A Collaborative Approach to Professional Development: A Systems Change Initiative Using Interagency Learning Circles

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Crystal Collins-Camargo, Dana Sullivan, April Murphy and Caroline Atkins

Project MATCH was a Children's Bureau-funded collaborative initiative of one state's public child welfare agency and three state universities who have a history of working together to enhance child welfare services to children and resource families. MATCH stands for Making Appropriate and Timely Connections for Children. The project had several goals, one of which was to increase inter- and intra-agency communication among public, private, and community stakeholders in the child welfare system focused on improving services to children in out-of-home care. During the first year of the program, potential barriers of the foster care system were explored through analysis of existing and newly collected data from public and private child welfare staff and resource families in order to refine proposed interventions with an overall goal of enhancing permanency for these children.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA; PL 105-89) required timely achievement of permanency for children in out-of-home care. While ASFA's emphasis on timely permanency, safety, and well-being does not negate reunification with family as a valuable goal, this legislation forced a shift from process and procedure to these three outcomes (Administration for Children and Families, n.d.a, n.d.b). The Center for Social Policy and the Urban Institute (2009) described the goals of this legislation as moving children promptly to permanent families, ensuring safety as paramount, elevating child well-being as a third focus of the child welfare system, and improving innovation and accountability. Many child welfare experts agree that barriers often delay movement toward permanency, which is a systemic issue in child welfare and may not successfully be removed by the public agency in isolation (e.g. Akin, 2011; Courtney & Hook, 2012; Davis et al., 2013). While critics have documented concerns about implications of some statutory requirements for subpopulations such as substance abusing families, "as intended ASFA has prodded child welfare agency culture towards a focus on permanence and towards timely decision making required to accomplish it" (Golden & Macomber, 2009, p. 21). As a part of Project MATCH, one state invested in enhancing the local collaboration of both public and private child welfare workers and resource parents in this regard.

This paper focuses on one of the interventions developed for implementation in years 2-5 of the grant: the implementation of regional, quarterly peer consultation groups. These groups were termed "Mix and MATCH" to suggest the interagency mix of professionals and volunteers around shared goals for system improvement. The data collected in the first year of the project suggested the extent of collaboration among public and private agency workers and resource parents was of concern, and there was a need for review of local data indicators and problem-solving regarding the implementation of best practices. Almost 80% of both public and private agency staff rated the development of a shared vision among staff and resource families as a strategy needed for the achievement of permanency (Grimes et al., 2009). The focus of these meetings was to engage the public and private agency partners in the development of a shared vision of the permanency goals for children and to implement local action plans to achieve these goals using strengthened

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collaboration among these parties as a vehicle for sustainable systems change. The Mix and MATCH groups met and reviewed local data to identify trends, discussed barriers and strategies to achieving positive outcomes, shared best practices, and provided opportunities for the celebration of permanency successes. Focused on the continuum of services associated with out-of-home care, the emphasis of the program ranged from targeted and diligent recruitment of resource families equipped to meet the needs of children in care to concurrent planning to placement decision -making and retention over the course of the project.

Literature Review
Collaboration as a Strategy

Because of the complexity of challenges experienced, partnerships are a strategy that acknowledges that success cannot be achieved by any single organization or sector on their own (Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001). Collaboration may occur around service delivery as well as administrative activities (Bolland & Wilson, 1994), such as data or resource-sharing, or staff training (Bunger et al., 2014). Networks and partnerships in the human services can be very challenging. Among the nonprofit sector in child and family-serving agencies, relationships are often characterized as a mixture of collaboration and competition, or "coopetition," resulting in very complex dynamics (Bunger et al., 2014). In a market where competition among providers exists, strategic responses of individual agencies vary. One study found that agencies often attempt to differentiate themselves to demonstrate superiority among peers (Barman, 2002). Partnerships between public and private agencies have been associated with effectiveness, efficiency, and equity (Andrews & Entwistle, 2010); however, varying missions, priorities, processes, and perspectives challenge such partnerships (Schaeffer & Loveridge, 2002). This may be especially present in child welfare where the call for accountability is high and the work complex, yet the ability of the public and private sectors to collaborate is critically important (Collins et al., 2012). Collabora-

tion among private providers may be encouraged by public agencies recognizing the value of such (Jang & Feiok, 2007).

