety and lives of children. AB 636 was designed to improve services by strengthening interagency partnerships, increasing community involvement, and publicly sharing outcome results. Following the implementation of AB 636, a work group established elements deemed important for improved accountability for child and family outcomes that result from the interventions and services provided by California’s Child Welfare System. These elements included a county self-assessment, peer quality case review, and county system improvement plan.

**History of the Peer Quality Case Review Process**

The peer quality case review system was developed in response to the Child and Family Services Reviews by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau and AB 636. AB 636 requires each county to write a system improvement plan using data generated from the comprehensive Child Welfare System/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) and building on the peer quality case review and a county self-assessment (see Figure 1). The state of California used the 58 county-specific system improvement plans to write the federally mandated Program Improvement Plan in response to the Child and Family Services Reviews.

The peer quality case review is designed to elicit concrete information on the successes and challenges of county practice strategies in one topic or for one outcome measure. Historically, this topic is chosen by each county with guidance from the state Department of Social Services, and includes elements that pertain to the delivery of social services and programs for children and other stakeholders, with social workers. Additionally, focus groups with key stakeholders engage in a review of quarterly CWS/CMS data that pertain to topics that involve children, foster children.
from the state Department of Social Services after a review of quarterly data reports drawn from the CWS/CMS system. Counties then select cases that pertain to their chosen area of improvement (e.g., timely reunification) and conduct interviews with social workers and probation officers. Additionally, focus groups are held with key stakeholders, which may include community partners, foster parents, biological parents, and foster children.

Historically, this process, while organized by the county under review, is implemented using peer review teams comprising line staff and supervisors from fellow counties’ child welfare services and probation departments. The peer quality case review “provides an in-depth analysis of case results and promotes information sharing that helps build the capacity of social workers and other staff” (California Department of Social Services, 2004, p. 8). It also eliminates direct comparison between counties, which is beneficial as counties many times have different population characteristics and economic circumstances (D’Andrade, Osterling, & Austin, 2008). Thus, the peer review teams offer support and ideas based on what works in their respective counties as possible ways for the county involved in the peer quality case review to improve on its own practices. Presently, more attention is being given to not only increasing the validity, reliability, and usefulness of the data used in developing a county’s self-improvement plan, but also to increasing the utility of the evaluation to improve child welfare practices (McCroskey, 2005).

Revising the Peer Quality Case Reviews: A Research-Based Collaborative Model

In a recent review of counties’ experiences with their self-improvement plans (which in part involves the peer quality reviews), counties expressed the need for more structure, guidance, and purpose with the process. The current pilot project was developed in response to this request. It used research-based information to guide the development of interview tools, increase the effectiveness of case file reviews, and improve county practice. Specifically, the case review process was added in order to provide a more comprehensive view of practice strengths and areas for improvement. The specific aspects related to the research-based collaborative peer quality case review model are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Using Research to Inform Practices

One of the prominent revisions to the peer quality case review process was to use existing research and theory to explicitly inform the self-assessment process. By constructing more knowledge-based questions for use during the self-review process, the developers of the revised
peer quality case review hoped to improve child welfare practices (Gibbs, 2003) and increase the utility of the review process. Previously, counties would choose an area related to safety, permanency, or well-being for children, such as timely adoptive practices, and then construct interview and focus group questions based on what they believed related to or impacted timely adoptions. In the research-based collaborative peer quality case review framework, counties construct interview and case review questions using research to identify if current county practices are consistent or inconsistent with what is known about factors related to timely adoptive practices. For example, a county might decide after looking at data from the CWS/CMS system that it is not successfully meeting an outcome related to achieving timely adoptive placements. It then decides that its peer quality case review will focus on achieving timely adoption placements and construct a tool to interview social workers on what factors and characteristics it believed related to timely adoptive practices. Whereas the county might previously have assumed that the same factors were associated with timely adoptive placements and timely adoptive finalizations, using current research under the research-based collaborative peer quality case review framework, it would learn that different factors are associated with these two outcomes and construct its review questions accordingly.

