CEDARS HOME FOR CHILDREN: AN ACADEMIC FAMILY SERVICES MANAGEMENT MODEL

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ABSTRACT: The linkage of traditional child welfare, day care, and academic systems presents a variety of programmatic and theoretical challenges. The University of Nebraska Cedars Home for Children Project offers a model for the integration of such systems. The three-year evolution of this model is examined across seven interrelated categories: formulation and refinement of a mission base, knowledge base, value base, definition of problems, client-worker relationships, nature of professional action, and agency arrangements of flexibility.

Introduction

Historically, children whose families could not care for them were placed in institutions. More recently, child welfare services have focused on the provision of aid to families so children can remain in their own homes. One of the newest services provided to families under stress is day care. Yet the linking of traditional child welfare and day care systems present programmatic and theoretical challenges. In a contractual agreement between a private foundation and a university academic unit, Cedars Foundation of Lincoln contracted with the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Department of Human Development and the Family to meet such a challenge and to provide managerial and professional services for Cedars Home for Children in Lincoln, Nebraska.

In its third year, Cedars continues to evolve across seven interrelated categories. Originally these categories were proposed by Germain (1979) and then expanded by Kirsh and Maidman (1984) to include the formulation and refinement of a mission base, knowledge base, value base, definition of problems, client-worker relationships, nature of professional action, and agency arrangements of flexibility. Development has occurred in each of these categories in response to the unique and ongoing needs of the Cedars program.

Mission Statement

The early months of the contract were challenging as new leadership, programs, and theoretical bases were explored. To establish a

philosophical base and to clarify the types of services, programs, and linkages, a mission and goals statement was developed by a joint Cedars Board/Human Development Committee. The resulting mission of the Cedars project included the development of a program service model to address the multiple needs of children and families and to provide students with quality learning experiences in a variety of ways (Meredith, Kallemeyn, Zeece, 1988).

To operationalize this mission statement, specific goals were initially delineated and focused on program development in four areas: prevention (day care, infant care, respite care, family services); intervention (residential, emergency shelter/respite, family services); academic (teaching and research); and staff development.

Knowledge Base

From the contract onset, differences in theoretical base and method of orientation were apparent. Initially, the day care program, later to become the hub of prevention focus, was primarily developmentally based and child centered (Bredekamp, 1986). Developmentally appropriate practice assumes that children grow in predictable ways and that understanding individual differences in children is crucial. It recognizes the importance of families and other significant adults in children's lives, but it identifies the child (rather than the family) as the primary recipient of services. The residential program, eventually to become the pivot point of the intervention focus, was systems-theory based and family centered. Additionally, prevention staff were trained primarily in child development and elementary/early childhood education; the intervention staff had education credentials primarily in human development, family science, and social work.

As the conceptual base of the program evolved, a hybrid systems-developmental theory approach emerged which focused on the importance of children and families both as individuals and across systems. Before this integration occurred, workers at Cedars, in some sense, were functioning much like the "cookie cutters" described by Weaver (1988). Instead of assimilating into an agency "melting pot" (p. 15), each group of workers functioned within a distinct paradigm. One of the most dramatic changes within the Cedars program has been the beginning of assimilation of workers into a coordinated team that works with families across programs and philosophies. This assimilation has not occurred quickly, completely, or without cost (i.e., loss of staff and intensive internal reorganization).

Value Base

Valera (1984) suggests that professionals must demonstrate commitment to the human purpose to establish ethical parameters for programs and organizations. Yet, child and youth care workers are not typically provided opportunities to pose philosophical questions about their jobs (Weaver, 1988). But the differences between philosophies at the beginning of the Cedars project and the direction from the mission statement required that Cedars staff examine their personal and professional values as they struggled to reconcile philosophical differences. Values influencing programming were also influenced by the current state and federal legislative focus on family unification. Consequently, the overall purpose of the program has become the remediation and/or prevention of abuse, neglect, and family discord by assisting families to identify resources and to utilize their strengths in meeting their own needs.

Definition of Problems

Cedars focuses on the definition and solutions of problems for programs, clientele, and staff. Kirsh and Maidman (1984) advise that problems in child and youth care programs often arise from such things as transitions, interpersonal processes, and environmental issues.

Transitions

One of the first transitions within the Cedars project dealt directly with the business operations. For the Cedars Foundation, the transition within the program from the foundation to the university involved separation of program management versus foundation responsibilities. This separation has still not been completed.

For the university, the transition from running teacher education programs (e.g., lab school) to running a residential program presented equal challenges. Typical university-based job descriptions for academic personnel and hourly wage earners did not adequately cover many of the duties of Cedars staff members. For example, children and their caregivers in residential care could not be put on university "break" over the holidays. Many hours were invested in designing job descriptions which best met the needs of the workers, as well as the program.

A second transition occurred in the area of public relations. For many in the community, Cedars was considered an "orphanage." This attitude was evidenced by the vast amounts of used clothing and other

household items which arrived at Cedars daily. During holiday seasons, it was not unusual to have requests from several dozen service groups (e.g., Boy Scouts, church groups) to bring homemade gifts, toys, and candy for the "orphans."