A key to retaining foster parents is the development of a positive relationship between the foster family, the agency worker, and other agency personnel (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006; Whiting & Huber, 2007). Data regarding public/private partnerships in child welfare service delivery suggest that the building of cross-system collaboration, data-sharing, and development of a shared vision may be associated with improved outcomes, and should be researched (Flaherty, Collins-Camargo & Lee, 2007, 2008). Therefore, the composition of the regional groups in the current project included all of these partners, using a learning circle or peer consultation model to promote the development of a collaborative, integrated learning system (Austin, 2008).

Team-Based Models for Fostering Collaboration and Innovation

The use of learning circles has been effective in both health care administration and education (Bochennek, Wittekindt, Zimmerman, & Klingebiel, 2007; Chen & Kuo, 2011; Wade & Hammick, 1999). While the literature on their application in child welfare is very limited, pilot projects have been evolving throughout the country for various purposes, such as implementation of evidence-based practices in child welfare supervisor-led circles (Brittain, 2012). It is hoped that expanding this approach to a child welfare setting will result in increased collaboration and problem -solving, but both process and outcome evaluation of such models is needed. A similar approach to professional development of clinical supervision skills among child welfare supervisors working in the same regions in the public agency was tested using a learning laboratory model (Millar, Shiell, & Page, 2003; Shackelford & Payne, 2003).

This approach has been utilized to aid in teaching new practices and approaches in agencies, particularly when a shift in the organizational culture is needed (La Croix & Hammerman, 2011). A similar approach, the use of design

teams or innovative learning and action research teams, has been implemented with success to promote innovation to address challenges like turnover in public child welfare agencies (Caringi et al., 2007; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2009). Another project implemented with the assistance of university-based consultation used supervisory teams in child welfare to promote in-agency innovation and implementation support. This project found the need to address communication challenges in implementation (Claiborne & Lawson, 2011). A four-state initiative implemented design teams to promote use of university-community-state agency partnerships for cross-systems change to serve child welfare families. Semi-structured interviews revealed effective design team processes (Lawson, Anderson-Butcher, Petersen. & Barkdull, 2003). Clearly, a small literature base is building regarding the use of team-based approaches to promote professional development and the implementation of practice innovations in the field of child welfare, primarily within individual agencies. The current study was designed to pursue these goals in addition to promoting overall perceptions of interagency collaboration among public and private agency staff and resource parents operating in local communities.

The Mix and MATCH Model

This intervention was implemented in four of the nine service regions of the state. In each region, Mix and MATCH meetings were conducted for three hours on a quarterly basis in two local sites over a three-year period. Sites were chosen on opposite ends of the regions to encourage diversity in participation; however, in some areas sites merged in response to duplicative or dwindling attendance so that group sizes were sufficient to pursue the project goals. Public and private child welfare agencies were invited to send representative staff and resource parents to participate with the intent of fairly consistent participation by individuals in groups of approximately 8-10. Family court staff, regional placement coordinators, and other community partners also participated in some areas. The groups were facilitated by university staff members, with two individuals facilitating groups in the eastern regions and two others in the western regions. Over time, it was observed that participa-

tion evolved as the purpose of the groups was refined.

Over the three-year period, the structure of the meetings evolved as well. Roughly half of the period involved a more structured approach with three distinct components: brief training on best practices, review of localized data trends regarding the target population, and the discussion of implications of the trends and development of local action planning. The training portion of the meetings focused on information regarding best practices in the areas of recruitment, concurrent planning, kinship care, placement, and retention. These topics were rotated each quarter. Facilitators provided brief summaries of current research and best practices on the topic covered that quarter, and participants discussed how aspects of the information could be disseminated and applied in local practice. Starting each session with a review of best practices set the tone for the action planning stage by encouraging participants to think beyond what or how they currently practiced. The project evaluation team analyzed data from the public child welfare system's data system and created quarterly reports and graphs on data indicators agreed upon collaboratively, provided on a county level. Examples included the number of children in placement compared to the number of resource homes available to care for them based on difficult to place categories such as sibling groups and teens; length of time to train, approve, and utilize new resource homes; and placement stability. The groups reviewed their own data to assess current performance, identify local practices and gaps in service with the potential to promote improvement, develop action plans for practice change, and review ongoing results. For example, region-wide, the number of resource homes might appear close to sufficient, but county-specific data could reveal either the absence or lack of variability in type of resource homes needed to ensure that youth were placed in their home county.

