Court Appointed Special Advocates:

Is their impact effectively evaluated by current research methodology?

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A Capstone project presented in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Policy Studies

Interdisciplinary Arts and Science

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CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1 – Purpose of the Study

Introduction

The 1974 passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act required every state to appoint a guardian *ad litem*, literally guardian in litigation, for every abused or neglected child involved in a judicial proceeding. Shortly thereafter King County, Washington, developed the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program in 1977. Prior to the development of the CASA program, most judicial districts in the United States appointed attorneys to act as advocates for children in judicial proceedings. The King County CASA program was unique in that it utilized community volunteers to fulfill the child advocate role. CASA currently exists in every state in the nation, under a variety of names. In Snohomish County, Washington, the site for the present research, the CASA Program is the Snohomish County Volunteer Guardian ad Litem (VGAL) Program, but to be consistent with other studies, the name "CASA" will be used for this study. [1] The program began in 1979, and as of the date of the present research, employed nine Program Coordinators to supervise 208 volunteers, who advocated for 557 children.

A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) is a trained community volunteer appointed by a judge to advocate for the best interests of children who have become dependents of the State. Dependent children are defined as those children who are under 18 years of age, who have no parent willing or able to care for them, or who are abandoned, abused, or neglected and are under the protective care of the Department of Social and Health Services, Children's Administration (the "Department"). Dependency is a legal action filed in Superior Court in which the State is the plaintiff on behalf of the child, and the parents are the defendants. Since 1986, due to child fatalities and shifting philosophies and swings in legislation, the Department has shifted its focus from chiefly maintaining the

[1] This researcher has worked with the Snohomish County VGAL Program since 2000 as both volunteer and staff.

family, to predominantly keeping the child safe, to advocating for both child safety and keeping the family intact. Litzelfelner and Petr (1997) found that because of "conflicting roles and loyalties, worker turnover, increased demands, and lack of social work training, child welfare workers are not in the best position to act as a child's case advocate. Child welfare workers have primary identities as professionals in an agency, not as child advocates, and simply are not in a position to protect children from a system of which they are a part"(398). In contrast, the CASA's responsibility is to advocate for the child's best interest, and while bound by law, is not bound by Departmental policy. This unique position gives the CASA the opportunity to make recommendations to the court that a social worker would not be allowed to make, due to his or her position as an employee of the Department.

By law, CASA's duties include, but are not limited to, investigating the child's situation, reporting the facts to the court, meeting with the child, reporting the child's wishes to the court, monitoring all court orders for compliance by the parents, the Department, and the child if necessary, and making recommendations in the best interest of the child. The CASA influence in a child-welfare case is highly nuanced. As an example, staff at the Snohomish County CASA Program reported volunteer activities not captured in court files: of a volunteer persuading the Division of Developmental Disabilities to reverse their decision to cut the aide hours for a severely disabled child; of changing the direction of a case from termination of parental rights to a successful reunification with the parents within six weeks of being appointed and of attorneys, who represent the wishes of the child, utilizing CASA volunteers to advocate for the child's best interests.

Studies have attempted to assess the effectiveness of the CASA program in terms of case outcomes (Abramson, 1991; Berliner & Fitzgerald 1998; Brennan et al., 2010; Caliber Associates, 2004; Calkins and Millar (1999); Collins-Camargo, et al. 2009; Evaluation 2005; Heartz, 1993; Lawson & Berrick,

2013; Leung 1996; Litzelfelner & Petr, 1997; Litzelfelner, 2008; National CASA Program Audit, 2006; Weisz & Thai, 2003).

Results from these studies are mixed; some found children with CASAs generally experience longer stays in foster care (National CASA Program Audit, 2006) while other studies found the length of stay considerably shortened (Calkins & Millar, 1999). Some found that CASA involvement led to more services for parents and children (Caliber Associates, 2004). CASAs are typically assigned to the most severe cases of abuse or neglect (Caliber Associates 2004), but with the exception of Calkins and Millar (1999), the vast majority of the research has compared cases with CASA to cases without CASA, without controlling for the difference in the level of relative risk between those cases assigned a CASA, and those that are not, resulting in selected groups that were not equal in all ways but CASA assignment.

