Baselines: A Review of Evidence about the Impact of Education and Training in Child Care and Protection on Practice and Client Outcomes

April 2006

SCOTTISH INSTITUTE
FOR EXCELLENCE IN
SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Baselines: **A Review of Evidence about the Impact of Education and Training in Child Care and Protection on Practice and Client Outcomes**

Evaluation and Evidence, Discussion Paper 2

Dr. Sharon A. Ogilvie-Whyte
Centre for Child Care and Protection
University of Dundee

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Preface

In the first Discussion Paper in this series, Evaluating Outcomes in Social Work Education (2005), Professor John Carpenter highlighted the absence of a body of knowledge examining the impact of education and training on subsequent practice outcomes in social care settings.

In order to develop this theme, we commissioned Dr Ogilvie-Whyte to examine the existing evidence base supporting (or otherwise) the effectiveness of specialist training and education in child care and protection social work, particularly as it impacts on professional practice and outcomes for abused and neglected children. In beginning to establish the breadth and depth of current knowledge in this field, and in particular identifying the range and quality of relevant evaluative studies, this paper provides an overview of existing work in this field. It draws on the available literature to identify the present status of conceptual, methodological and empirical work associated with outcomes from specialist training and education in child care and protection. In doing so, it re-emphasises the need to place thorough evaluation of professional training and education firmly on the research agenda and restates the importance of sound evidence to underpin current investment in staff training as a primary means of achieving better outcomes for people who use services.

My hope is that the publication of this paper will both stimulate critical discussion and encourage colleagues to respond actively to the many challenges it presents.

Professor Bryan Williams
Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education

April 2006

1. Introduction

The identification of the importance of training and education for social work professionals involved in child care and protection work (CCP) continues to be central to the recommendations of the numerous inquiries into instances of fatal or serious child abuse and the accumulated findings of research on child abuse and the child protection system these inquiries have prompted (e.g. Department of Health 1995 *Child Protection: Messages from Research)*. Indeed, Reder and Duncan (2004, pg. 108) in their discussion of the Victoria Climbie inquiry report consider training and education to be the 'cornerstone' in improving practice. Here, the highlighting of serious system and practice failures (Devaney 2004) has been strongly linked to the recognition that social service workers (and others with a remit for CCP) require training and guidance beyond that offered in generic qualifying programmes in order to identify and respond effectively to cases of child abuse and neglect. In particular, recognising children in need, related processes in risk assessment and a greater understanding and clarification of the roles and responsibilities of different agencies and professionals have been benchmarked as areas where perceived deficits in knowledge and skills require redress through training and education (Department of Health et al 2000).

Consequently, the numbers of CCP social workers participating in post-qualifying training and education initiatives aimed at improving their practice skills and knowledge base has been steadily rising as agencies begin to respond to recommendations for training and education. As a consequence, social work departments and allied agencies are allocating substantial and increasing fiscal resources to improving levels of professional competence amongst their workforce through the funding and provision of educational and training opportunities at differing levels.

In addition to an increasing level of investment in training and education by agencies, there are indications within Scotland that local authorities are placing more importance on the acquisition of post-qualifying training and education in CCP. Some social service departments have, for example, taken the step of linking salary scales and career progression within CCP to the successful completion of academically accredited post-qualifying programmes in CCP such as the Graduate Certificate in Child Care and Protection offered at the University of Dundee, and many social workers are now required to complete this specialist training in order to continue to practice in this area of social work.

In part, this appears to reflect a wider 'trend towards service-specific competence' and the development of occupational standards for child care social work (Skinner and Whyte 2004, p. 372, cf Corby and Cox 2000). For instance, the situation in England and Wales for CCP social workers already requires the mandatory completion of the Post-Qualifying Childcare award by 2006 in order to continue to practice within their field with the government currently estimating that some 7,000 social service employees will have acquired the award by this date (Brown and Keen 2004). Whether or not completion of a similar award will become a mandatory requirement of all CCP social workers in local authority departments in Scotland remains to be seen.

The primary aim of training is as Mitchell (2001, p. 434) states, 'to ensure that professional social workers can deliver services which effectively meet the needs of service users'. Whilst it is clear that training and education are being seen as the solution to identified practice and system problems in CCP, it is unclear whether or not post-qualifying CCP training meets this aim. The review of the literature carried out for this paper revealed a paucity of evidence about whether training and education can directly impact upon practice. Moreover, the impact of training on the delivery of effective services that meet the objectives of the child protection system in terms of improving outcomes for abused and neglected children has not [as yet] been subject to much evaluative inquiry.