Groups were asked to use a standardized format for action plans which included the issue identified, the current status, the desired outcome, assumptions, actions to be taken, start and end

dates, team members responsible, and resources to be used. Examples of action plans included planning church-based recruitment events to target homes for teenagers, increasing use of pre-placement visits to promote placement stability, and training clerical staff regarding customer service techniques for use when potential or current resource families call the office. The following outcomes were anticipated: increased collaboration among public and private agency staff and resource parents, learning and implementation of best practices that affect achievement of permanency for children, and the development of a data-driven approach to practice change as part of the system's organizational culture. Action plans were revisited each session to update progress, revise actions, and celebrate achievements. In addition, email reminders were regularly sent to alert participants to upcoming or pending actions. Over time, after each of the topical areas had been covered, the structure of the meetings shifted to enable more focus on review of data and action planning around areas of particular interest, as well as more localized leadership in facilitating meetings. In the last year of the grant, larger events were undertaken by some of the groups. Examples included a collaborative training opportunity for parents with both the state and public agency in a region of the state, as well as a conference for teens, their resource families, and social workers with teens on their caseloads. These types of events were conducted as a direct result of needs identified during the Mix and MATCH sessions. They were truly collaborative events with planning and implementation conducted by both the state and private agencies with minimal support from university facilitators.

These groups were designed to be an integral part of ongoing support and training for public and private agency staff and resource parents. They were designed to create a process that transforms the culture and fosters change that could be sustained beyond the life of the grant. As the public and private sectors work together to make appropriate and timely connections for children to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being, we promote a greater understanding of the needs of the child welfare system across agencies.

It should be noted that the implementation of this intervention experienced significant challenges over time that are important to understand in order to appropriately interpret evaluation results. In particular, groups started out with much larger attendance, which later dwindled significantly. Regionally, public child welfare administrators indicated that they were able to better identify the most appropriate individuals to send to meetings as the intervention progressed. Attendance by state agency resource parents was limited, peaked about midway through the grant, and then decreased again. Because public agency workers had to manage court dates and unanticipated caseload emergencies, attendees were often not the same at each session. The project also struggled with consistent participation by private agency representatives. Participation by private agency resource parents was limited at the beginning and dwindled to non-existence. Potential contributing factors and implications of these challenges are offered in the discussion section of this paper. Participants varied from front line workers, recruitment and certification workers, private agency leadership, and leadership within the public agency. Process and outcome evaluation data regarding the implementation of the intervention will be summarized.

Methodology

Survey

A paper survey was administered pre-, interim-, and postintervention to assess knowledge gained from the training provided at the Mix and MATCH groups. The thirteen multiple choice knowledge questions were designed by the evaluation team based on the content in the training curriculum portion of the intervention and were assessed for content validity by the Mix and MATCH facilitators prior to administration. The survey also included an assessment of the collaborative relationships and an assessment of current level of practice in the field using retrospective, self-report measurement.

The Wilder Collaboration Scale (Wilder Research Center, 2001) was utilized to assess the extent of the partnership relationship with the

participants. This 40-item 5-point Likert-style scale was developed by Mattessich, Murray-Close, and Monsey (2001) to measure perception of collaboration across six domains: (a) collaborative communication dynamics, (b) purpose and mission, (c) human and financial resources to achieve goals, (d) collaborative process, (e) collaborative environment, and (f) characteristics of members. This scale has been used in many studies with a wide variety of collaborative groups such as community colleges and workforce investment programs (Townsend & Shelley, 2008), inter-organizational research consortiums (Perrault, McClelland, Austin, & Sieppert, 2011), and public-private partnerships in child welfare to implement performance-based contracting (Garstka, Collins-Camargo, Hall, Neal, and Ensign, 2012).

Questions related to six areas of practice were included in the survey administered in intervention regions. These questions were designed to measure the extent to which best practices in these areas were occurring in their regions. The six practice areas measured on the survey were analyzed to determine any differences between the pre- and post-administrations. They were measured by questions on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating the most practice knowledge in the area. Constructs measured were foster parent retention (4 items, maximum possible score = 20); customer service (4 items, maximum possible score = 20); placement stability (5 items, maximum possible score = 25); concurrent planning (6 items, maximum possible score = 30); targeted recruitment (5 items, maximum possible score = 25); and kinship care (9 items, maximum possible score = 40). The participants were asked about their overall skill in these practice areas, the time they have to perform these skills, and the agency support that is perceived as the skills are performed. All three of these constructs were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with an overall possible score of 30.