As a result of most studies not accounting for the difference in level of relative risk between the two groups, little empirical evidence of CASA effectiveness or impact upon child well-being has been generated. Caliber Associates (2004) recommended further exploration of CASA effectiveness and impact on child well-being, with samples being carefully matched for level of relative risk and degree of family impairment. Caliber Associates suggested that a community with a shortage of CASA volunteers and a waiting list of children in need of CASA representation would provide an ideal setting for such studies, as the groups (CASA, No CASA) could be matched for risk level and family impairment, thereby minimizing issues of selection.

At the time of this study, Snohomish County had a waiting list of 429 children who had not been assigned a CASA. The goal of the present study was to examine whether Calkins and Millar's (1999) model of measure could be replicated. If not, then further research is needed to establish which types associations would accurately measure the influence of the CASA.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the present research was to replicate Calkins and Millar's (1999) study by examining the differences between groups of cases assigned a CASA, and those without a CASA, in terms of months in dependency, number of out-of-home placements, services obtained for the child, and family contact upon dismissal, and to compare the results with those found by Calkins and Millar (1999). Although Calkins and Millar did not evaluate the child's contact with family members upon dismissal, this measure was added in the present study because CASAs receive training on the importance of family connections and frequently advocate for ongoing familial contact. Connection with family members has been shown to be beneficial to a child's sense of well-being (Fanshel and Shinn, as cited in Baker, Mehta & Chong, 2013). Empirical evidence provided by the present research lays a foundation for future comparisons of CASA/NO CASA groups and provides recommendations for new approaches to study the effectiveness of the CASA.

The experimental group was children in Snohomish County, Washington who were dependent and had been assigned a CASA, and the control group was children residing in the same county who were dependent and had not been assigned a CASA. The quasi-experimental design followed the methodology employed by Calkins and Millar (1999); the study undertaken by Calkins and Millar was significant because it did what other studies have not done; it controlled for the level of relative risk which is typically higher in cases assigned a CASA than those without a CASA (Caliber Associates 2004). Calkins and Millar found that cases assigned a CASA had "significantly fewer placements, tended to be more likely to achieve permanency, and spent less overall time under wardship of the court" (p. 37). Permanency is when a child has been placed in a permanent home, such as reunification, adoption, or third-party custody, and the dependency is dismissed.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The present research examines four research questions. First, are cases assigned a CASA more likely to have shorter dependencies? Second, are cases assigned a CASA more likely to have fewer out-home-home placements? Third, are cases assigned a CASA more likely to obtain more services for the child? And fourth, are cases assigned a CASA more likely to have ongoing contact with family members at dismissal? Given that the present research controlled for the difference in the level of relative risk between those cases assigned a CASA and those that are not, the results of the present research are expected to mirror the results of Calkins and Millar (1999). The hypothesis was that cases assigned a CASA were more likely to have shorter dependencies, fewer out-of-home placements, obtain more services for the child and have more family contact after dismissal.

CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 – Review of Literature

There have been multiple studies attempting to examine the effectiveness of the CASA program in terms of case outcomes (Abramson, 1991; Berliner & Fitzgerald, 1998; Brennan et al., 2010; Caliber Associates, 2004; Calkins and Millar, 1999; Collins-Camargo, et al. 2009; Evaluation 2005; Heartz, 1993; Lawson & Berrick, 2013; Leung ,996; Litzelfelner & Petr, 1997; Litzelfelner, 2008; National CASA Program Audit, 2006; Weisz & Thai, 2003). Measures of effectiveness varied from permanency outcomes such as adoption, guardianship and reunification (Brennan 2010), number of out-of-home placements, length of out-of-home placements, frequency of placement changes, types of placement changes (Leung, 1996), whether or not the judges, caseworkers and parents were satisfied with the performance of the CASA (Litzelfelner, 2008, Evaluation 2005), and whether or not CASAs adequately represented the interests of minority children (Abramson, 1991, Caliber Associates, 2004). A few have integrated child well-being into the study (Litzelfelner & Petr, 1997; Caliber Associates, 2004).

Defining child well-being or the best interests of the child, or child "welfare" introduces a level of complexity that has only minimally been addressed in the literature, and relatively few studies have explored the association between CASA assignment and child well-being. Litzfelner and Petr (1997) describe children involved in the child welfare system as being uniquely vulnerable, as they have lost their natural advocates, their parents. Litzfelner and Petr believed that the role of the child advocate was to monitor the "fit" between the child and his or her environment, and whether the environment was safe for that child. Statham and Chase (2010) advise that childhood well-being is defined in a myriad of ways, with a wide variety of domains and measures being used to assess the levels of child well-being. They indicate there is a close association between childhood well-being and positive family relationships. The findings of studies measuring CASA impact on case outcomes and child well-being have been mixed; Caliber Associates (2004) found that children assigned a CASA were more likely to be

placed out of home, less likely to be reunified with their families or placed in kinship care, that CASAs spent less time on cases with African American children, but that both the children and the parents were likely to receive more services. Conversely Abramson (1991) found when CASAs were assigned, significantly fewer minority children were placed in long-term foster care, and significantly more children were placed in adoptive families than in a comparison group.