2. Training and Education in Child Care and Protection and the Climate of Evaluation

In recent years, services for children and families have become a particular focus of evaluation. In part this has been stimulated by an increase in preventative social welfare initiatives at both national and local levels aimed at improving outcomes for vulnerable children (e.g. Ghate 2001). This reflects the thrust of government policy since the late 1990's which has seen a shift in focus from remedy to prevention with considerable resources being invested in targeted programmes (e.g. Sure Start) aimed at reducing the likelihood of statutory intervention and associated costs of this at a later date through the early provision of support for disadvantaged children and families. Additionally, corresponding concerns about the effectiveness of existing interventions and services coupled with the disquiet over perceived widespread problems with practice, the failings of the wider system of child protection and the persistence of the observation that 'looked after' children and young people do not have good outcomes when compared to their peers (Francis 2002)

has fuelled the momentum for evaluation. Moreover, it has been consistently argued that the impact of child protection services appears, at the structural level, to be minimal (Gibbons et al 1995).

Given the growing culture of evaluation focusing on services for children and families and the improvement of outcomes for vulnerable children which has been stimulated by the evidence-based movement and the 'what works' agenda, it is somewhat surprising that the contemporary demand for the evaluation of outcomes has not filtered through to training and education in the CCP field – particularly given that training and education has been consistently highlighted as a solution to improving outcomes for children, if not, as some have stated 'the key' (Reder and Duncan 2004). More crucially, in considering the increasing level of public funds that are being invested in the provision of specialist training opportunities to CCP social workers (and professionals in other agencies) it is all the more surprising that in a climate where accountability for the efficacious use of fiscal resources is a paramount concern that this should be the case.

This lack of evaluative work is not however unique to CCP training but indicative of a lack of a published body of work evaluating the impact of social work education and training at both the qualifying and post-qualifying level. For example, Carpenter (2005, this series) draws attention to the findings of recent systematic reviews which have identified a deficiency in the level of evaluative research examining or evidencing the outcomes of social work education. Similarly, in discussing the impact of post-qualifying awards on practice, Mitchell (2004) reports that a review of the literature revealed limited availability of evidence.

3. Review of Existing Literature

The existing literature which discusses training and education in CCP social work is, broadly speaking, characterised by three distinct strands:

- ☐ Literature which highlights the importance of training and education
- ☐ Literature which identifies the training and educational needs of CCP social workers
- ☐ Literature which discusses the impact of training and education in terms of pedagogy and/or in terms of its impact on practitioner skills and knowledge

(1) (Re)Stating the case for training and education

Overwhelmingly, published work on CCP training and education falls into one or both of the first of these two strands. Commentaries which exist here tend towards *prescription and/or proscription* and are thus invariably concerned with advancing sets of recommendations for training and education and identifying structural barriers that prohibit training and education. Here, the professional and academic literature is peppered with articles that highlight the importance of training and education as the key to addressing CCP social work's ills.

For the most part, the articles that bridge these first two strands of literature tend towards the repetitive reiteration of the statements made in the published reports of inquiries in respect to training and education and the associated implications for training and educational practices therein. Perhaps unsurprisingly, consistent reference is made to Lord Laming's (2003) inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbie and the emphasis placed on the need for significant training to improve practitioner skill deficiencies in areas such as communication, assessment, policy and procedure and so on. Consequently, commentaries on what needs to be done to produce effective practitioners are plentiful and there exists, as Keys (2005, pg 336) impresses from a health services perspective, 'no shortage of written guidance'.

However, as Reder and Duncan (2004) point out, the problems highlighted in this inquiry (and reiterated in the literature) are by no means new as meta-analysis studies reveal; these issues have been a recurrent theme that has run through the 30 years of public inquiries into fatal child abuse and serious case reviews undertaken within the UK. Thus, recommendations represent, by and large, little more than restatements of what has already been frequently prescribed, the recurrence of which, Reder and Duncan (2004) argue, evidences that lessons are not being learned. More crucially, it highlights that 30 years of consecutive inquiries highlighting the same problems suggests not only that these problems are entrenched in the 'system' but also that inquiry reports have failed to make an impact upon practice.

(2) Points of tension: training or education?