The post-survey also included some open-ended questions asking participants for their perception regarding the process:

- What aspect of the Mix and MATCH process has been most useful to you in your day-to-day work as a part of the out-of-home care system? Why?
- What aspect of the Mix and MATCH process has been the least useful to you in your day-to-day work as a part of the out-of-home care system? Why?
- Please provide an example of your use of information, skills, or ideas gained through the Mix and MATCH in your day-to-day practice.
- Now that Project MATCH is coming to an end, to what extent do you believe meetings similar to Mix and MATCH should be continued in your region?
- If something similar were to be continued, how would you recommend they be structured?
- Please describe your perception of the impact the Mix and MATCH has had on your region and the collaboration among public and private agency staff and resource parents as well as community partners.

These open-ended questions were analyzed for general themes using a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006).

The pre-survey was administered at the first Mix and MATCH meetings across the four regions beginning in January 2010. The mid-survey was administered at a session marking the midway point to the end of the funding cycle (beginning May 2011), while the post-survey was administered during the final round of meetings which took place in the spring and summer of 2013. The surveys were administered on paper at the beginning of the respective meetings.

Stakeholder interviews.

At the end of implementation, interviews were conducted with public and private agency staff and resource parents involved with the interventions in each of the four regions, public agency administrators, board members, and project staff. Those individuals who had participated in Mix and MATCH meetings were invited to participate in interviews. These interviews included 45 individuals and were conducted in the final quarter of the project.

Results

Results from Mix and MATCH Survey over Time

Sample. The number participating in only the preadministration survey was 98. As has been noted, attendance at meetings was inconsistent, and overall participation decreased over time. The number that participated in the midadministration was 50. The intent was to match participants from pre- to mid- to postadministration; however, due to low participation the number of matched pairs was very small. There were 28 that participated in only the postadministration. Overall, there were a total of 190 that participated in the Mix and MATCH data collection over time.

In the preadministration, 83% of the participants were female. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 66, with a mean age of 40.6 (SD = 10.6). A majority (91%) identified as Caucasian, with 7% identifying as African American, 1% Hispanic, and 1% identified as other. In terms of education, 22% had a BA in a field other than social work, 19% BSW, 14% MA in a field other than social work, 21% MSW, 14% high school/GED, 7% AA, and 2% indicated they had a postgraduate degree. Thirty-three participants were resource parents and had been serving in this capacity for an average of 7.1 years (SD = 1.6, range = 1-30 years). Participants reported they were fostering between 0 and 5 children at the time of survey completion, with a mean of 1.5 children (SD = 1.4).

In the 2011 midadministration the demographics were very similar. Eighty six percent were female. The mean age was 42.1 (SD = 9.6, Range = 21-65). Ninety-six percent were Caucasian, and 4% identified as African American. Eighteen percent had a BA other than social work, 13% BSW, 16% MA other than social work, 23% MSW, 17% high school/GED, 7% AA, and 2% a postgraduate degree. For this administration, 16 participants were resource parents and they had been for an average of 11.96 years (SD = 11.45, Range = 1-30 years). The number of children they were fostering when they completed this survey was 2.1 (SD = 1.9, Range = 0-6). In the 2013 postadministration, all participants identified as Caucasian and only 10% were male. The educational breakdown remained about the same. Only two participants in this sample identified as foster parents.

Overall knowledge. On the knowledge portion of the instrument, the scores improved only slightly, from preadministration Mean = 7.9 (SD = 2.2) to postadministration Mean = 8.18 (SD = 2.5) out of a maximum possible score of 13. This was not a significant difference: $t = 1.14$, $df = 28$, $p = .262$. However, this is not particularly meaningful given the fact that the project did not experience consistent participation from the same individuals over time as was initially expected.