Caliber Associates (2004) examined the level of relative risk in cases assigned to a CASA, and found that CASAs are typically assigned to cases with relatively higher level of risk of harm to the child than cases without CASA involvement. As a result, Caliber Associates (2004) warned that if studies of CASA impact do not take into account the issue of selection, they run the risk of understating any positive effects of CASA involvement. Caliber Associates suggested that research in communities in which there is a shortage of CASA volunteers and a waiting list of children in need of a CASA might be the proper setting to accurately test the effectiveness of the CASA program. They recommended two samples, those with a CASA and those without, should be carefully matched for abuse and neglect factors. By eliminating the selection bias, such a study would provide a better test of the impact of a CASA volunteer on case outcomes and child well-being.

The Calkins and Millar (1999) study was significant in that it did what other studies had not done; it controlled for the higher level of relative risk typically found in cases assigned a CASA. Specifically, Calkins and Millar examined the Clark County CASA Program in Clark County, Nevada, examining 189 dependency cases in which 68 cases had a CASA assigned, and 121 did not have a CASA assigned. They did a case record review, documenting the age, gender, and ethnicity of the children in each group (CASA, No CASA), and they recorded the date the dependency was filed, the date it was closed, and how many out-of-home placements the children experienced. They developed a set of questions related to “case severity,” concerning the history of abuse or neglect, the general level of

stress the family experienced, such as financial stress or housing complications, and whether the family had a history of substance abuse and/or criminal activity. They also asked questions concerning the mental and physical health of the child, as well as the child's use of substances. The measures related to severity were summed to give a total severity rating per case. The mean for each group was compared using a one-factor Analysis of Variance (ANOVA); no significant difference was found between the two groups in terms of severity. Using Chi Square Analysis, the two groups were found to have no significant difference in terms of gender distribution, nor was there disproportionate representation within groups in terms of race/ethnicity.

Once the two groups were matched, Calkins and Millar ran a set of analyses to determine whether there was any significant difference between the two groups in terms of case outcomes. Their study found that when a CASA was assigned to a case, the children experienced fewer changes in foster homes, were likely to spend less time as a ward of the state, and were more likely to achieve permanency.

The present study attempted to replicate Calkins and Millar by matching CASA/No CASA groups in terms of the level of relative risk, the age of the children, and race/ethnicity. Age was chosen as a matching variable rather than gender, as the age of the child has been shown to effect case outcomes (Caliber Associates, 2004, Ringeisen, Tueller, Testa, Dolan & Smith , 2013). The two matched groups were then compared in terms of case outcomes, namely length of dependency, number of out-of-home placements, number of services obtained for the children, and whether or not the children had ongoing contact with their family upon dismissal of the dependency.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The participants in the present research were children who had been found to be dependent by the Superior Court of the State of Washington in Snohomish County. As a Program Coordinator with the Snohomish County VGAL (CASA) Program, this researcher was granted access to court case files. The present research consisted of a case review of court documents of dependency cases filed between 2008 and 2012, and dismissed no later than December 31, 2013. This time frame allowed for the inclusion of lengthier dependencies as CASAs are frequently assigned to cases of severe neglect or abuse, which may take longer to resolve (Caliber Associates 2004). However, no cases over three years old were considered in the present research as the longer a child is a dependent of the state, the greater the likelihood that the age of the case alone will have a direct affect upon dependent variables chosen in the study (Stott, 2012). Children who had been assigned an attorney to act as Guardian ad Litem were eliminated from the list, as well as any cases which had attorneys appointed to act as legal representatives of the children. The initial sample was 100 children; 49 had been assigned a CASA, and 51 had not.