Authors such as Reder and Duncan (2004) have approached the issue of training and education much more critically than the majority of those writing in the first of these two strands suggesting, as do others (e.g. Rustin 2004), that the critical issues that underpin poor, disastrous and fatal outcomes for children are much more complex and considerably deeper-rooted than defective practices and the failings of individual practitioners – these being conceptualised as symptomatic of the failings of the larger system for protection as it currently exists (most notably resource constraints). Despite the critical approach taken by authors who relocate deficient practices as a dimension of wider systemic problems in child protection, the saliency of the argument that specialist training and education are a vital part of the solution remains.

While there is an unarguable consensus that specialist education and training is required to address the key areas of skill deficiencies that have been continously identified both intra and extraprofessionally; the form that specialist training and education should take, what practitioners need, what educators should provide and how it should be delivered, is a source of ongoing controversy. Points of emphasis differ considerably and encompass a wide range of issues perceived, although infrequently evidenced, to be in need of redress (from teaching methods and techniques to the relative merits and demerits of providing interprofessional training and education and a plethora of issues in between). Most notably, however, interwoven into these particular debates on training and education are concerns that dominant approaches which privilege models of competency based training and emphasise evidence led practice which have stemmed from the current preoccupation with procedures and legislative and technical practices within child protection fall short of equipping practitioners with the knowledge needed to perform effective child protection work (Cox and Hardwick 2002, Skehill et al 1999).

Concerns of this sort are a feature in the academic writing of those who implicitly frame their recommendations and pose their arguments in terms of 'education' as opposed to 'training' (although the distinction is rarely explicitly made and the tendency is to use the terms interchangeably) – the former being predominantly concerned with issues that surround criticalreflection, theoretical thinking and so on and the latter with equipping CCP practitioners with the acquisition of routine skills and competencies (Buckley 2000; Jones 1996; Howe 1995,1996). Those who fall into the former category point to an encroaching

and increasing anti-intellectualism in social work practice in general and CCP social work in particular (Cox and Hardwick 2002) and raise concerns that CCP social work is becoming 'an unreflective practice' (Buckley 2000). Briefly stated, such concerns tend to oscillate around arguments that training which focuses on routine competencies to the exclusion of theory is producing practitioners who lack the crucial critical thinking skills necessary to work effectively in an area which is fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity (Parton 1996).

Authors such as Buckley (2000) levy serious criticisms at social work education which they perceive to be developing detrimentally in response to the demands of employers and political and public opinion rather than the 'academy'. The consequence of this deference, it is argued, is that practitioners with inadequate theoretical knowledge are unable to apply core professional values and work in ways which are non discriminatory and non oppressive and so on. However, and as Cox and Hardwick (2002) note, no analysis has yet been conducted into the impact of theory in practice.

Others however have gone much further than Buckley and have questioned the conceptual integrity and quality of standardised materials used in CCP training. Garrett (1999) for instance, presents a number of concerns about the theoretical bases of the 'Looking after Children' materials as well as concerns regarding its social and political content (see also Knight and Caveney 1998). In particular Garrett argues that the materials which underwent extensive piloting prior to their distribution throughout England and Wales, lack 'sociological curiousity' (Francis 2002, pg.451).

These issues aside, it is evident within these strands of literature that training and education in CCP is currently occupying a prominent position within social work discourse – discussions about the need for specialist training are plentiful and many authors are involved in debating what sort of training and education practitioners need. However, there is very little evidence of effort within social work to evaluate either the impact of 'training' or 'education' as these are both defined above. The empirical case for specialist training and education may well have been firmly made from both sides of the fence via recourse to the findings of public inquiries and research into professional practices, but it has been established without any significant recourse to evaluative work which examines the impact of either training or education in CCP.

Therefore, recommendations in respect to the importance of and perceived need for training and education appear to be founded upon an untested hypothesis that training and education makes a difference – the arguments may be persuasive but evidence that it works remains elusive.