Collaboration. Four of the subscales of the Wilder Collaboration Scale (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001) administered in the data collection were significantly higher from pre- to postadministration: collaborative membership and relationship ($t = -2.5$, $p < .05$), collaborative functioning ($t = -4.83$, $p < .001$), collaborative goals ($t = -2.70$, $p < .01$), and collaborative resources ($t = -$

Table 1

Mix and Match Collaboration Scores from Pre to Post

Scale	T1 Mean (SD)
	T3 Mean (SD)
Collaborative Environment	3.5 (.46)
	3.5 (.55)
Collaborative Membership	3.5 (.43)
	3.6 (.53)**
Collaborative Functioning	3.45 (.40)
	3.68 (.53)*
Collaborative Goals	3.53 (.82)
	3.8 (.48)*
Collaborative Resources	3.5 (.59)
	3.7 (.47)**
Full Scale	3.52 (.37)
	3.59 (.54)

*$p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, ***$p < .10$

1.98, p <.05). However, the overall scores did not differ significantly over time. Groups were combined in order to have more equivalent group sizes before analysis (e.g. participants completing at pre- and midadministration were coded as pre-only and their interim scores were dropped, and those who completed mid- and postadministration were coded as post-only and their interim scores were dropped). This yielded a pre-only group of 96, and the post-only group response was 102. See Table 1 for a summary of the collaboration scores.

Practice areas. From the pre- to postadministration, the means for foster parent retention, placement stability, and targeted recruitment increased slightly; those for customer service, concurrent planning, and kinship care decreased slightly over time. There was not a significant difference from pre to postadministration in any of the practice areas.

Overall skill, time, and agency support. Overall skill increased from a mean of 20.3 to 21.7 from pre- to mid-administration (p < .001); there was an increase to 22.7 at postadministration but it was not significant. Time to perform skills increased significantly from a score of 18.3 at time 1 to 21.9 at midadministration (p < .001). Agency support remained fairly consistent across time (21.5-21.67). There were no significant differences by agency type in terms of overall skill, time or agency support. There was a significant difference from pre- to midadministration in worker time and skill overall.

Qualitative Questions from final Mix and MATCH Survey

Open-ended questions were added to the postadministration of the survey. Overall, the responses were positive with respect to the meetings and indicated the benefits of the intervention. The following themes were identified. The number indicates how often the particular phrase was stated. The overall low response to the postadministration of the survey made these numbers relatively low.

What aspect of the Mix and MATCH meetings has been the most useful? The most frequently identified theme was collaboration and working together (n = 10); particularly, working

with staff and foster parents from both public and private agencies was listed as beneficial. The other main theme for this question was the focus on recruitment and retention of foster parents (n = 5). Illustrative quotes for this question included: "Collaboration—having various players together to formulate plans" and "Foster parent retention information... assist[ed] me in learning new ways to retain foster parents."

What aspect of Mix and MATCH has been the least useful? The participants expressed frustration with not having the "decision-makers" or the "right people" at the meetings (n = 3) and not seeing enough accomplished (n = 3). A quote to illustrate both of these comments was as follows: "Not seeing things get accomplished quicker— lack of consistent attendance."

Do you think that the Mix and MATCH meetings should continue? Fifteen participants responded to this question and all but one indicated that they thought the meetings should continue. Respondents suggested a quarterly or monthly meeting (n = 9). They also wanted there to be increased collaboration, communication, and participation from other agencies (n = 5). One participant stated "our group is committed to carrying on the mission of [the meetings]."

Perception of impact of Mix and MATCH meetings on regional and public/private staff and resource parent collaboration. This question yielded a mixture of responses. Four participants indicated that the groups were ineffective or only partially effective: "somewhat effective, still do not have a lot of agencies involved," "I don't feel it had an impact on my agency... I always felt as if we were speaking in theories," "it sparks discussion... but more could get done." However, thirteen participants had positive things to say about the impact of the groups. Themes included good networking, good collaboration, growth for all involved, improved communication, and good training. One person noted "the collaboration has been very useful and I hope it continues," another said that "we have done good work," and another summed up both positions by saying "the group has accomplished a lot—[and there is] still work to do."

Stakeholder Focus Group Results

Along with questions regarding the other interventions associated with Project MATCH, interviewees were asked to comment specifically on the successes and challenges associated with the Mix and MATCH. In general, many people were positive about the potential of this intervention despite ongoing challenges with participation from partners. There was lack of consensus regarding the value of reviewing local data, action planning, and providing training on best practices, but planning of hands-on collaborative events was seen as a positive. Themes identified based on content analysis are described below, with the number in brackets indicating the number of times the theme was observed. Illustrative quotes follow in italics.

What went well. Four themes arose from analysis of responses to this question.