Within 12 months of a child being removed from the parents' care, the court is mandated by The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 to adopt a permanent plan to move the case forward to completion. These hearings, entitled "Permanency Planning Reviews" present an opportunity for parents, CASAs, and the Department to apprise the judge of the status of the parents' progress in services, how the child is faring, any contested issues needing a judicial ruling, and recommendations for a plan to move forward, such as reunification with the parents, adoption, third-party custody or long-term foster care. Because these hearings typically occur when the case is near the age of 12 months, cases in the experimental group were limited to those in which a CASA was appointed to the case within

the first nine months, and had served on the case a minimum of 12 months, which would have afforded the CASA the opportunity to participate in permanency planning hearings.

A quasi-experimental design was utilized to compare the two groups; the initial experimental group consisted of the 49 cases to which a CASA had been assigned, and the control group was 51 cases with no CASA assigned. Random selection would not produce two groups out of this sample that were similar in all characteristics except the independent variable (CASA assignment), as CASAs are typically assigned to cases with greater level of relative risk to the child. Therefore, two groups were selected from the original sample of 100 cases that were matched in terms of level of relative risk, race/ethnicity, and children's ages.

To select two groups of cases that were matched for level of risk, each of the 100 cases was evaluated for eleven factors documented in the case file: whether or not the family had been involved in previous dependencies; whether or not the child had experienced neglect, physical abuse, verbal abuse and/or sexual abuse; whether or not the child struggled with mental health (indicated by the child being engaged in mental health treatment); whether or not the family lived in poverty (as evidenced by the appointment of a public defender); parental substance abuse; parental mental health (either self-reported or diagnosed by a mental health professional); domestic violence; and criminal activity that resulted in police involvement. The measures were summed for each case, giving a total severity rating for each case. To select cases for the two matching groups, extreme scores were eliminated, and only cases which had a severity rating from 4 to 7 were included, as over 81 percent of the cases fell within this range.

Race/ethnicity was broken down into seven categories; Black/African American, Native American children who did not qualify for the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) protection, Indian children as defined by ICWA and therefore eligible for additional protection, Hispanic, Caucasian, Other,

and Unreported. If a child is Indian, as defined by ICWA, the Act places additional requirements upon social workers to make active efforts, which can add to the length of the dependency. In the present study, 24 children were reported by their parents to have Native American ancestry, but only five qualified for the protections of ICWA. Because so few children qualified for ICWA protection, the two categories were collapsed into one, "Native American." Finally, cases with unreported race/ethnicity were eliminated, as well as "Other," as no children were recorded as anything other than the chosen categories. Ultimately, the categories were collapsed into Non-Caucasian and Caucasian in order to be able to run cross-tabs. There were no Hispanic children in the final two matched groups. Of the 100 original cases, 47.1 percent were Non-Caucasian and 47 percent were Caucasian.

The ages of the children were categorized by ranges; 0-6 years, 7-11 years, and 12 and older, as each stage presents unique challenges for children and families. Furthermore, as dependent children age, they are less likely to find a permanent home (Caliber Associates, 2004, Ringeisen, et al., 2013). Of the sample of 100 children, ages ranged from 0 (less than one year) to eleven years. However, 78 percent of the children were age 0 to 6 (M=3.98, SD 3.77). In the final selection of two matched groups, all the children were age six and younger.

The final selection of cases consisted of 47 cases with severity ratings between 4 and 7, evenly divided between Non-Caucasian and Caucasian, ages 0 to 6. Although Calkins and Millar (1999) employed a one-factor Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the cases assigned a CASA, and those not assigned a CASA in terms of the level of case severity and age, in the present research independent t-tests were run. To determine whether there was disproportionate representation of children who were Non-Caucasian, Chi-Square analysis was employed.

Similar to previous studies evaluating the CASA by outcome measures, data was collected for six factors: 1) the number of months in dependency before a permanent outcome was achieved , as indicated by the date of dismissal; 2) the number of out-of-home placements during dependency; 3) the number of times a child changed schools as a result of dependency; 4) the number of services obtained specifically for the child; 5) positive school engagement; and 6) whether or not the child had ongoing contact with family members at the dismissal of the dependency. If the experimental and control groups were matched for the level of relative risk to the child, race/ethnicity, and age of the child, theoretically any difference in outcomes could be attributed to CASA assignment.

