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Shaping Child Welfare Policy Via Performance Measurement

Clare Tilbury

Performance measurement is generally depicted as a neutral, technical exercise providing objective data for decision-making. But it also has a normative role in framing policy problems and solutions. This article explores the role of indicators in shaping child welfare, comparing stated policy with performance indicator regimes in England. It shows how indicators construct child welfare narrowly as investigation and placement, contradicting the more comprehensive family support approaches of policy and legislation.

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Performance measurement is one element of global public management reforms (termed the *new public management*) involving market-oriented forms of governance and the restructuring of welfare states. Such changes include separating purchaser and provider roles, developing quasi-markets of service providers, decentralizing budgets, and contracting for service delivery. They require new forms of control to replace bureaucratic-hierarchical modes, and performance measurement is presented as a tool for indirect control of public expenditure, oversighting managerial competence and providing accountability for results (Sanderson, 1998). Generally considered a tool of public choice, rationalist approaches to policy making, performance measurement requires defining objectives (*outcomes*) for policies and programs and using quantitative data (*indicators*) to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of the strategies for achieving those objectives. Indicators purport to provide an objective view of performance to inform decisions about policy or program adjustments (Barratt, 1997).

But policy is not a rational, stepwise process in which knowledge or data generates solutions or options for solving self-evident policy problems. Rather, the objectives of government policies and programs are contested, complex, and ambiguous. Policy is more than the formal, identifiable decisions or statements of government. It is an interactive process in which definitions of social problems and their solutions are constantly shifting and being redefined (Considine, 1994). This implies an interactive model of the knowledge-policy link whereby the producers of knowledge (facts, statistics, theories, and research findings) are not outside the political world of values and goals (Innes, 1990). Conceptualizing quantitative data as having underpinning values and ideas facilitates investigation of the role of indicators in shaping or con-

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structuring policy, not only retrospectively monitoring its implementation.

This article has two aims: to discuss the relationship between performance measurement and policy and to explicate the implications of this relationship for child welfare policy and practice. In doing so, it explores how the development and use of performance indicators may operate to *enable* or *constrain* certain policy perspectives. In many jurisdictions around the world, performance measurement accelerated during the 1990s at the same time as significant concerns about child welfare services were raised. Preventative interventions such as family support and family preservation, and moves to differential response systems and community partnership approaches, were positioned as essential to child welfare reforms (Daro, 2003; Penn & Gough, 2002; Waldfogel, 1998; Wilding & Thoburn, 1997). This article argues there is a disjuncture between performance measurement regimes that focus narrowly on investigation and placement and the development of these more comprehensive family support approaches to protecting children.

While performance measurement has been underway for several years, it has not been subject to much critical appraisal at a policy level within the child welfare field. The literature is concerned mainly with methodological and implementation issues, including the difficulties of data collection, comparability, and potential distortions to practice (for example, Courtney, 1993; Poertner, McDonald, & Murray, 2000). The links between policy and performance measurement mean it is essential to ask questions about who is measuring performance, who uses performance data, and what its impact is (Carter, Klein, & Day, 1992).

Critical Policy Approach to Performance Measurement

There are different theoretical approaches to understanding the relationship between policy and performance measurement. In instrumental, rational-technical models, performance measurement

is a tool for management to monitor the efficacy of policies and programs. Interest in performance measurement was part of the growing influence of management ideas and techniques on public policy that emerged from the 1960s onward. The sources of this management approach were located in several disciplines: scientific management, economics, social and occupational psychology, and management accounting. In the 1990s, proposals for reinventing government became influential, particularly in the United States. This involved, for example, governments setting strategic directions rather than providing services; encouraging competition to produce efficiencies; focusing on outcomes rather than inputs; elevating the needs of the customer; and leveraging market forces to solve public policy problems (Parsons, 1995). Performance measurement was one of a range of techniques for facilitating these desired changes to public administration. The objectivity of performance measurement was lauded in public choice critiques of the 'inherent' inefficiency of the public sector compared to markets (Jackson, 1988). From a rational policy approach, performance measurement is reasonably straightforward, a tool of management in the service of unquestioned and unproblematic values of efficiency and effectiveness. Performance measurement can provide accountability internally to the next level of management and externally to stakeholders, as well as inform program improvement. Research is directed at finding the right indicators or assessing agency performance based on indicators.