(3) Existing evaluation

The issue of whether or not training makes a difference to either practice or outcomes for clients appears then as an area of inquiry that is clearly in its infancy. That said, it is an area of inquiry which is beginning to gain a small measure of momentum and evaluations of educational and training initiatives have recently began to emerge in the wider social care literature. However, whilst social service departments have taken the lead in recognising the role of training and education, of the few studies that are available in the literature, most are not, as would be expected, specific to social work. Rather than becoming a focus of evaluation in social work, specialist training and education in CCP has, it seems, become the forte of health. The reasons for this are not clear but may presumably be related to the contemporary focus within national policy frameworks on the need for non-social work professionals - particularly those working in health – to address their role in child protection and access appropriate training and education to improve knowledge and skills (cf Scottish Executive 2000; 2002). Thus, it is possible that within agencies who have had little or no tradition of providing training and education in child protection, evaluation of its effectiveness has become a more salient imperative. Paradoxically, it is within the health literature that the most relevant work reporting on the evaluation of training and education initiatives in CCP can be found. However, because training and education initiatives here are delivered at an elementary level – addressing issues such as how to identify abuse and the role of different health professionals within an interagency context – comparability to social work needs at the post qualifying level is difficult to achieve and drawing generalisations from evidence which is of a variable nature is inherently problematical.

However, within the health field, Marjorie Keys (2005) presents a rare account of her evaluation of training in CCP for 23 primary health teams that directly seeks to address whether or not training makes a difference. Whilst the training delivered was basic vis-a-vis that required for social work practitioners, the study offers some insight into the impact of training on the knowledge and skills of practitioners. Keys' study is unique in so far as, unlike most other evaluations, it applies theoretical models designed to evaluate training. In particular, Keys applies Hamblin's (1974) model of evaluation which specifies five levels of evaluation for training: Reaction, Learning, Job Behaviour, Organisational Change and Ultimate Value.

Using Hamblin's model which builds on Kirkpatrick's (1967) typology of learning outcomes often used to evaluate learning (see Carpenter 2005, this series, for a description of Kirkpatrick's model), Keys' reports the following results of evaluation conducted at each of these five levels:

Hamblin's levels of evaluation	Project methods and outcomes of evaluation
1. Reaction	Immediate verbal and written feedback, including qualitative value to the participants of the training. Indicated a high level of satisfaction.
2. Learning	Self-assessment of improvement in knowledge, skills and confidence.
3. Job Behaviour	Internal audit of awareness and practice, demonstrable difference when teams had accessed training. Observed and anecdotal change in practice, e.g. improved attendance at case conferences.
4. Organisational Change	Several primary care teams introduced changes in practice as a result of the training, e.g. utilising a practice protocol.
5. Ultimate Value	Evidence of increased awareness with the NHS organisation concerned; project may have contributed to this. Subsequent requests from LHCC for author to provide further training and guidance.

Keys identifies that the training provided did make a difference at each of these different levels of evaluation. More crucially, she reports that over 86 per cent of the participants reported an improvement in their knowledge, skills and confidence of at least 50 per cent.

(4) Methodological problems and solutions

Whilst these results are encouraging, akin to the majority of other studies, Keys relies almost exclusively for her data upon practitioner self-assessment which focuses on participants' initial acquisition of knowledge and skills as short term measures of outcomes. This approach is characteristic of evaluation studies which tend towards the use of post intervention methods of data collection often administered immediately following the delivery of training. Studies of these types fall prey to three main criticisms:

Firstly, where questionnaires have been administered to participants in an ad hoc fashion, as is often the case in evaluation of training, a failure to address either (a) the reliability and validity of the data instruments in respect to the stated aims and objectives of the course which are, in pedagogical terms, inextricably linked to evaluation (Martin 1997, Hicks and Hennessy 2001) or (b) evidence that the data instruments are robust, i.e. that they meet basic psychometric principles and/or are standardised leaves the researcher open to accusations that any findings advanced are less than robust in research terms (Hicks and Hennessy 2001). Here the impetus is that any evaluation should, in order to meet basic scientific principles in research, utilise data instruments that have been rigorously tested and standardised and are therefore presumably able to better evaluate initiatives through capturing their real capacity to achieve stated learning aims and objectives (Hicks and Hennessy 2001).

Whilst there are standardised data instruments which have been developed following scientific principles for the evaluation of training and education in these terms, they are currently not being used to evaluate training and education in CCP. Pollard et al (2005) for instance detail several standardised instruments that they utilised to evaluate the interprofessional learning and working of health and social care students that could be of potential benefit for the evaluation of CCP training and Hicks et al (1996) and Hicks and Hennessy (1996) have developed and tested a measurement tool designed to elicit pre-test and post-test data in order to assess whether or not training initiatives reduce or close identified skills gaps (cf Hicks and Hennessy 1996). Moreover, Sinclair Taylor (1997) has put forward a developmental model of child protection training courses which has been suggested as an appropriate instrument for evaluating training inputs in child protection by Hodgkinson and Baginsky (2000) who have drawn on this model in their assessment of child protection courses delivered within the context of initial teacher training. Whilst this model has been devised with teachers' CCP training requirements in mind, it could potentially be adapted given its specificity to child protection.