The challenge for public relations became to rechannel thinking without discrediting motives for giving – or giving itself. This was accomplished through media coverage of the contract (i.e., educating the public at large), involvement of Cedars and university faculty as change agents in community activities which had traditionally supported the view of Cedars primarily as an orphanage and, most importantly, through the changing reputation of Cedars within the Lincoln Social Service and child caring community.

A third transition was represented in the shift to more regulated child care. In the past, Cedars had not accepted any form of reimbursement from clients and was therefore exempt from licensure in its residential and day care programs. At the beginning of the contract, Cedars had many areas which did not meet the minimum standards of the rules and regulations which had been established by the state to govern child care facilities. The noncompliances ranged from minor violations, such as lack of proper record keeping, to major violations, such as the lack of written policies and procedures by which the program was to operate. All of the noncompliances were rectified, and both the day care and residential programs currently operate under state licenses.

Interpersonal Processes

The professionals with whom child and adult clients interact on a regular basis are seen as one of the most important parts of the Cedars program. Ongoing support in the form of supervisory conferences are offered to all workers. General encouragement is provided to enhance professional development at all levels. During the first year of the project, staff concentrated on developing and implementing a viable, respected program. Primary training and supervision was provided to line staff by the director and coordinators. During the second year, a formal orientation program was developed and implemented. This orientation and follow-up training was based on specific agency-identified needs and competencies.

To further meet the needs of the workers, a Cedars/Human Development Committee was established to review the in-service needs of the program. As a result of this committee, an in-service needs assessment was developed and distributed to all Cedars employees. Results of the

assessment permitted agency administration to evaluate general and personal needs and to determine the preferred method of training delivery for each of the proposed in-service topics.

Environmental Issues

Working under the assumption that families receive messages from all the environments in which they are involved, one of the first environmental issues dealt directly with the physical condition of the Cedars facility. At the project beginning, staff worked to identify and correct a variety of deficiencies which were present. Within the residential program, these were addressed through: 1) thorough cleaning of all areas; 2) proper storage and maintenance of medication, toxic chemicals, supplies, and foods; 3) sorting and redistribution or disposal of large quantities of donated items; 4) establishing proper room usage; 5) ordering of appropriate equipment to meet the needs of children and families in care; 6) temporarily repairing windows and installation of temporary fencing to meet the safety needs of children; and 7) identifying specific concerns within the facility which need to be addressed through ongoing capital improvement planning. While considerable improvement has occurred and the residential facility is now safe and meets licensing, fire and health/safety requirements, ongoing assessment of this area is planned.

As a part of a $750,000 addition to the Cedars facility, foundation offices and a state-of-the-art day care center were constructed through consultation with the university's early childhood education and child development faculty. This addition provides space for 47 children: 35 pre schoolers and 12 infants. Additionally, the expanded capacity allows for more flexible use of emergency and respite programming. Renovation of the residential care facilities continues to be a high priority.

Client-Worker Relationships

Within the Cedars program, enhancement of client competence is paramount. This is true regardless of the age, gender, race, religion or economic circumstance of the client. The key to the development of competence in both the client and the worker is thought to be fostered within healthy client-worker relationships. Ideally, workers focus on the development of skills, like those characterized in Kirsh and Maidman (1984), which "promote a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity manifested in openness, authenticity, honesty, naturalness, and human car-

ing" (p. 4). It then becomes an administrative responsibility to make it a priority to foster the same kind of mutuality and reciprocity among the staff as well.

Nature of Professional Action

Within the Cedars project, the nature of professional action is first and foremost preventive. Even in those families whose children are in residential care, the preventive focus predominates. Whenever possible, family self-sufficiency and strength is explored with appropriate levels of support. The professional action is also task-centered with a focus on helping individuals and families understand their experiences and adopt active problem-solving techniques.

Agency Arrangements

Effective provision of service to families requires collective, as well as individual, efforts within the Cedars project. This collectivism provides for linkages among program, staff, university faculty, Cedars Foundation/Board, and outside community agencies. Organization within Cedars provides for a multi-tiered arrangement with the coordinators of the prevention and intervention program components reporting to an executive director.

The Human Development and the Family faculty link has also evolved over the first two years. Currently, several job "trades" have been negotiated wherein a faculty member works directly within the Cedars program and the executive director teaches an undergraduate course. Additional exchanges are being considered for the future.

And finally, the community link is one of the most exciting outgrowths of the new Cedars program. With the use of the family services team approach, community agencies are actively involved with the identification, development, and delivery of service to families. This approach has been well received and has minimized duplication of services within the community, while maximizing resources available to Cedars clients.

Conclusion

The Cedars program is innovative and sound. It represents the collaboration between the public and private sectors to meet the

pressing and complex needs of families at risk. To do this, systems have been linked and boundaries have been crossed between theoretical bases, educational bases, and historical precedents for models of care and practice. The Cedars venture affords the next generation of youth and child care workers (students) the opportunity to learn from a real life setting. Equally important, it challenges faculty to examine the relevance of their teaching about the complex needs of families in crisis.

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