The limitations of the rational-technical model for understanding the relationship between performance measurement and policy are exposed by critical policy analysis. Forester (1993) argues that the rationality of public policy becomes an instrument of control when expertise and technical knowledge determine the public agenda, ignoring the implicit values and power of knowledge production and use. Facts are contingent on context. The requirement for clear, uncontested goals does not recognize the existence of disputes between policy actors with different agendas and perspectives, having access to different forms of power (Considine, 1994;

Sanderson, 1998). Critical approaches investigate how policy processes include and exclude policy actors, focusing on how such processes are structured and who has a voice. Exploring how attention is directed to (or diverted from) certain policy issues enables policy and practice to be linked directly to the exercise of influence and power and provides a base for understanding how knowledge influences policy action (Forester, 1993).

Some critical theorists view performance measurement as a tool for top-down management control in the service of a neo-liberal agenda that valorizes efficiency over effectiveness (Pollitt, 1993). Here, it is argued that performance measurement is inevitably biased to management and economic interests over the concerns of other stakeholders such as professionals and citizens. This critique draws attention to the dangers of increasing reliance on procedures, guidelines, and targets that routinize social work practice to make it quantifiable, thereby undermining professional autonomy, attending to organizational rather than client goals, and downplaying the nonmeasurable aspects of performance (Munro, 2000; Parton, Thorpe, & Wattam, 1997). But managers, frontline practitioners, and other policy actors are active agents who, in the informal domain of everyday practice, may shape, reproduce, or subvert the performance measurement process. Power relations are not necessarily fixed or one-way. Considine (1994) points to the potential for change even in policy systems with centralized power, as pressures from the external environment or the persistence of problems open the door to new policy actors pushing new agendas. This is a pragmatic acknowledgment of the recursive and ambiguous nature of policy decision-making. There are aspects of performance measurement consistent with professional and client agendas about improving outcomes and the quality of practice, and it may be possible to use performance measurement to serve the interests of multiple stakeholders.

It is possible to conceptualize performance measurement not solely as a hard tool that measures quantitatively, but also as a soft tool, communicating ideas as well as facts. That is, despite its

limitations as a rational attempt to quantify and manage performance, performance measurement may work at a more discursive level: communicating policy intent, shaping the way we think and talk about child welfare, and defining notions of outcomes, effectiveness, and quality. This view of the nexus between knowledge and policy is consistent with findings that the major use of research is not via the instrumental application of specific data to specific decisions (Weiss, 1991). A problem-solving model does not adequately explain the extent to which research indirectly influences policy. Research is also used conceptually, as a source of ideas, information, and orientations to the world. That is, research has a role in formulating problems and setting agendas for change, bringing new perspectives to problems: an enlightenment model of research utilization (Weiss, 1991). This is not an argument that ideas in the public realm and policy are the same thing (or by extension that the ideas behind performance indicators have automatic policy currency). Nor does it deny other rationalist accounts of how data influence policy. A critical policy approach to performance measurement, however, provides a framework for exploring the role that performance measurement may play in communicating values and shaping policy. By examining the processes by which performance indicators are generated and used, tracking the aspects of a problem they reflect or ignore, and the interests they sustain or threaten, we can more fully comprehend their policy significance.

Child Welfare Performance Indicators in England: Context, Power Relations, and Values

A case study to examine the influence of performance measurement in a specific child welfare context compared policy documents and performance regimes in England. The policy documents included legislation and major government guidelines or statements of policy on child welfare. Both documents and related performance indicators were applicable for 2000-2001. The analysis first considers the context in which performance measurement

developed in child welfare. It then examines the ways power is allocated amongst policy perspectives in the process of producing and using indicators, including the organizational arrangements for measuring performance and who participates in performance measurement. Finally it explores the values embedded in performance indicators, the dimensions of performance measured, and the aspects of work covered, recognizing that indicators represent ideas and perspectives on child welfare that can permeate policy debates. While such an analysis cannot precisely predict the influence of performance measurement, systematic exploration of these dimensions of the policy process helps to understand the ways in which performance measurement can operate discursively to influence policy and practice.