Thus whilst there are potentially suitable instruments available to measure the outcomes of CCP training and education in social work, they are not currently being used. Questionnaires are commonly cited as being used – usually involving the use of lickert-type rating scales, happy face sheets and so on – and which are frequently described as being cognate to the particular initiative being evaluated. These are, however, rarely evidenced as being robust tools and their content and suitability to the task is rarely discussed in anything other than the most abstract of ways – this being implicitly presented as a given in rare published accounts. Moreover, many of these questionnaires place an emphasis on what is commonly referred to as 'comfort factors' (e.g. whether or not participants like the venue, the lecturer and so on) and therefore tend to be measuring learner satisfaction with the delivery of the training rather than measuring learning. Here, Howarth and Morrison (1999) highlight that questionnaires such as these are not indicative of learning gains.

Secondly, self assessment measures also have a tendency to be criticised on the grounds that they can incur less than honest responses from participants. This raises further questions about the validity or 'truthfulness' of some of the information gathered via questionnaires of this sort and as Baginsky and MacPherson (2005) highlight in their evaluation of child protection training for teachers, insights gained from self-report data often do not correspond to insights derived via other methods. In reporting on the results of their evaluation for instance they draw attention to discrepancies between the information course participants gave in questionnaires and subsequent statements offered in qualitative focus groups. Thus, they point towards the need for researchers to exercise caution in the use of questionnaires.

Although these are frequently cited criticisms of questionnaire methods in general, Hicks and Hennessy (2001) suggest that one method to circumvent this and other methodological problems associated with questionnaires may be to conduct evaluation on the basis of observable performance outcomes. Here they cite Burchell (1995) who proposes the use of competence statements as a method of measuring outcomes in training and education. This method is suggested to be particularly useful if the training intervention is aimed at improving practice. This particular approach formed part of the research strategy in Devine's (1995) evaluation of child protection courses at Dundee University in which she gathered agency representatives' views on whether or not the students' learning had impacted on practice. Devine however utilised this outcome measurement technique alongside a range of others including:

- ☐ Student's successful completion of the course
- ☐ Student's own evaluations of learning and subsequent impact on practice
- ☐ Student's subsequent career moves
- ☐ Student's contributions to developments in various aspects of child protection work at a local, regional and national level

Devine concluded that training officers and managers thought the investment in the training had been worthwhile and that:

'…the majority of students on all courses thought that they had achieved a knowledge base, competence in their professional role, skills in critically evaluating their own practice, and skills in direct work with children. They also achieved a sense of self-confidence in their professional role and an awareness of their own and others' value systems.'

Although this study was limited to practitioner and manager views, in incorporating the perspectives of managers/agency representatives on whether or not learning had made an impact on actual practice and so on, Devine clearly has taken steps to eliminate, as far as possible within the confines of the study, issues associated with the sole application of self-assessment measures.

Of course it has long been argued that the use of multiple outcome measures in child protection proffer more validity than the application of a single outcome measurement (Huxley 1994, Quinton 1996). However, there is a clear need to utilise a more divergent range of measurement tools other than self-assessment questionnaires within CCP training evaluation. There is also a clear need to move beyond a preference for evaluation to examine short term outcomes only.

(5) Longitudinal studies

The third point of criticism levied towards current evaluative work in CCP training and education (and the evaluation of social work education more generally) is the distinct lack of longitudinal studies (see Carpenter 2005, this series). Humphris and Hean (2004, pg.25) in discussing the relative merits and demerits of evaluation in interprofessional training point out that, 'very few studies have been designed to provide evidence of longer term outcomes, in particular on professional practice'. The literature review conducted for this paper identified few longitudinal studies within the wider literature on the evaluation of training and none specific to CCP that had this aim in mind and for the most part, the evidence that exists here can at best be conceptualised as anecdotal.

However, many authors do try in small ways to attend to the long term outcomes of training, often giving explicit recognition of the tendency towards anecdotalism in their accounts. In the study by Keys (2005) cited above, for example, inferences are made that the training had impacted positively on practice which was considered to be more effective than had been the case two years previously – although, Keys states quite explicitly the evidence advanced here is anecdotal.

