Developing a systematic map on foster care: an Australian example

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Overview of study with 2 key phases:

1. A systematic map of foster care research 1995-2008
2. Interviews with “users” to examine the utility of the map. User perspectives include:
   - Researchers
   - Policy makers
   - Knowledge ‘translators’

Aims to examine the utility of a systematic map as a tool to:

- Locate the available Australian research in the broader context of international research
- Examine the potential use of a searchable bibliographic database from the perspectives of different ‘users’
- Identify priorities for narrower policy and practice-relevant systematic review questions
- Contribute to the national research agenda by identifying gaps and opportunities for possible collaborations both nationally and overseas.
Background/Contextual factors

- Audit of Australian out of home care research (Cashmore & Ainsworth, 2004)
- *Out-of-home care: Messages from research* extended the audit (Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo & Richardson, 2005)
- ‘Insider – researcher’

Starting point……

Issue

The accessibility of the out-of-home care research to Australian policy makers & practitioners

Key questions

1. What is the nature of the out-of-home care research, in terms of coverage, quality and perspectives?

2. How can this research inform policy and practice in the out-of-home care field?
Model of Professional Knowledge
(Drury-Hudson, 1997)

![Diagram of Model of Professional Knowledge]

Range of questions of the research

- Not only what works but for whom, in what circumstances, why and for what outcomes
- Practitioners perspective – case management includes key decisions about removal, assessment of protective and care needs, placement matching, interventions etc. – basis for the scope and breadth of this systematic map
- Policy makers – often short timeframes eg post inquiry 12 weeks to prepare the Blueprint for reform. A key driver for wanting the broader map
- Program development and management require different types of information, re cost effectiveness, feasibility, service and system level outcomes
- How conceptual literature may also inform….rather than directing what we do - to query/challenge current jurisdiction specific approaches; have we got it right or are there other ways eg permanency planning
Key methodological questions

- The scope of the map in terms of the topic areas
- Search terms – issues due to different terminology across jurisdictions
- Inclusion criteria
- Screening criteria – where studies didn’t neatly “fit” e.g. part of cohort children in care, relevant to more than 1 category – not discrete categories
- Breadth and depth – how many databases, years, jurisdictions, books or only journal articles
- Software to support the mapping process

Methodology

- Preliminary handsearch of 10 years of a key UK journal and USA journal
- Electronic searches to test individual search terms, prior to a ‘rolled up’ search
- 1995-2008 (built on timeframes for Australian audit)
- To date searches in PsycInfo and ERIC
- Screening only on abstracts
Total reports identified n=81580 (1806 duplicates)

Total abstracts screened n=6,344

- Not on topic n=594
- Not CP popular n=400
- Not specific to out-of-home care n=2,562
- Risk assessment n=124
- Prenatal substance exposure n=16
- Family preservation n=70
- Prevention and early intervention n=92

Book reviews n=143
Program description n=157
Conceptual or theoretical n=546
Literature & systematic reviews n=113
Research studies n=1,789

Screened out n=3,556

- Case management n=157
- Parents n=247
- Cultural considerations n=68
- Effective components n=29
- Participation in decision making n=46
- Adoption from care n=182
- Publications in care n=192
- Outcomes for children n=184
- Foster families n=184
- Assessment/evaluation n=147
- Kinship care n=145
- Residential care n=125
- Issues for professionals n=69

Jurisdictions

- USA 733
- UK 76
- Other 93
- Canada 66
- Australia 44
- Spain 23
- Sweden 17
- Netherlands 19
- Norway 19
- Germany 17
- Italy 17
- Across jurisdictions 14
- Jurisdiction not stated in abstract 606

Number of research studies 0 200 400 600 800 1000
### Broad topic clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Cluster</th>
<th>Number of Research Studies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interventions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Needs and outcomes for children in care</td>
<td>584</td>
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<tr>
<td>Young people transitioning from care</td>
<td>157</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adoption from care</td>
<td>102</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in decision making</td>
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### Interventions

<table>
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<th>Topic Cluster</th>
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<tr>
<td>Foster families</td>
<td>159</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment and treatment interventions</td>
<td>139</td>
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<td>Kinship care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Case management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issues relating to reunification</td>
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<td>Residential care</td>
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<td>Issues for professionals</td>
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<td>Cultural considerations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapeutic and treatment foster care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foster care - effective components</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Outcomes for children and young people in care

- Concept of ‘tagging as you go’, even studies screened out but of relevance to child protection eg family preservation; risk assessment
- Focus on putting research studies in the context of the broader literature
- Capacity to roll up into broader topic areas or drill down into sub topic areas and to increase utility for multiple in depth reviews
Quality of reporting

In 227 screened in reports child protection population was not explicit and 143 were research studies.

In 1121 reports the jurisdiction/s is not stated in abstract and 606 were research studies.

Emerging themes

Gaps in the research on key topic areas and types of studies eg Longitudinal studies – 66 out of 1789

Number of thesis studies without further articles 266 of 1789 – issue of accessibility compounded.
**Limitations/challenges**

- An emerging methodology
- Single reviewer undertaking the study on a part-time basis
- Time intensive
- Difficulty of screening based on abstract alone eg high number where cp or oohc population not explicit

**Using research to inform policy and practice**

- Drawing on the research on human reasoning
- Challenges the notions of research leading to certainty (Taylor & White 2006)
- Greater potential in using the research to strengthen analytical thinking and asking is there another way to understand this……
- ‘Respectful uncertainty’ when faced with the complexities of individual cases (Sheppard, Newstead et al. 2001; Munro 2002; Munro 2005; Taylor & White 2006). Often reviews highlight the limitations of the research evidence that underpins key practice assumptions.
References