- Networking across agencies/roles was useful to have candid discussion of regional challenges and solutions [6]. *"The … meetings we had are beneficial due to networking… It's good for foster parents and staff to talk because there are a lot of foster parents that move agencies. It's beneficial for the PCCs to meet each other and share ideas with recruitment, processes, etc."*
- Collaborative planning and implementation of events has been productive as opposed to the model of the first year [6]. *"We did better towards the end. We began having working topics from the interventions. We then felt like we had a purpose—we were having conferences, which gave a cause and we worked each one."*
- Regions should take more of a leadership role [6]. *"Towards the end we were working in smaller groups rather than having training. We started leading it, got others involved… and it started going more so the way it should have from the beginning. We started meeting more frequently. Did some great projects. In the beginning no one attended. At the end it got a lot better."*
- Expand the size of the group to include more community partners including the courts [4].

"Judges need to be participating in Mix and Match discussions."

Four additional generally positive comments were made, such as one respondent's statement: *"We found this very beneficial and are continuing to use it. We still have DCBS and PCCs meeting together and working together. We are working to limit overloads with foster parents and other things. We have educated staff."*

What did not go well. Four themes emerged regarding implementation issues.

- The intervention experienced participation/ attendance issues [6]. *"It was a struggle to get everyone at these meetings throughout the process. This was with all areas of participants—DCBS staff, privates, etc. In the beginning it was a struggle, but once they saw the benefit of the meetings/project, that changed."*
- The meetings were seen as duplicative with another regional partnership meeting [5]. *"We have tried to come ways to keep it going. Participation was declining. We already had PCC collaborative meeting so added this on."*
- There was a lack of follow through on action plans/planning of collaborative events by some participants [3]. *"We had meetings with everyone talking, but nothing seems to be getting done outside of the meetings... People came and went, and I finally stopped going. There was no follow through on any plans."*
- Competition or tension regarding push to move kids from private agency resource homes to public agency homes impacted the Mix and MATCH process [3]. *"I don't think we ever addressed the main issue in the room which is the different ways [private agencies] approve homes versus how [the public agency] does... When you get everyone in the same room, sometimes it's hard to focus globally on how best to serve children and recruit foster parents, when these issues are under the surface. These issues needed to be dealt with… As long as there is a contractual agreement between [the public agency] and*

any other provider and the standards/money are different, there will be some undercurrents that surface."

Recommended changes. Three general suggestions were made for altering the approach to such a group.

- Find a way to increase participation of private child welfare agencies/Use regional management to encourage participation [5]. "What disappointed me was the lack of buy in from private child care agencies… It was so unfortunate that they weren't involved."

- Focus on the purpose, structure, public relations and participation incentives [3]. "A more critical look at the structuring of Mix and MATCHs, the PR and planning for that… Additional thoughtful planning involving regional leadership more... [It might help] if we worked with folks early on more, getting to the [private agencies] and courts in a systematic way. I don't know that there was anything wrong with the content and the structure."

- Focus on planning collaborative events and hands-on projects [3]. "We tried to do action planning and tried to tie into [CFSR Performance Improvement Plan]. I don't think people had a firm understanding of what the numbers meant and how we could impact them. So, a couple of years in, we decided to change and make this 'big goal oriented' and let everyone take ownership. So, we planned a large community event. We had a lot of agencies come to the table… In summary, we went from our original intent of data sharing, to making it a more joint community effort... I think we made some gains in that area and established some relationships and better communication... The lines of communication are more open now. It's not perfect, but we are in a better place now than when we started."

Discussion

When reviewing the results of this study, it becomes clear that the process evaluation may be more of a contribution to the literature than the quantitative outcomes demonstrated. The project set out to use a team-based model in order to impact a number of areas related to the out-of-home

care system in one state: knowledge and implementation of best and promising practices in the child welfare system, use of data to drive innovative strategies for addressing identified needs, and collaboration among public and private agency staff and resource parents. Only in the latter was a statistically significant improvement observed, and this could not be demonstrated using matched pairs of data, only a time-based comparison, because the participants in the groups varied over time. Therefore, the positive results regarding collaboration must also be viewed cautiously as they may be a function of the individuals completing the survey at each iteration.