A shorter dependency was chosen as an indicator of effectiveness as the longer a child is in foster care, the older the child becomes, the more likely the child is to remain in foster care until age 18 and never find a permanent home (Caliber Associates, 2004, Ringeisen, et al., 2013). In addition, as long as the child remains in foster care, the greater the risk of moving from home to home (Ringeisen, et al., 2013). Placement instability has negative impacts on emotional development, identity formation and development of positive social networks (Stott, 2012), as well as disrupts connections to others and a child's sense of well-being (Stott and Gustavsson, 2010 as referenced in Stott, 2012.) If a child is moved multiple times, it becomes increasingly difficult for him or her to form trusting relationships with a new family, as indicated by Samuels (2008). Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan and Localio (2007), found that children, as a result of instability, may develop behavioral problems which further impact their ability to be placed in a permanent home. CASA advocates in Snohomish County routinely advocate for maintenance of placement if the child is safe and well-cared for, when Departmental policy might mandate otherwise.

Each time a child is forced to change schools, academic progress is hindered, and social connections are broken. Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano & Fleming (2008) found that school mobility appears to negatively affect academic engagement. Schmidt (2003), as referenced by Pears,

Kim, Fisher and Yoerger (2013), indicated there is some evidence that school engagement provides protective factors for children who have experienced more adversity than others. Since the final matched groups for the present research consisted of children age 6 and younger, the number of school changes did not apply, and was dropped from the final analysis.

CASAs are trained to observe the children in a variety of settings, and make recommendations to the Department and the court for services that would be beneficial to the child. Generally, the majority of services for children fall under the category of assessments, such as bonding assessments, mental health assessments, and overarching global assessments of the child's world. These assessments may recommend additional services for the children. In the present research, standard medical and dental care was not included as all children brought into care of the state receive routine medical and dental care. Included were specialized services, such as evaluations, therapy, bonding assessments, professional educational advocates, or other services that are not routinely provided for all children. "Services obtained" was chosen instead of services ordered because many services for children are brought about without the need for court action.

Data was collected on "positive school engagement," which was signified by reports that indicated the child enjoyed school or was doing well in school. However, the children in the matched samples for the present research were ages 6 and younger, and positive school engagement was dropped from the final analysis.

In Fanshel and Shinn's study (as cited in Baker, Mehta & Chong, 2013) connection with family members has been shown to be beneficial to a child's sense of well-being. In the present study, extended family contact was indicated by regular, ongoing contact at the time of dismissal with parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents as well as step-siblings, step-uncles and aunts, and step-grandparents.

Ethical Considerations

The Washington State Institutional Review Board, Human Research Review Section, determined that the present research was exempt from oversight, so long as information was recorded in such a manner that subjects could not be identified, directly or through identifiers linked with the subjects, in accordance with 45 CFR 46, section 101(b)(4) and the Washington State Policy on Protection of Human Research Subjects, Chapter 11, section 4. To protect confidentiality, no names or any other personal identifiers were recorded at any point during the study. Cases were logged with the Superior Court case number, and assigned a random number which was used to link the case to the data. During the linkage the Superior Court case numbers were maintained in a location separate from the data, accessible only to this researcher. Once the linkage was complete, the original court case numbers were destroyed.

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4 – Results and Discussion

Data Analysis Strategy & Results

Each group (CASA and NO CASA) underwent Independent t-tests to compare the differences between the level of risk and age, and race/ethnicity was evaluated by Chi Square analysis to ensure that the CASA and NO CASA groups were equivalent to one another. To evaluate whether there were between-groups differences in terms of case severity, an overall severity scale, which indicated the level of relative risk to the child, was calculated for each case; the scores from the eleven severity measures were summed and averaged to give one total severity rating per group. The mean severity rating for the CASA group was 5.23, SD .87, and the mean severity rating for the No CASA group was 5.24, SD 1.01. An independent samples t-test resulted in no significant differences between the two groups: $t(45) = .05$, $p=.96$, two-tailed.

Using a Chi Square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) the variable race/ethnicity was examined to determine whether there was disproportionate representation between groups in terms of the race of the child. Using a cross tab with Chi Square, only 77% of the cells had expected frequencies of 5 or more. Therefore, race/ethnicity was collapsed to Non-Caucasian and Caucasian. No significant association was found between CASA assignment and race/ethnicity, χ^2 (1, n = 47) = .39, p = .53, phi = -.14.

To calculate whether there were between-groups differences in terms of age, an independent samples t-test was run and found no significant between-groups differences for children assigned a CASA (M = 1.55, SD = 1.87) and those who were not (M = 2.08, SD = 1.73), $t(45) = 1.02$, $p = .31$, two-tailed.