In England, the Children Act 1989 provides the legislative basis for services to children in need (of which maltreated children are a subset). Legislation and policy guidelines are set by central government, while service delivery is undertaken at the local government level by social services departments or contracted agencies (Aldgate & Hill, 1995). The policy environment in which performance measurement in child welfare developed in England was similar to that of many other countries. In the late 1980s and 1990s, agencies experienced difficulty in meeting the demand for services. There were public inquiries and extensive media criticism of child protection. The inadequacies of investigative responses, the paucity of services to help families, and the poor quality of out-of-home care were in the spotlight (Aldgate & Hill, 1995). Legislative and policy responses positioned family support as a key to reform. The influential publication, *Child Protection: Messages from Research*, argued that a narrow focus on investigation of maltreatment allegations and the increasing use of compulsory means of intervention was detrimental to children (Department of Health, 1995). This research is frequently invoked to support efforts to rebalance the child welfare system towards both protection and welfare goals, expanding access to preventive support services for families.

The welfare regime in England was also influenced by an ideological critique of the welfare state (McDonald, Harris, & Wintersteen, 2003). This brought changes in arrangements for funding, providing, and monitoring services in line with the ideas of new public management. Two strong policy themes were evident: a policy drive towards family support approaches coming from factors intrinsic to child welfare, and a managerial impetus for reform arising from concerns that applied to the whole of the public sector, with its keywords of management, effectiveness, quality, efficiency, and accountability.

The main principles underpinning the Children Act 1989 are that families are primarily responsible for raising their children, the state has a role in assisting families, and state powers should be exercised only when essential to protect a child (Aldgate & Hill, 1995). These principles provide the basis for recurring policy directions and subsequent policy statements about how to provide child protection services: a broad range of services for children in need to prevent the risk of family breakdown; services provided in partnership with parents in preference to coercive intervention; defined state powers to balance the rights of parents and children; the notion of the state as a corporate parent looking after children away from home according to the same standards as other parents in the community; and assessment of children's needs within a developmental framework rather than concentrating on maltreatment. Yet despite this legislative and policy agenda, numerous studies found that the family support aims of the Children Act 1989 were not fully achieved (Aldgate, Tunstill, & McBeath, 1992; Colton, Drury, & Williams, 1995; Penn & Gough, 2002; Wilding & Thoburn, 1997). The overall picture was of scant preventative responses, with access to services still mostly triggered by the presence of child protection concerns.

There was a level of pluralism evident in shaping policy directions, with the government, researchers, advocacy groups, and the media participating in the policy process. There are frequent references in the literature to how the media portrays aspects of child

protection practice, signaling the perception that the media is influential in shaping child protection policy (Ayre, 2001; Parton et al., 1997). *Messages from Research* reported the findings of 20 research projects, 14 of which were funded by the Department of Health (Parton, 1996). Other research and government reports drew attention to deficiencies in the care system, providing backing for a more supportive child welfare response (Aldgate & Hill, 1995). The influence of researchers was also reinforced through the government's commitment to evidence-based policy and practice (for example, Department of Health, 2000, p. 16; Hunt, 2000).

Performance measurement was one of the tools employed by central government to modernize how public services were provided and resources allocated, part of a concerted effort to promote management techniques (Rushton & Dance, 2002). There are strong organizational arrangements propelling performance measurement in England. Its ongoing existence is not reliant on a single agency within government. As central government has no service delivery role, there is an impetus for performance measurement to achieve indirect control. Central government is the main player in developing and using performance indicators, with its role now overtaking that of the independent Audit Commission in prescribing indicators. Most indicators are set by the Department of Health. Over time, as the Department of Health expanded its reporting framework, the Audit Commission decreased its number of indicators (6 in 1994–1995, 10 in 1999–2000, and 0 in 2001–2002). The Audit Commission, however, continued to use indicators in joint performance reviews with the Social Services Inspectorate and determining local authority rankings in annual league tables. The treasury department also uses indicators, with some elements of funding tied to performance. Arrangements such as setting targets, ranking performance, financial incentives for good performance, and intervention to remedy poor performance make performance measurement a vital element of providing internal accountability from the local service delivery level upwards to central government.

