Exploring the policy to practice gap: Social workers’ experience of embedding child protection policy into their practice

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Introduction
My role as Child & Family Agency (TUSLA) Implementation Officer

- Moving policy through the stages of the implementation process
- Identifying barriers and finding solutions
- Identifying facilitators and institutionalising them
- Engaging with stakeholders and community
- Engaging in data-based decision making
- Evaluating outcomes
Rationale for research study regarding social workers’ embedding of child protection policy into their practice

• Ireland has a long and complex social history

• Number of major inquiries

• Impact of inquiries on child protection legislation, policy and practice

• Are inquiry recommendations being effectively implemented?
Child Protection and Welfare Policy in Ireland

**Children First 2011 and ancillary policies**

- Over-arching policy reference document for practice
  - Children First 2011 published by Department of Children & Youth Affairs (DCYA)
  - Concerns: Parents, social workers, medical staff, An Garda Síochána (Police), etc.
  - Makes child protection everyone’s business

- Gives guidance on
  - definition of child abuse
  - standard reporting procedures
  - roles and responsibilities of organisations and personnel working with children
  - assessment and management of child protection and welfare concerns.

- Under the umbrella of Children First, the Child and Family Agency has in excess of 50 ancillary policies/ procedures for child protection and welfare practice.
Exercise 1

In pairs consider and discuss the policies you are currently using in your daily practice within your organisation.
How this study differs from past studies

• Exploring how social workers negotiate the process of applying Children First and ancillary policies in their practice

• Bottom up approach – identifying social workers’ attitudes towards implementing child protection policies to their daily practice

• Analysing policy implementation process through lens of implementation science
Basic tenants of implementation science

STAGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

- **Adoption**
  - Decision to implement a policy

- **Enactment**
  - Planned outcomes (measured in terms of fidelity to the policy)
  - Unplanned outcomes (resulting in positive and/or negative consequences caused by implementation of the policy)

- **Sustained Maintenance**
  - Most complex and difficult stage. Sustained policy implementation stage requires little to no external support, leading to a degree of 'institutionalisation'

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

1. **Passive versus active dissemination**

2. **Inter-personal communication**

MCKENNEY AND REEVES, 2012
Basic tenants of implementation science (cont.)

Critical Success Factors

1. Attributes of the policy being implemented
   1. Something better
   2. Compatible with existing values, cultures, practices & beliefs

2. People involved
   1. Change leaders
   2. Change champions

3. The context and surrounding systems
   1. Implementation fidelity and/ or flexibility

MCKENNEY AND REEVES, 2012
### Methodology/Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Qualitative research using a phenomenological approach</td>
<td>- Purposive sampling of eight participants from different child protection social work departments in the Cork Area. Inclusion/ exclusion criteria.</td>
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- Data collection through recorded in-depth individual interviews → verbatim transcripts
- Data analysis through initial and focused coding → themes representing meaning of the data
- Discussion of themes through lens of implementation science
Themes/sub-themes

1. Professional role identity
2. Spheres of influence
3. Negotiating the change process
   1. Communication: active vs. passive
   2. The need to know
   3. Role of change leaders and champions
   4. Engaging frontline professionals
4. Exercising frontline discretion
   1. Fidelity and flexibility
   2. Managerialism of public services
   3. The continuum of exercising frontline discretion
Professional role identity
Social workers’ perception of their professional role and responsibilities

(CF 2011 foundational to practice)

“I would like to think that [Children First] is not something that we have a conversation about. This is just me generalising completely, but like it is raining today, you wear a coat [you work in child protection] you use [Children First].”

(Bureaucracy / relationship building role conflict)

“There is too much policy around practice, just makes the work more bureaucratic and that doesn’t do anything to change the outcomes of the children that you are working with when you have more paperwork to do at the end of the day. (...) I don’t know whose needs they are serving but I don’t think that they serve the children and families that we work for (...) or social workers.”

(Best practice vs finite resources)

“It is disappointing and it is upsetting as a social worker (...) because you know you are not doing the best for your clients that you want to do.”
Spheres of influence
Social workers’ perspective on the influence of external stakeholders on policy implementation

(Sharing responsibility)

“I know I definitely use [Children First] when I am speaking to different professionals (...) A lot of stuff is kind of dumped on social workers and as long as they make a phone call to the duty worker they feel their job is done and this is not the case obviously. So I found it useful to be able to quote from [Children First] to say, no it is actually all [of our] our responsibility.”

(Professional credibility)

“For me [Children First] gave me a confidence that this isn’t just me saying this, I can now reference [Children First] and this backs up what I am saying”

(Professional accountability)

“I think the nature of our work is that you are constantly hoping that something doesn’t go wrong on your case because by God if it does, you have signed up that you have read Children First but why you didn’t follow Section 2.1 or whatever.”
Negotiating the change process sub-themes

- Communication: active vs. passive dissemination strategies
- The need to know
- Role of change leaders and champions
- Importance of engaging frontline professionals
Negotiating the change process

Communication: active vs. passive dissemination strategies

(Tick the box)

“An email went round, you have [a policy/procedure], read it and sign that you have read it.”

(Team approach)

“Some people would read [the policies distributed by email], some people wouldn’t, you’d be asked [at a team meeting] if everyone got a chance to read them and you’d have then five minutes silence, some people nodding and some people just keeping the head down.”