Ultimately, out of the original sample of 100 cases, two groups were identified that were matched in terms of case severity, race/ethnicity and age. Of those, 22 had CASA representation, and 25 did not.

Q1. Are cases assigned a CASA more likely to have shorter dependencies? The length of dependency was measured by the number of months the case was open from the time the petition was filed until the case was dismissed by court order. Partial months were rounded to the nearest whole number. The variable was then analyzed by an independent samples t-test: CASA (M = 24.09, SD = 7.36) No CASA (M = 21.24, SD = 7.43), t(45) = 1.32, p= .19, two-tailed. There was no significant difference between those cases assigned a CASA and those without, in terms of length of dependency.

Q2. Are cases assigned a CASA more likely to have fewer out-home-home placements? To examine whether the cases with CASA assignment had fewer out-of-home placements than those without a CASA, the number of placements was analyzed in an independent t-test: CASA (M = 1.82, SD = 1.01), No CASA (M = 1.12, SD = .33), t(45) = 3.28, p=.002, two-tailed. The results indicated there was a significant difference between groups in terms of number of out-of-home placements, with cases assigned a CASA experiencing significantly more out-of-home placements.

Q3. Are cases assigned a CASA more likely to obtain more services for the child? To evaluate whether the cases with CASA involvement resulted in more services obtained for the child than those cases without CASA involvement, the number of services was analyzed in an independent samples t-test: CASA (M=.68, SD=.995) No CASA (M=.44, SD=.58), t(32.99) = -.99, p= .33, two-tailed. No significant difference was found between those cases assigned a CASA and those without, in terms of the number of services obtained for the child.

Q4. Are cases assigned a CASA more likely to have ongoing contact with family members at dismissal? To evaluate whether the cases with CASA involvement resulted in the children having more

contact with family members at case dismissal than those cases without CASA involvement, the two groups were analyzed in a Chi Square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) χ^2 (1, n=47) = .009, p = .93. No significant difference was found between those cases assigned a CASA, and those without, in terms of contact with family members upon dismissal.

Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to analyze methods of evaluating the influence of the CASA. The majority of research to date has utilized case outcomes to measure the value of CASA, without controlling for the greater level of risk inherent in most cases assigned a CASA. Only one study was located that controlled for this level of risk, Calkins and Millar (1999), and the present research replicated their methodology to determine if their results would be duplicated in Snohomish County.

Results showed that the relationship between the variables in Calkins and Millar's (1999) study and Snohomish County were not the same. As a matter of fact, the results for each variable deviated from the results in Calkins and Millar (1999); none of the results were duplicated.

Length of Dependency

Calkins and Millar (1999) found dependencies to be significantly shorter when a CASA was assigned, but the results of this research found no significant difference between the two groups. This finding was somewhat surprising, as CASA volunteers are trained on the deleterious effects of lengthy dependencies and the importance of attaining permanency as quickly as possible. Given that children who qualify for the protections of the Indian Child Welfare Act require active efforts on the part of the social worker, which can lead to lengthier dependencies, it may be that by collapsing the race/ethnicity categories of Native American and ICWA children into one, the results were impacted by the ICWA cases. It is also unclear whether Calkins and Millar's (1999) study included ICWA cases.

Number of Out-of-Home Placements

Whereas Calkins and Millar found significantly fewer out-of-home placements for children assigned a CASA, the present research found that children with CASA representation experienced significantly more out of home placements than those without a CASA. As with the other dependent variables, this result was surprising in that CASAs are trained on the importance of maintaining placement stability. Two possible scenarios may have created these results; it may be that the children were moved repeatedly before the CASA was assigned, or it may be the CASA's investigation of the child's situation indicated a move was necessary and that the benefit of the move outweighed the cost.

Number of Services Obtained for the Child

Calkins and Millar (1999) did not measure the number of services obtained for children with an assigned CASA, but given that their results showed CASA involvement had a favorable effect on their selected outcomes, the present research added services obtained for the children as a measure of effectiveness, with the expectation that CASA assignment would result in a favorable outcome. However, the present study's result indicated there was no significant difference between groups in terms of services obtained. This finding, like other results mentioned above, was surprising in that CASA volunteers in Snohomish County, Washington, are specifically trained to carefully observe the child for any special needs that might have been overlooked, and to recommend assessments and services that would support the child. It may be that since the ages of the children in the final sample were from newborn to age six, the majority of the services required were simply routine medical and dental. They had not yet entered school, when many of the effects of prenatal drug exposure become evident, nor had they yet developed behavioral difficulties so prevalent in older children in dependency. It may also be an issue of training; while available resources in an unstable economy frequently change, CASAs in Snohomish County may benefit from an increased emphasis on searching for resources in the community and how they can be accessed for the child.