External accountability is promoted through the publication of performance data and inspection reports, and hence some debate about performance has been prompted. Performance measurement has attracted media attention, mainly when the performance of local authorities can be compared or targets are not reached (for example, Batty, 2001). Child protection researchers have engaged with performance measurement to a limited extent. There is support in the literature for monitoring educational attainment (Goddard, 2000; Rushton & Dance, 2002); concern about the impact of indicators on professional individualized decision-making (Munro, 2000); and criticism of using indicators to rank the performance of local authorities in league tables (Oliver, Owen, Statham, & Moss, 2001; Humphrey, 2003). The Department of Health has commissioned research reviews on why and how to improve practice in specific areas related to indicators (ECM Research and Practice Briefings, 2007). Performance indicators have not received widespread attention, however, including from less powerful policy actors such as clients, frontline practitioners, or service providers.

In England in 2000–2001, there were 40 national performance indicators (Table 1). Only one referred directly to family support (relative spending on family support). There were 33 indicators relating to children in need for reasons related to maltreatment. Of those, six indicators related to the process of investigation, registration, and substantiation (for example, re-registrations, duration on the register, and case reviews) and 27 indicators related to ‘looked after’ children (i.e., children in out-of-home care) or care leavers, 14 of which measured quality in out-of-home care (for example, placement stability, duration looked after before adoption, and inspections of children’s homes). The seven remaining indicators related to services for children in need more broadly (for example, educational attainment and participation for children in need). The strongest emphasis of the indicators is on service quality and outcomes for looked-after children. That is, the indicators relate to the relatively small number of children requir-

TABLE 1

Performance Indicators for Children's Services, England, 2000-2001

- Placement stability for children looked after
- Educational qualifications of children leaving care
- Re-registration on the child protection register
- Employment, education, and training for care leavers
- Children looked after in family placements
- Cost of services for children looked after
- Unit cost of children's residential care
- Unit cost of foster care
- Cautions and convictions of children looked after
- Health of children looked after
- Reviews of cases on the child protection register
- Duration on child protection register
- Young children looked after in family placements
- Adoptions of looked-after children
- Children looked after absent from school
- Inspections of children's homes
- Long-term stability of children looked after
- Relative spending on family support
- Ethnicity of children in need
- Adoptive placements ceased not resulting in adoption
- Duration looked after before adoption
- Children reaching expected standard in curriculum tests
- Children permanently excluded from school
- School days lost through unauthorized absences
- Children age 10 years or older cautioned or convicted
- Looked-after children reaching expected standard in curriculum tests
- Educational qualifications of children looked after
- Looked-after children permanently excluded from school
- Looked-after children from ethnic minorities
- Ongoing support for care leavers aged 19 years
- Care leavers aged 19 years with suitable accommodation
- Disabled children who accessed respite care
- Qualifications of residential care workers
- Qualifications of social workers and residential managers
- Rate of children looked after
- Children looked after in residential care, foster care, adopted
- Looked-after children age 11 years or older permanently excluded from school
- Rate of children on the child protection register
- Children on the register whose cases should have been reviewed that were reviewed
- Children on the register visited at least once every six weeks by their social worker

Sources: Department of Environment, Transport, and the Regions, 1999; Department of Health, 1999, 2001.

ing legal response and ignore the much larger number of children at risk from ongoing poor parenting and living at home. Good practice means concentrating on managing the child protection register and looking after children in care. While performance measurement encompasses a policy concern with service quality, it does not advance the broader policy agenda regarding family support. Over time, more convergence has emerged between stated policy and performance indicators, with the 'children in need' indicators that communicate policy interest in the life chances of all children, but a considerable gap remains.