An illustrative example of how research informed the focus for selection of cases occurred in one participating county that chose to examine its practices related to placement stability. In thinking of questions to construct in order to interview social workers, a county social worker supervisor stated:

Prior to reading the literature review on placement stability, I was under the impression that we should focus our Peer Quality Case Review mainly on older children because our agency does not pay particular attention to how placement moves impact infants. We seem to operate under the assumption that they [infants] are less impacted by moves .... After reading the literature review and understanding the importance of predictability and attachment for infants, we want to ask questions about how our infants in our county’s child welfare system are affected by practices related to placement stability.

As this quote highlights, the provision of a literature review on a county’s chosen topic area better informed its review of agency child welfare practices, which we believe leads to improved organizational performance and accountability. In addition to helping develop more meaningful review questions, integrating research with a county’s peer quality case review allows for all involved to better interpret the results attained from the review process, as well as to develop its peer quality case review plan on research-informed practices rather than on speculations and assumptions.

Adding the Review of Case Files

The case file review was added to the research-based collaborative model for conducting peer quality case reviews to offer an additional source of information for the county review process. File reviews helped ensure that the information gleaned from the interviews with child welfare workers and probation officers was confirmed by information placed in the case files. Previously, the peer quality case review did not involve a review of the case files. Thus, during the peer quality case review process, the social worker or probation officer being interviewed about a particular case would sometimes answer, “I’m not sure if that child received an assessment,” or “I’m new to the case and I do not know the child’s placement history.” The review of case files also allowed for examination of counties’ documentation and working process as they relate to their chosen focus areas related to permanency, safety, and well-being.

Summary

It has been suggested that probation workers can be undermined on performance if qualitative self-assessment (Gupta & Blewett, conducting a peer quality case review) by peers based on research that is informed by process-oriented data on performance (Tilb

Development and Strategies

Given that the peer quality case review process is beneficial to counties, we recommend an important step in the counties’ participation has been keeping informed about collaborative peer quality case review implementation.

Counties were encouraged to convene the peer quality case review model for the fourth year of implementation, as part of the California Review. As such, all counties in the research-based collaborative peer quality case review model had impl-
Summary

It has been suggested that child welfare and probation workers' professional competence can be undermined when the focus is solely on performance outcomes, and that enhanced qualitative self-assessment processes are needed (Gupta & Blewett, 2007). The strategies for conducting the research-based collaborative peer quality case review contribute to this endeavor by promoting a self-assessment process that is informed by both outcome-oriented and process-oriented data that promote effectively evaluating and understanding the complexity of performance (Tilbury, 2004).

Development and Implementation Strategies

Given that the peer quality case review involves multiple systems (i.e., child welfare, probation, community partners, California Department of Social Services consultants, and Regional Training Academy partners), key players from each of these respective fields were involved in developing procedures to refine and enhance the peer quality case review process. Meetings were convened involving key players with both extensive knowledge about AB 636 and experience implementing the peer quality case review self-assessment process and comprehensive business reviews. Furthermore, early in the design process, buy-in was sought from the Northern California's County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA), an important step in ensuring the proposed pilot counties' participation. The Northern CWDA has been kept informed of the research-based collaborative peer quality case review process and implementation.

Counties were recruited to implement the revised peer quality case review at the beginning of the fourth year of implementation of the case review process so as not to disrupt the 3-year cycle of the California Child and Family Services Review. As such, all counties that piloted the research-based collaborative peer quality case review model had implemented the original case review process once. Notably, all Northern California counties with peer quality case reviews during the 2008-2009 year self-selected to serve as pilot sites for the research-based collaborative process.