Results from this demonstration project are not generalizable, as they represent implementation of an intervention in only one state. Even within the four regions of the state experiencing the intervention, it cannot be said that strict fidelity to an intervention protocol was observed across sites or over time. As is often true in participatory action evaluation, interim process evaluation results were used to adjust the structure of the groups and the approaches used throughout the process, and the cultural characteristics of each region were taken into account.

During the time of intervention, the child welfare system experienced significant challenges concurrent with the implementation of this project. The state experienced significant budgetary challenges during the implementation period. Although this was a federally-funded initiative, other aspects of the out-of-home care system experienced tremendous funding cuts and shifts and. in particular, a push to move children out of private agency homes, which no doubt influenced the participation of private agency staff in the intervention and the perceptions of collaboration. During the time period of implementation, project and agency leadership changed—a common challenge in public child welfare. In addition, the system experienced tremendous criticism and a legal battle with the state's two large newspapers regarding the release of case information on child maltreatment-related fatalities throughout much of the implementation period, which proved a significant diversion of energy and emphasis in the agency. All of these factors were reported as implementation challenges

in the stakeholder interviews and should be noted. The literature documented that implementation climate is a global construct related to effective implementation of innovation. It should be measured with consideration both to individual perceptions on how innovation use will be rewarded, supported, and expected, as well as on an organizational level (Jacob, Weiner & Bunger, 2014). Given the dynamics occurring within the context of this study, direct measurement of perceptions of implementation climate may have shed light on how these factors may have influenced participation and results of the Mix and MATCH groups.

So what is the value of this study to the greater professional development or systems change literature? The positive promise indicated in the small but growing literature regarding the use of team-based learning approaches to promote innovation and collaboration upon which this intervention was built—and the positive perceptions of participants and managers of the potential for an approach like this expressed in the qualitative component of the survey and the interviews— suggests this is an approach worth further research. It was likely a victim of implementation and evaluation challenges within the context of an ever-changing and reactive child welfare system.

This project is a cautionary tale regarding the importance of building implementation supports based on what the literature reveals. Unfortunately, the complexity of implementing an intervention with aggressive goals such as this within the context of a likely co-opetive market, characterized by a complex mix of competition and collaboration, was underestimated. Relationship history, incentives for participation, power and resource imbalances, leadership engagement, and institutional decision-making are all factors that have been demonstrated to influence collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008). While the intervention did involve face-to-face dialogue and efforts toward trust-building, as Ansell & Gash (2008) recommend, it may not have been realistic to expect greater success in a relatively short timeframe given the contextual factors, leadership change and disengagement, and recent institutional decisions that impacted business in the private sector. Perceptions of collaboration did improve,

but perhaps the level of engagement was insufficient to create sustainable strides. Qualitative data suggest that viable and valuable incentives for participation were not applied.

Professional development initiatives cannot hope to promote learning and engagement unless the intended individuals participate on a consistent basis. This project was plagued by poor attendance throughout. A number of contributors are possible. First of all, meetings were held on weekday mornings, which made it impossible for many resource parents due to work schedules. This challenge often inhibits initiatives targeted at both agency staff and resource parents as the former are unlikely to attend nights and weekends, and the latter are less likely to attend during the traditional workday. In terms of lack of consistent participation of private agency staff, our qualitative data suggested this was likely related to motivation and competition. Efforts to increase attendance including direct phone calls to encourage participation by regional leadership, were unsuccessful. The fact that participation and perceptions improved when the process shifted focus from learning best practices, and reviewing local data to inform improvement efforts to planning collaborative activities, is interesting. Clearly the motivation to learn skills and work to improve in areas directly related to the job was not sufficiently strong enough to overcome other issues such as workload or other factors.

The literature from design team and similar collaboration-building strategies may have shed light on implementation strategies that could have magnified success of the initiative. Claiborne and Lawson (2011) documented the value of intensive, staged consultation in transforming responsibility for managing and maintaining the group, which may have promoted transition from the university facilitators to organic leadership within the community. Conflict resolution and focusing on the very real challenges affecting members of the team, as supported by research (Claiborne & Lawson, 2011), did occur in the groups when issues arose. However, perhaps this should have been more an intentional focus. Similarly, research has demonstrated attention to informal relationships and the development of trust, re-

spect, and understanding to be critical in collaborative and network-building initiatives (Bunger, Doogan & Cao, 2014; Perrault et al., 2011). Strong, trust-based relationships have been associated with knowledge-sharing across agencies (Huang, 2014) and even client outcomes (Provan & Sebastian, 1998). Qualitative data from the Mix and MATCH evaluation suggested relationship building was valued by participants. However, intentional and repetitive activities with this intent may have enhanced value. The Mix and MATCH implementation team assumed that by bringing the partners together to engage in learning and innovative planning, these relationships would naturally grow, which may have been naïve.