Ongoing Family Contact

Similarly, while Calkins and Millar (1999) did not measure family contact upon dismissal of the dependency, this measure was added to the present study with the expectation that CASA assignment would positively influence familial contact. Again, contrary to expectations, no significant difference was found between the two groups. The present study did not delineate the various permanent outcomes of return home, adoption, or third-party custody, and considered "return home" to be ongoing contact with family, which may have influenced the results. In addition, this study only considered family contact at the time of dismissal; it may be that more research on the length and quality of ongoing family contact might be a more appropriate measure.

Limitations

This quasi-experimental design evaluated two groups, CASA and NO CASA. There is the risk that not all variables upon which the groups should have been matched were identified. Therefore, it is possible that the two groups were not equal in all ways but CASA assignment, and there were factors not accounted for that influenced the results. Case outcomes are influenced by many factors; the length of dependency may be the result of hearings or trials being continued for reasons beyond the CASA's control, and the number of out-of-home placements could be the result of foster families choosing to resign from foster care, or children being moved due to their own behaviors.

In addition, the present research compared two small groups; 22 cases with a CASA assigned, and 25 cases without a CASA, for a total of 47 cases. Calkins and Millar (1999) studied 189 cases; 68 with a CASA assigned and 121 without a CASA. As with many small studies, it may be that the present research sample was not large enough to detect an effect, especially in regard to length of dependency, number of services obtained for the child, and contact with family members upon dismissal.

Threats to Validity

Perhaps the greatest threat to validity in the present study is conceptualization in that case outcomes do not adequately measure the highly nuanced value a CASA adds to a dependency case.

Given the small sample size of the present study, unrepresentativeness may threaten external validity. This could be overcome by repeating the experiment several times with different samples, in different locations, to see if the results could be duplicated. Furthermore, matching the groups may have eliminated specific selection effects, such as the difference in the level of relative risk between the groups, but the possibility of unmatched differences remains, which could threaten internal validity. The differences, or lack thereof, between the two groups may have been caused by some factor other than CASA assignment.

Suggestions for future research

New approaches need to be developed to capture the essence of the CASA contribution. Rather than using narrowly defined case outcomes as measures of effectiveness, an improved study might begin with a case study analysis of what CASAs have been able to accomplish to improve children's situations, as well as a quantitative analysis of how well they fulfill their required duties under RCW 13.34.105 in Washington, or the relevant statutes in other states. Additionally, a study evaluating the direct benefits of CASA appointment experienced by the child in terms of emotional support or providing the child a voice in court may provide further insight into the value of the CASA. Any studies comparing cases with CASAs to cases without CASAs should make efforts to match the groups in terms of case severity, race/ethnicity and age in order to avoid unwanted selection effects.

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

Overall, results revealed that even after matching the CASA/No CASA groups, the present research was unable to replicate the findings of Calkins and Millar (1999) in Snohomish County, confirming that these measures of effectiveness may not properly assess the value of CASA involvement. Closer examination of Calkins and Millar (1999) revealed conceptual errors in that effectiveness was quantified, as it is in the majority of CASA studies to date, by narrowly defined outcomes, such as fewer placements, achieving permanency, and less overall time in dependency. This conceptualization does not effectively capture the highly nuanced influence of the CASA on an active child welfare case, or the personal benefit experienced by the child. Widespread anecdotal evidence indicates CASAs are effective at representing the best interest of the child, by such activities as keeping the judge informed of the child's situation, by advocated for case aide hours for a developmentally disabled child, by making recommendations in the child's best interest when their attorneys were restricted to advocating for the child's wishes. This list is by no means exhaustive, leading this researcher to conclude that traditional measures of effectiveness are too narrowly defined and miss the subtlety of the CASA's contribution to the child's well-being. We need more research to find more appropriate measures of the subjective interactions between the CASA and the children.

Research is used to inform policy at the local, state, and national level. Relying on studies that do not capture the essence of the CASA's impact may result in policies that do not maximize public benefit. Other methods need to be explored to measure the influence of the CASA to accurately inform policy makers of the effects of the CASA program.

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