Preparing for the Peer Quality Case Review

The following is an illustrative example for how the research-based collaborative peer quality case review took place within the participating pilot counties. As occurred in the past, a representative from the county's child welfare and probation department, with guidance from the state consultant, chose a particular area of practice in need of improvement (e.g., achieving timely reunification). A new contribution to the peer quality case review is that once the area of practice improvement is chosen by the county, the Regional Training Academy then provides the county with a literature review related to its chosen area. This literature review is then discussed over a scheduled webinar with the county child welfare and probation representatives, the Regional Training Academy, and the state Department of Social Services representatives. During this webinar, all participants discuss how the available literature is applicable to their individual counties and what types of cases to review. For example, reading the literature review, the county learns that children with disabilities are significantly less likely to successfully reunify with their families. As a result, the county may then choose to examine a case file in which a child has developmental disabilities and did not successfully reunify with his or her family and a case file in which the child with a developmental disability did successfully reunify with his or her biological parents.

Following this call, the Regional Training Academy, the county, and state Department of Social Services representatives develop interview and case review tools based on the research. These tools are then used in mock interviews to identify if they are effective in capturing county
practices in the county's chosen topic area. The tools are then refined and used during the week of the county's peer quality case review.

**During the Week of the Peer Quality Case Review**

An additional aspect of the collaborative nature of the peer quality case review has been peer county involvement in conducting the interviews, reviewing the case files, and sharing practices. These peer county representatives are typically chosen based on their expertise and experience within a particular focus area, such as achieving timely reunification within their respective counties. During the week of the county's peer quality case review, Regional Training Academy partners, state Department of Social Services representatives, the peer county participants, and the county's child welfare and probation workers spend 3 to 4 days participating in the peer quality case review. After the county's chosen cases are reviewed and the respective workers for these cases are interviewed, all participants and representatives discuss the county's practice strengths and challenges related to their areas (e.g., achieving timely reunification). The week of the research-based collaborative peer quality case review ends with a discussion for how county practice challenges and strengths are similar to what is found in the literature. The peer county participants then share their own county practices related to the topic area under review.

**Method**

Qualitative data were gathered to assess participant satisfaction and effectiveness with the research-based collaborative peer quality case review model. In-depth interviews with state consultants, social workers, regional academy trainers, probation officers, and community partners were conducted to capture individual experiences with the implementation of the revised self-assessment process. Seven out of 10 individuals asked to participate were interviewed for this article. Additionally, 46 individuals (26%) were probation staff, 52% child welfare staff, 13% community agency partners, and 9% California Department of Social Services staff who participated in the research-based collaborative peer quality case review provided their written responses to questions concerning their experiences with the revised self-assessment process.

**Participants**

The 7 individuals interviewed represented experiences within six Northern California counties that participated in the revised peer quality case review process. The interviewees consisted of four California Department of Social Services consultants, one probation officer, one child welfare supervisor, and one Northern California regional trainer. These interviews were coded and categorized based on emergent themes and patterns, which were then analyzed to identify similarities and differences in participants' views (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Interviews were tape-recorded with participant permission. Each participant engaged in a semistructured interview that lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. All interviewees had participated in the revised peer quality case reviews and some had participated in both the revised and older case review processes.
These individuals were asked some of the following open-ended questions:

- If you participated in the revised case review process, do you think it has improved the quality of the information being collected for counties? If so, in what ways?
- Do you think the revised peer quality case review has had an impact on the child social workers and probation officers involved? If so, in what ways?
- How was this process different from previous years?
- What is your impression of the coordination between the parties involved in the process?
- How do you think the process of conducting peer quality case reviews has worked, including the planning process to the writing of the final report?