Discussion

There has been an ongoing debate about policy directions in child welfare involving multiple policy actors. There has not been this level of debate about performance measurement, which has been driven by government and is largely top-down. Performance measurement has been more oriented to accountability upwards rather than to external stakeholders. To the extent that performance data are reported publicly, government may be accountable to the wider community. However, media reporting tends to focus on poor performance, which can have obverse effects if agencies manipulate data or activities to reach targets rather than actually improve performance (Sanderson, 1998). There is no indication that performance data make government directly accountable to the children and families who use child welfare services. While 'client satisfaction' is an indicator of quality for government services (Department of the Environment, Transport, and the Regions, 1999), it is not common in child welfare performance regimes. Nevertheless, the very existence of performance data means it is open to interpretation by a range of policy actors. For example, in Australia, children in care have used performance data as part of their policy advocacy efforts. An organization representing young people in care published a report card assessing state government child protection efforts against a performance indicator set, sig-

nalling their interest in interpreting performance data (Create Foundation, 2001).

In selecting some performance indicators and not others, decisions are made about what is important. Efficiency indicators do not dominate the performance regime in England; there are evident concerns about quality and outcomes. While legislation and policy documents in England are premised on a continuum of services including family support, however, this is not evident in performance measurement, which predominantly focuses on investigation of maltreatment allegations and children in out-of-home care. The signs that family support is marginalized in performance measurement include the following.

- The number of indicators relating to family support is very small. Thus, we can take for granted that investigation and out-of-home care are essential to child welfare while the inclusion of family support has to be justified.
- The underlying values of the indicators promote the perspective that good practice in child welfare is mainly about achieving safety and placement stability for children. This focuses policy action (at least in part) on the topics the data represent. For example, safety becomes the absence of re-abuse, quality is defined as placement stability, and placement stability relates to the number of placement moves or length of time in placement.
- While the processes of investigation and out-of-home care are framed as problematic and needing attention, there is no measurement of the activities or processes of family support, as if there are no concerns about quality here. Family support cannot be questioned because no data are reported. Family support is positioned as unproblematic and morally good, but it is also marginalized in the process.

If indicators help establish a norm that policy should be supported by data, then family support is in a difficult position because relatively little aggregate data on family support services

are being generated, and even less are publicly reported. This invisibility means family support is unlikely to be prioritized in the competition for funds in a policy environment dominated by management, measurement, and accountability where performance measurement and resource allocation go hand in hand.

Congruence Between Stated Policy and Performance Measurement

It is apparent that performance measurement is not apart from policy. Performance measurement can be seen as a normative discourse attempting to establish a certain policy direction. Individual performance indicators and sets of indicators have embedded values that can operate as ideas in the policy process, although the scale of their influence is contingent upon the institutional arrangements that facilitate their role and legitimacy. The context in which performance measurement occurs, and the processes by which indicators are generated and used, facilitates or moderates its influence. The direction of the influence should be consistent with both policy and research. Performance measurement efforts concentrated on investigation and placement at best relegate family support to the margins of the repertoire of child welfare services, and at worst they reinforce the child rescue paradigm. Clearly, not only should indicators be valid and reliable, they need to be right for a particular policy approach. In thinking about the utility of performance measurement for improving child welfare services, its indirect and conceptual uses—not just its direct instrumental uses—should be considered. Some specific, decision-linked uses of performance measurement in child welfare can be identified, such as linking funds with performance (Rushton & Dance, 2002). There may also be tacit, second-order uses of indicators (Innes, 1990) in allocating power and resources to child rescue policy perspectives, framing the problem of child welfare as investigation and placement, and excluding family support from being viewed as a solution to performance problems. In order for the scope of performance measurement in child welfare to be broad-

ened to encompass the legislative and policy shift towards supporting families, performance measurement in child welfare needs to be understood as a proactive policy tool rather than as purely a technical monitoring tool.

It is recognized that the ideas and knowledge performance measurement produces are jostling for space alongside other claims for attention in the policy process, and it is not possible to conclude easily whether performance measurement is having a positive or negative impact on practice. This analysis shows, however, at least in England, that it is likely to be working against the promotion of a family support approach.