Where evaluators have attempted to measure longer term outcomes the conclusions reached are often disheartening. For example, Clarke (2002) in an evaluation of training given to care managers in risk assessment, gathered self report data via semi-structured interviews six months after the intervention to measure skill gains in assessment practices. Clarke reported that the training had failed to impact on skill acquisition. It was concluded that the reasons for this were congruent with many other training evaluations within the social services which report that practitioners have difficulty in transferring learning into practice within organisations. Here factors associated with the organisational climate and in particular high caseloads are consistently advanced as prohibiting the transfer of learning to the workplace (Clarke 2002). Skinner and Whyte (2004) echo these statements and add that a lack of support for learning and the barriers coming from colleagues within organisations who are not receptive toexperimenting with new ideas seriously impedes the transfer of learning within the workplace. Similarly, Rushton and Martyn (1990) found in their examination of two post qualifying social work courses that:

'…the climate of some practice agencies is inhospitable to critical thinking and the tasks of relating new extensions of knowledge to improvements in practice.'

Here Skinner and Whyte (2004) suggest that for transference to occur a persuasive culture of learning within the organisation needs to be present. Additionally, and related in part to the pressures of high workloads, Bourn and Bootle (2005) in their evaluation of a distance learning postgraduate advanced award for child and family social work supervisors highlight that this, coupled with staff shortages and the personal commitments of participants, rendered time to study in short supply and similar difficulties have been noted in studies of post qualifying awards in CCP (cf Postle et al 2002, cf Cooper and Rixon 2001).

In relation to this, Bourn and Bootle (2005) consider that training evaluations need to also consider examining how issues such as these together with a plethora of other factors such as library access and so on impair learning.

Clearly, more longitudinal work is required to establish the long term outcomes of training and education in CCP and whether or not it impacts on practice. Practically and methodologically, this is challenging for evaluators but nevertheless critical to the establishment of an evidence base. Currently, the evidence that is available suggests that the long term prognosis for the effectiveness of training and education to meet its central aim of improving practice is not favourable. However, akin to the majority of existing studies, the small sample sizes involved suggest that these conclusions should be approached tentatively – not least because small sample sizes question the significance of statistical claims as the power of analysis is low.

Pollard et al (2005, pg.253) drawing on the thought of Freeth et al (2002) and Humphris and Hean (2004) note that robust evaluation in education requires:

'…longitudinal studies with lengthy follow-up periods, including those which follow the cohorts through the course of their professional programmes and out into practice.'

In a rare and ongoing longitudinal research study evaluating interprofessional learning amongst health and social care students, Pollard et al's outline of their methodology explicitly states their commitment to conduct a longitudinal research study which is robust in research terms and clearly wishes to avoid the problems of inadequate research design and methodology that characterises evaluative work in this field. This is evident in their methodological statement:

'The study aims to satisfy conditions for robust quantitative evaluation by recruiting adequate participant numbers, collecting baseline data and using a longitudinal design which enables the measurement of change over time.'

In their methodology they outline four data collection points designed to meet these aims:

- ☐ on entry to a professional programme (baseline data)
- ☐ after completion of the second year interprofessional module (interim data)
- ☐ on qualification (qualifying data)
- ☐ after nine months practice as a qualifying health or social care professional (practice data)

Moreover, they describe a set of sophisticated data collection instruments, the validity and reliability of which they have addressed in detail in previous publications (cf Pollard et al 2004).

(6) Process evaluation

Pollard et al's study is linked to a wider set of qualitative studies which aim to capture understanding of the impact of training and education in terms of process as well as outcomes, the evaluation of which has been emphasised by others to be crucial to a holistic understanding of the impact of educational initiatives (Reeves 2003). Within the literature specific to training and education in CCP process evaluation is notably absent (although some authors allude to process in their commentaries). Yet it is frequently identified as having been both neglected and necessary to the establishment of an evidence base, and as others within the broader area of evaluation have noted, 'examining processes may be just as important as measuring impacts and outcomes' (Pirkis et al 2001, pg.640). In other words, evaluation needs to examine not only *what* happens but *why* it happens and in *what circumstances*.

In part the case for process evaluation is related to ongoing conceptual debates about the measurement of outcomes in child protection. A great deal has been written about outcome measures in child protection and the conceptual differences between outcomes and outputs and their usefulness to effective evaluation has been repeatedly questioned (Devaney 2004). More crucially, critics of evaluative work based on the measurement of outcomes argue that even when such measures identify success (which critics have maintained is not often) they fail to explain why success has occurred (Newburn 2001).

