‘Children's Well-Being: The Research & Policy Challenges’

Abstract for 3rd International Conference of the International Society for Child Indicators to be held at the University of York, UK, 27-29 July 2011.

Title:

‘Technology and Professional Practice: Reflections on the Integrated Children’s System’

The presentation links to the conference theme of indicators in evaluation studies. Through results from an extensive mixed methods formative evaluation in England and Wales of the Integrated Children’s System (ICS) I will seek to illustrate the diverse ways in which policy, management and practice interests interact to shape the development of technologically-embedded indicators of risk in children’s services. The Integrated Children’s System is a government led initiative and part of a wider package of e-government developments for children’s services, designed to promote effective services for children and families in England and Wales. There are similar developments in a number of other countries, and the presentation has some relevance to corresponding work in, e.g. the Nordic countries and Australia. I identify four connected consequences of the ICS for practice. The ICS:

* Actively shapes practice.
* Brings issues into focus.
* Renders social work visible, and
* Distances the services user.

I will interpret the findings in terms of the persistence and diversification of professional discretion, and the interplay of standardization and case based practice. The main conclusions are critical of the way in which indicators of risk and wellbeing are represented in this system. However, I challenge some accepted academic understandings of the relationship between technology and professional practice.  
  
Policy and Practice Implications  
• The tendency of central government to invest multiple aspirations in a policy initiative will tend to compound the difficulties of implementation  
• The policy pressures to formalization of practice indicators are likely to continue  
• Practitioners should reflect on and develop ways of exercising discretion.

• Social workers should be neither optimists nor ‘doomsayers’ regarding technology  
• We should not expect too much from policy innovations.

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