Democratizing the Process of Performance Measurement

Performance measurement has the potential to promote dialogue and organizational reflection, although it has generally not been used for this purpose. There is a need to democratize the processes of performance measurement (Carter et al., 1992; Sanderson, 1998) so that researchers, practitioners, advocates, and clients have a voice alongside government in how good performance is defined. Of course, government has overall responsibility for child welfare and will always be centrally involved in determining performance indicators, however, other stakeholders can use performance data for their own purposes. The aim should be to generate processes of greater deliberation and participation so there is more cross-fertilization of ideas between the worlds of research, child welfare policy and practice, and performance measurement. Stakeholders have to know how to use performance indicators; not just how to interpret statistics but also to recognize the values behind indicators, how they interact with each other, the gaps in indicator sets, and their role in policymaking.

The lack of attention less powerful actors give to indicators may undermine their capacity to influence policy and practice in the longer term. This is not to underplay the power of government and the structural barriers that limit the influence of others in the policy process. Even if there was more democratic participation in

the development of indicators, this would not guarantee a more considered approach or a better match between policy and indicators. Negotiation over measurement can be a way to focus on values and goals, however, through concrete questions such as “What do we count?” One of the key questions here is which family support services or activities should be ‘counted’ as contributing to child protection.

Critical Focus on Family Support

Because performance measurement uses programs as the unit of analysis, it is concerned with the effectiveness and efficiency of total government expenditure on child welfare. This aids conceptualization of the child welfare process as an integrated whole. Performance measurement has much to offer family support as part of a “systemic reform effort that transcends individual programs and services” (Pecora, Fraser, Nelson, McCroskey, & Meezan, 1995, p. 17). Evaluations of single models are useful but not sufficient for understanding the system-wide impact of family support; program-wide data are also needed that capture its diversity. Yet this research shows that performance measurement is biased to investigation and placement, which is concerning given the history of child welfare in which the value of working with families has been consistently marginalized in practice. Family support has been sidelined in one of the key policy tools of the new public management regime, even within a policy and legislative environment that purports to place family support in a central position.

Drawing family support into performance measurement regimes will subject it to more critical attention, particularly since it is so ill-defined and even descriptive research in this field is limited (albeit growing). Part of the problem with defining family support is the lack of empirical knowledge about its scope, methods, and processes. Such research is important to move family support beyond being an elusive policy goal. As data are collected and used for performance measurement, an iterative process

develops whereby its objectives and results can be clarified. That is, rather than waiting to know more about family support before determining performance indicators, through the process of measurement we will understand more about practice and the dimensions of good performance. An imperfect knowledge base should not be an excuse for inaction. The logic of performance measurement—operationalizing the concept of family support in standard performance measurement terms of inputs, outputs, processes, and outcomes—can be used as a way to ‘unpack’ family support or disentangle its constituent parts (Knapp & Lowin, 1998). Performance indicators for family support might include the number of families receiving services relative to expenditure, family satisfaction with services, the extent to which case goals are attained, or the extent to which specified needs relating to parenting skills, access to social support, and improved care of children are met. Even descriptive input, output, and process data would be useful to highlight the scope of service delivery, record trends, signal emerging issues, and contribute to program development. The technical aspects of performance measurement can be used while recognizing its implicit values. That is, as performance indicators construct policy and practice, measuring family support introduces a set of indicators for reconstructing child welfare more broadly into the discourse, balancing preventative family support with investigation and out-of-home care.

Conclusion

This article locates performance indicators as a policy device that both responds to and constitutes certain views about policy problems. That is, child welfare performance indicators are part of a larger narrative about the problem of child welfare. The conclusion that performance measurement shapes policy is not surprising, but it does challenge the notion that performance measurement is a technical management tool, rather than a process and an opportunity for expressing policy intent. The critical policy frame-

work has encouraged a strategic reading of the actual and potential role of performance measurement in improving practice in a way that is cognizant of its limitations. Performance measurement can be adapted to a range of value positions, framing our understanding of issues and defining good practice. Performance, effectiveness, and efficiency are contested concepts. Outcomes can be defined broadly or narrowly. Indicators may or may not be supported by research; they may simply reflect a government preoccupation with a perceived performance problem. But it is possible for indicators to represent a vision for change consistent with what is known about good practice, and for the 'knowledge' they produce to be made more useable through critical scrutiny of their underpinning assumptions. This will ensure performance measurement is oriented towards opening up debate rather than becoming an empty "ritual of verification" (Power, 1997) tangential to real policy change.

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