

Dr. Nancy Freymond

Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University
nfreymond@wlu.ca.

Managing the accountability paradox: Promising practices in an unsustainable child welfare system

This paper highlights a fundamental paradox in frontline child welfare practice in Ontario, Canada. In 2007, the province of Ontario instituted a differential response model which maintains a procedure-driven risk emphasis in “core” investigatory child welfare services and encourages a more collaborative service response in less “dangerous” family situations (Child Welfare Secretariat, 2005). Frontline workers are encouraged to build relationships and respond creatively to the unique needs of families and children, whenever possible. However, these expectations unfold in a system that is dominated by bureaucratic control, standardized procedures and stringent documentation requirements (Cameron et al., 2007). Managerial values permeate all aspects of front line practice creating radical imbalances between responding in meaningful ways to families and children and managing systemic accountability requirements.

In Ontario child welfare services are administered by 53 incorporated not-for-profit agencies that are funded by the provincial government. These agencies tend to be large, centrally located organizations. Innovations that show considerable promise in the delivery of differential interventions to families and children have emerged in selected regions where services are delivered from accessible community based settings such as schools and neighbourhood centers (Cameron, Freymond & Hazineh, in press).

The data which inform this discussion were collected under the Transforming Front-Line Child Welfare Practice study at Wilfrid Laurier University, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. This research is part of a larger program of study, the Partnerships for Children and Families Project, which is directed at fostering improvements in child welfare delivery systems. The data are comprised of 18 focus groups with front line child welfare workers, 17 individual interviews with their supervisors as well as employment survey data. This paper reports on findings that compared accessible settings and centralized child welfare settings among multiple dimensions including workers perceptions about values and professional identities, the range of services offered to families and children, and job conditions.

Although frontline workers believe that their jobs are fundamentally important and those in accessible settings demonstrate promising practices in engaging families and children, the demands of central bureaucratic control, risk aversion and system self protection substantially shape the experience of frontline workers. Workers consistently report spending up to 70% of their time managing accountability paperwork. Compliance with the documentation requirements and service time lines are viewed as essential in protecting workers and agencies and obstacles in intervening with families and children.

The findings suggest that workers cannot balance constructive intervention that responds

effectively to the needs of families and children while adhering to the bureaucratic demands of a child welfare system dominated by the values of managerialism. Workers across both settings reported comparable relatively high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, components of “burnout” as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1986). They spoke about feeling overwhelmed by excessive workload expectations and a loss of faith in the system of child welfare and in their capacity to respond in meaningful ways to the needs of families and children. The suggestion was that the forces of managerialism would reshape any efforts at reform to reflect its priorities.

This paper discusses the importance of rethinking risk management and reaction to error in systems of child welfare. It forwards ideas about shaping public discourse as well as the shared management of risk.

Bibliography

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