Findings

More Purposeful and Improved Process

Overall, the most consistent theme identified from the feedback and individual interviews was that the research-based collaborative methods for conducting the peer quality case reviews contributed to making the self-assessment process more purposeful and improved the self-assessment process. All stated that the revised strategies have improved the quality of the information being collected and they would, with some further refinements, implement the revised strategies in future peer quality case reviews. All 5 interviewees who had participated in a previous peer quality case review concurred that the process of conducting the revised peer quality case reviews has worked, including useful and helpful in using the research-based collaborative process. As one individual commented, “The revised process is an improvement over the old process because it is now an example of continuous quality improvement, which fosters more agency buy-in and actual county practice improvements and changes.”

Benefits of the Research and Case File Reviews

Many of the respondents concurred that the literature reviews were useful and helpful in guiding their recent peer quality case review process.
Others remarked that the literature review was “brilliant,” informed the questions and provided the foundation for improvement. As one person related:

The literature review really contributed to positive changes within the county.... After reading the literature and evidence they realized what their county could actually do to make positive changes to improve that area.... [The literature review] contributed to making it a more valuable and meaningful process overall.

Another respondent stated that:

This information was based on what the research says makes a difference, so this is looking at outcomes for quality assurance based on things that we know make a difference, rather than speculation or on the feelings of staff. Also, as we worked from the research in developing questions, we were able to have meaningful feedback.

A third commented that the addition of the literature review produced more research-informed questions for the interviews and case review tools:

The literature review is a real advantage.... [It] focuses tool development, focuses the county to look at research to see what's working well. It focuses [the] county in such a way that the counties ask questions that they may have glided over in the past. Rather than on speculation or just using questions from other counties.

The case file reviews were also viewed by all as essential to the peer quality case review process. As one respondent commented, “In using the case reviews, teams really got to know the case really well, and they were able to ask different, more appropriate follow-up questions because they were so familiar with the case.” Another respondent commented that having the peer review teams also look at the target child’s case file resulted in counties increasing their understanding of the importance of good record keeping:

Incorporating the case file review helped the counties to learn how important it is to document things, especially when cases are transitioned to new workers. The interviewees and the peer reviewers are recognizing the importance of case file management.... The case review is essential — helps round out the information. The interviewers are familiar enough with the case that it really helps them understand the case and ask the appropriate questions.

**Enhanced Interagency Collaboration**

As indicated by one child welfare worker, the alignment of her county’s revised peer quality case review with the current literature on “placement stability” and training on accurately conducting case reviews contributed to increased collaboration between agencies:

This helpful collaboration and organization helped in providing staff with a greater understanding of the process, plus it fostered some buy-in, which collectively contributed to greater commitment and collaboration in implementing suggested improvements and changes following the final report.... Everyone was on the same page.... Overall, this … was a useful and beneficial process.

Additionally, 3 interviewees noted that the revised peer quality case review resulted in greater intracounty collaboration between probation departments and child welfare services: “It helps probation and CWS [Child Welfare Services] partner more and share resources and see what they have in common and what needs they have in common. Partnerships are improving.”

An example of this enhanced collaboration leading to improved provision of agency services was highlighted in an interview with a probation worker. As a result of the collaborative peer probation department and family stability for minor learned that its caseload had good family focus on the services to improve the peer.

**Importance of A**

This interviewee noted that the revised peer quality review was essential in improving the process. As one respondent stated:

This was my experience during preparation week, and I really appreciated the teamwork with my staff and volunteers as they worked together to improve the process. It was a useful and beneficial experience.

Another respondent commented that the peer quality case review resulted in greater intracounty collaboration between probation departments and child welfare services: “It helps probation and CWS [Child Welfare Services] partner more and share resources and see what they have in common and what needs they have in common. Partnerships are improving.”

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worker. As a result of the research-based collaborative peer quality case review process, the probation department learned that engaging in formal family finding efforts increased placement stability for minors. The probation department learned that its county's child welfare services had good family finding efforts, and as a result decided to partner with its county's child welfare services to improve their family-finding efforts.