Against this background it is, however, widely acknowledged that the factors which influence outcomes (either positive or negative) within the child protection system are inherently complex; there are a plethora of interacting factors which affect service recipients and the processes of intervention and assessment which current outcome measures (argued to be output measures) do not accurately reflect (Trotter 2002). Gibbons et al (1995) for example, have pointed out that the observed better practice in some social service departments is difficult to make transparent in terms of results through standard measures which either obscure or wholly ignore process features.

Thought of this kind is apparent in the wider theoretical and methodological literature on evaluation. Pawson and Tilley (1997) for example, consider that it is wholly inappropriate to approach the evaluation of social interventions and programmes from such a positivistic lens. Here, their arguments about what is obscured are similar in kind to those of the many authors who have now commented on the inadequacy of focusing solely on outcomes/outputs. For instance, Pawson and Tilley (1997 cited in Newburn 2001) comment that social interventions and programmes (which include training and education and its application) are embedded in complex processes of human understandings and interactions and should be seen as working 'through a process of reasoning, change, influence, negotiation, battle of wills, persuasion, choice increase (or decrease), arbitration or some such like'. That is not to say that evaluation that examines outputs and outcomes and the like is not valuable or important but rather that it needs concurrently to explore the internal dynamics of the child protection system and its various services to identify what influenced outputs and outcomes (e.g. why some social service departments appear to deliver more effective services than others) and render visible the processes whereby these effects occur. This means examining the *circumstances* in which CCP learning is successfully transferred to practice. In turn, this requires that the evaluation of initiatives needs to move toward an understanding that attempts to capture *both* issues of agency (what happened?) *and* of structure (why did it happen?).

Most recently this is evidenced in Pawson and Tilley's (1997) model of evaluation referred to as 'realistic evaluation' (Figure 1. below). This model as described by Newburn (2001, pg.7):

"…seeks to explain how particular outcomes (O) are produced by interventions within certain salient conditions that are referred to as the 'context' (C). The evaluation also investigates the way, or 'mechanism' (M), by which an intervention produces particular outcomes. Realistic evaluation is, therefore, driven by theory: having at its core both hypotheses about 'mechanisms' and the influence of variations in 'context' ".

Figure 1: Causal outcomes follow from mechanisms acting in contexts
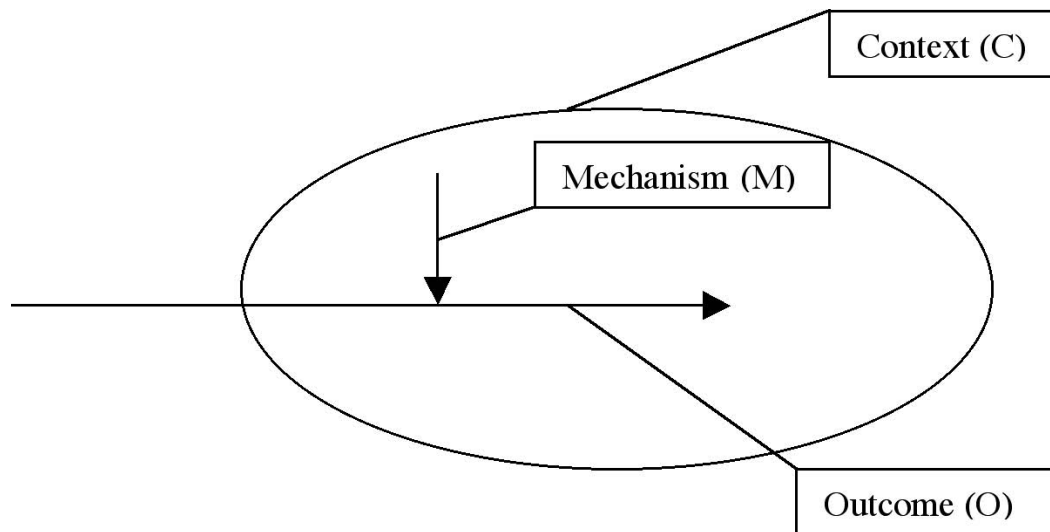
Adapted From: Pawson and Tilley (1997)

Accounting for process ('context' and 'mechanisms' in Figure 1) involves collecting good qualitative data and it is important to recognise that many evaluation studies have attempted to account for some aspects of process by doing so. However, qualitative data collection and analysis is time consuming and costly and as such the quality and quantity of qualitative data supporting evaluation studies is often poor – this being consistently attributed to resource constraints but more often than not also to the requirements of funders who favour quantitative data generated through evaluation using positivistic methods. However, there is clearly a need to address process issues in the evaluation of initiatives in training and education (Pollard et al 2005).