(Conflicting priorities)

“It is left to us to do that. It [the policy] has been provided to us, it is up to you now to read it, but the time to read it isn’t there. It doesn’t take priority over the phone calls or the emails or the home visits that you have to do and that is what I struggle with.”
Negotiating the change process

The need to know

(After-the-fact awareness)

“I think sometimes I stumbled across [policies] along the way in the last four years, oh this has happened, oh there is [an already existing] policy on that.”

(Getting ahead of the curve)

“I suppose […] that I would like to be able to know what is in that policy, so that if something were to come up or, if [I] needed it as a point of reference for something, that I would be able to say that I have read this and I know this is the policy on it.”

(Confidence in policy knowledge & implementation)

“There is a difference between dissemination and implementation and somewhere along the line it kind of goes askew and we are not doing ourselves justice by not being able to say, yes we know about these policies, we know how to locate them, how to access them. (...) At the end of the day you are the one who is having to follow the policy, put it into practice.”
Negotiating the change process

Role of change leaders and champions

(Self-appointed change champions)

“I would say things get promoted in the team by specific people and I don’t think there is a team approach. (...) whereas there are a couple of people, a few people, that are proactive and try and push things or open up discussions about things. [But] it is difficult to go anywhere with that if you don’t have a whole team approach to it.”

(Peer role modelling)

“I would speak to my colleagues as well and see their experience of a certain [policy] and take direction from them. What worked, what didn’t work and what their assessment would be of something as well, what they reckon. So there would be a lot that would inform the type of action we take on cases.”
Negotiating the change process

Importance of engaging frontline professionals

(Front-line generated knowledge)

“We have a lot of knowledge, we have a lot of practice based, evidence based knowledge that isn’t being utilised within the profession and within the Child and Family Agency.”

(Iterative cycle)

“I do think consultation is important as well and the organisation [should be] interested in feedback on whether or not a policy document is workable in the format that they are proposing.”

(Reactive policies)

“I think policies are created or developed out of anxieties or out of an article in a newspaper or something has gone wrong and it is reactive. And [TUSLA] has to be seen to be doing the right thing and it can be optics driven.”
Exercising frontline discretion sub-themes

- Fidelity and flexibility
- Managerialism of public services
- The continuum of discretion
Exercising frontline discretion

(Fidelity and flexibility)

“[Policy implementation] is like Chinese whispers as well because it starts at the top, it comes down and goes to different people. (...) There are different connotations put on it by different people, there are bound to be. So if a certain aspect (...) is inoperable, we [the team] look at it and will just do [certain elements of the policy]. And I don’t mean to change the essence of it at all, just around the edges, just to make it operable.”

(Managerialsim)

“What if something was to happen? Sometimes I just think, yes it is great having your paperwork all up to date, and I do, but I have a parent that is in crisis at the moment and I haven’t seen her this week but her paperwork is up to date.”

(The discretionary ‘space’)

“We are working at a time where we all know the lack of resources […] yet we are constantly being measured by our performance and what we are not doing. So it is not helpful then to introduce policy documents which aren’t workable in practice.”
Findings viewed through the lens of implementation science

1. the attributes of the policy being implemented
2. strategies for embedding implementation process
3. the people involved in the implementation process
4. the context and surrounding systems
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<tr>
<th>Attributes of the policy being implemented</th>
<th>Strategies for embedding implementation process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➢ Professional role identity reflects best practice principles of Children First</td>
<td>➢ National office management team &amp; 17 local area managers designated policy implementation leaders</td>
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| ➢ Lack of awareness of numerous policies makes integration of policies into practice less than integration into role identity | ➢ Front-line practitioners:  
➢ not always looking to, or receiving direction from, these implementation leaders  
➢ struggle to identify implementation champions on their teams or assume this role themselves |
| | ➢ Communication  
➢ TUSLA Hub  
➢ Over-reliance on passive strategies |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The people involved in implementation process</th>
<th>The context and surrounding systems</th>
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<tr>
<td>➢ Child protection social workers key players in policy implementation strategy</td>
<td>➢ Influence of Children First on spheres of practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ Social workers struggle with managerialism aspects</td>
<td>➢ Measurement of fidelity to policies/ National Standard Business Process</td>
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<td>➢ Fear of exercising too much judgement discretion due to accountability</td>
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Exercise 2

➢ In pairs, consider specific examples and discuss the barriers and facilitators in your work environment with regards to how policies are implemented.

➢ Complete the SWOT analysis in how policies are implemented within your organisation and your team.
Bridging the policy to practice gap:

Recommendations for moving forward

*TUSLA (the Child and Family Agency) could:*

• Curtail over-reliance on passive dissemination strategies.
• Develop active dissemination strategies – local policy implementation groups.
• Have implementation leaders facilitate emergence of implementation champions.
• Promote iterative cycle of frontline practitioners’ involvement in policy development, implementation (adoption & enactment) and review.
• Review all current adopted policies giving consideration as to their impact on service delivery.
Discussion: Bridging the policy to practice gap
Exercise 3

In pairs discuss:

What have you learned from this workshop and your peers - how might you maximise your strengths and opportunities while minimising your weaknesses and threats?

Commitment to Change Statements: You formulate individually which new strategies you will try to implement – action focused based on today’s workshop. How will you be an implementation leader or champion?