**Importance of Adequate Preparation**

The interviewees indicated that while the revised peer quality case review took a great deal of preparation, such preparation led to a more productive and efficient quality assurance process. As one respondent indicated:

This was my first time going through a [peer quality case review], but from the reactions and comments made by staff during preparation, I think this was a totally different experience. I found that the new process is much more labor intensive in the preparation, but it ran smoothly during the week, and there was plenty of time to prepare for the event if you start early and pace your team with realistic goals. I found both CDSS staff and our [Regional Training Academy consultants] to be invaluable in this process, as they walked me through every step and offered so much technical support.

Another respondent stated that it is important to adequately prepare. Research related to a particular focus area must be received in a timely manner to ensure that the information is actually used during the week of the peer quality case review:

In our case, our literature review was not completed early, so our questions and tools were developed quickly. I think that if we had more time to review the document, our questions might have been better crafted and some of the issues in regards to the difference between probation and CWS would have been addressed differently.

Thus an important element of ensuring that the research is beneficial and useful to the county for its peer quality case review is that it is important that the county receive the information with enough time to review it and make use of the research for constructing its interview and case review tools.

**Lessons Learned**

**Communication and Initial Buy-In**

Some of the individuals interviewed indicated that the planning process in setting up the research-based collaborative peer quality case review was a challenge and that there was some initial resistance in implementing some of the revised strategies, such as making use of the literature review to guide the peer quality case review process. One respondent also indicated that miscommunication and disorganization during the planning phase of the peer quality case review contributed adversely to effective implementation and use of the self-assessment process.

**Preparation and Planning**

Difficulties were also noted for recruiting community partners to participate as peer county team members in the peer quality case review process and in getting appropriate individuals to attend the focus groups. All of the interviewees indicated that in order for the research-based collaborative peer quality case review to be efficient and beneficial to individual counties, it is important that adequate preparation is afforded to the process prior to the week that the review takes place. One respondent commented that it is helpful to the process to maintain regular contact to facilitate the planning and preparation phase for the peer quality case review: "I think that establishing a team and having regular calls and emails was very beneficial, but also we had a site visit several months in advance as well, and that was great."
Implications for Practice

In this project, a research-based collaborative model for conducting the peer quality case reviews for both child welfare and probation was developed and tested. Response to the pilot was generally favorable and suggested several potential benefits for agencies concerned with improving quality assurance processes and better meeting the needs of the families and children they serve. The interview responses and participant feedback suggest the importance of the revised strategies for conducting peer quality case reviews to making concrete positive improvements for children and families involved with child welfare services. Among other benefits, participants indicated that the research-based collaborative practices contributed to increased engagement in the peer quality case reviews and buy-in to the quality assurance process.

Moreover, both the use of research and the case review component were viewed as important strategies. Using research to more thoroughly inform performance measures and accountability indicators for child welfare and probation practices has contributed to enhancing the quality of the self-assessment process by affording the county under review a much more comprehensive understanding of the findings from the interviews and focus groups. The integration of research also serves as a powerful training tool for all participating parties involved in the review process and allows for enhanced collaboration and understanding across agencies, (e.g., probation, mental health, and child welfare).

Study Limitations and Next Steps

The current evaluation of the research-based collaborative peer quality case review process is limited, since only those who were willing to fill out the surveys or be interviewed provided feedback on the process. Those who chose not to participate may have held different perspectives concerning the revised process, which are not represented here. Additionally, this pilot project did not assess if the revised practices implemented in the peer quality case reviews resulted in actual practice improvements. A future line of inquiry should examine if knowledge attained from the research-based collaborative peer quality case review has transferred to actual changes in agency practices and behaviors.

Conclusion

The peer quality case review process is a promising method for child welfare and probation agencies to monitor programs, services, and activities to make continuous agency and system improvements. Feedback from participants indicated that the research-based collaborative process implemented in this pilot project enhanced the peer quality case review process overall. These revised strategies for conducting peer quality case reviews offer promise for improving interagency collaboration and provision of services to our most vulnerable children and families.

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