(7) Client outcomes

Studies which consider the impact of training or education on client outcomes are rare and those which consider this from the perspective of children as service users and/or consumers have been found in the review undertaken for this paper to be relatively absent within the research literature. This absence of attention to client outcomes is a very real concern particularly if the primary objective of any intervention is to affect change in the lives of clients.

Moreover, the occasional assessment of client outcomes derived through recourse to the assessment of the impact of training on practice (as a proxy measure) does not provide us with a reliable indicator. Research on outcomes has consistently drawn attention to the disparities that exist between the definition of outcomes defined for or by different stakeholders and particularly the diversity between what organisations, practitioners and managers consider to be good outcomes and what clients perceive good outcomes to be (Felton 2005). The implications of this are that we currently have little knowledge about the impact of training and education on client outcomes, considering this from the perspective of clients themselves (cf Felton 2005).

Draper (2001), in a paper which gives a practitioner view of evaluation, raises many questions about this absence of accounting for what practitioners, parents and children consider to be good outcomes in child care and protection (see also Winters 2006). For example, she questions the relevance of the measurement indicators used in the evaluation exercises which took place within her service for understanding the effectiveness and/or success of that service. She also addresses the issue of whether evaluation actually measures the right things. More importantly she raises the issue that what practitioners and service users (both parents and children) see as important outcomes or evidence of success are often at variance with the types of outcome and success that evaluations typically examine. Here, she argues that what was measured failed to take into account a whole range of positive results which those involved in the service considered important. Examples given are children and parents making friends, children becoming more independent and sociable or getting opportunities to play and experiment with materials such as sand. Given observations such as these it is important that evaluation begins to address not only the outcomes of training and education for clients but also what clients consider good outcomes to be.

4. Conclusion

France (2001, pg.41) highlights that 'What works?' and 'Why?' are, in practice and policy terms, becoming central questions asked of all local and national services. Attempting to answer these questions has stimulated a growing culture of evaluation within public and voluntary services. Public servants increasingly demand better information about whether or not particular interventions and services are effective at achieving their objectives and more knowledge about what works and why some things work whilst others do not (France 2001). Related to this are issues of 'cost-effectiveness' coupled with the requirement of, for example, statutory funders to account for public money spent on social welfare initiatives and a realisation that if limited resources are to spent wisely then sound, reliable evaluation is essential (Ghate 2001, Draper 2001).

As things currently stand, the presumption that specialist training and education in CCP is 'the key' to improving outcomes within the child protection system is an untested hypothesis. More crucially, it is evident that the evaluation of the impact of training and education in CCP has hardly begun. The lack of evidence of the effectiveness or otherwise of training and education in CCP in particular (and social work education more generally) is problematic. Fundamentally, it raises questions about the level of faith being put in training and education as a cure for CCP social work ills. Considering this, it seems both timely and vital that we begin to ask critical questions about the role of training and education in CCP social work and what might be learned from rigorously evaluating its effectiveness in terms of impact on both practice and outcomes for social work clients.

Cumulatively the few studies that are available make some headway into the establishment of an evidence base. However, their usefulness tends to be limited by a range of practical and methodological problems. Most notably here, poor research design exacerbated by a lack of rigorous or critical application of conceptual or methodological thought on evaluative research and the use of inadequate research techniques and measurement tools mean that the findings presented are less than robust in research terms. Rigorous evaluation is of course resource intensive and many of these studies report being constrained by limited resources. The consequence of this, however, is that the quality of the resulting evidence is less than satisfactory. It is imperative therefore that stakeholders begin seriously to consider the need to embark upon investing in a programme of evaluation that is robust and aims to address the prima facie assumption that training and education does actually make a difference.

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Baselines: A Review of Evidence about the Impact of Education and Training in Child Care and Protection on Practice and Client Outcomes

The aim of this paper is to stimulate discussion between educators, policy makers, service managers, practitioners and evaluators through a review of the breadth and depth of current knowledge about the impact of child care and protection social work training and education on practice and outcomes for abused and neglected children. By establishing evidential baselines in this important area of practice, it is intended to contribute to the development of a more coherent strategy for filling gaps in our knowledge base and strengthening the evidence base of professional practice.