Provan and Milward (1995) suggested that new funding for expansion of services within a group of agencies is required to stimulate coordinated service delivery and networking. Bunger, Doogan, and Cao (2014) found such infusion of funding associated with expansion of service networks and staff sharing of expertise among behavioral health agencies. Alternatively, fiscal scarcity has a negative effect on collaborating and interagency networking due to competition (Park & Rethemeyer, 2014). Needs assessment data collected by Project MATCH used to develop its interventions (including the Mix and MATCH) illustrated notable lack of understanding, competition, and flagging collaboration among private providers, as well as between the public and private agency staff in the child welfare system. However, the intervention and its implementation supports were clearly not strong enough to counter these influences. Qualitative data collected from stakeholders suggested a need for stronger leadership from public agency management to set the expectation of collaboration. The literature has posited that navigating the competitive provider pool and promoting effective collaboration in pursuit of a strong service array is an important skill for child welfare managers (Collins-Camargo, McBeath, & Ensign, 2011). However, although this may be desired by public agency leadership, it is important to recognize each agency as an individual entity over which they have only indirect influence (Keast, Mandell, Brown, & Woolcock, 2004). More than public agency leadership may have been needed to

support collaborative implementation of innovations in the market-driven environment. Lasker, Weiss, and Miller (2001) suggest a framework for developing partnership synergy that includes resources such as money; expertise; information and connections; and partner characteristics including level of engagement, relationships, leadership, a governance strategy, and external environment. In addition, accountability is critical within a network of collaborators, including informational accountability in terms of expectations and interorganizational behaviors, which have been shown to be as important as formal accountability mechanisms (Romzek, LeRoux, & Blackmar, 2012). Perhaps more attention to inclusion of program components based on these lessons from the literature might have been beneficial.

Having learning as a purpose, a collaboration success factor, illustrated by Perrault and colleagues (2011), was clearly a significant component of the Mix and MATCH model. Why, then, did knowledge, skill, and perceived implementation of best practices improve only slightly, and in some cases actually decrease during the project period? This, too, may be related to lack of consistent participation due to inadequate incentives and contextual challenges. It also could be related to issues of dosage. However, only additional research could demonstrate the strongest contributing factors to the very modest professional development outcomes. Quarterly meetings with brief shots of training and discussion across a variety of topics may not be sufficient to result in either knowledge development or translation into practice. Learning transfer has been demonstrated to require reinforcement and support (Antle, Sullivan, Barbee, & Christensen, 2009). The Mix and MATCH intervention directly touched only those attending the meetings, and qualitative data suggested a need for infusion into the broader practice environment.

While the quantitative results of this participatory evaluation study were disappointing, increased perceptions of collaboration were found over time. Significant evidence of implementation of promising and innovative practices related to out-of-home care based on localized data documenting needs was not found across the board, yet

qualitative results suggest participants valued the review and interpretation of data as a basis for discussing system improvement. In particular, engagement of interagency activities such as adoption fairs was valued, as was the less tangible but desired opportunity for representatives from stakeholder agencies to better understand each other's processes, constraints, and missions. In the field of child welfare, the Children's Bureau has articulated a vision involving collaborative reform efforts targeted at collective impact within the system (Mitchell, et al., 2012). This seems to acknowledge the important contribution of both sectors in this field and the need for an integrated collaborative approach. The evaluation of this Mix and MATCH project, which had similar aspirations but only limited success, suggests that it will be critical to consider the contributions of the business and administrative literature for the field to move forward with such strategies with hope of success. In social work, collaboration is often taken for granted. In this project, adequate homage might not have been paid to what the literature reveals about what may be necessary to make such a strategy work in a market environment. As Bunger et al. (2014) suggest, we must examine whether coopetition—the complex balance or imbalance of competition and collaboration— produces the level of benefits to organizations and the families they serve in order to adequately market and effectively incentivize this very difficult work. Clearly more work is needed to inform the field on how to best enhance collaborative efforts across sector boundaries to serve children and families.

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