

Utilization-Focused Workforce Research

Lessons Learned

The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD) is working with [eight sites](#) and the Children's Bureau in a participatory fashion ([Fetterman, 2014](#)) to implement utilization-focused ([Alkin & Vo, 2017](#); [Patton, 2008](#)) site-specific and cross-site evaluation strategies. The goal of this research is to build knowledge of interventions to improve child welfare workforce retention, and ultimately outcomes for children and families. A complex systems approach ([Westhorp, 2012](#)) is being taken to identify how factors such as organizational structures and culture, staff workload, supervision, and caseworker values influence outcomes, including safety and permanency of children.

Effectively and efficiently collecting and analyzing necessary data and communicating the findings of such workforce research to child welfare agency directors, researchers, implementation team members, and funders is essential for research utilization. Findings need to be explained within the context of complex real-world conditions. Well-designed measurement, implementation, analysis and dissemination strategies are the platform for overcoming these challenges. The QIC-WD learned many lessons while conducting utilization-focused workforce research across eight diverse public child welfare agencies. In this brief we detail how we are chronicling natural variation (e.g., stay at home orders, hiring freezes, political will, and leadership changes), synthesizing existing data, conducting process evaluation (e.g., identifying implementation drivers), visualizing data to meet diverse stakeholder information needs, and building systems that are both flexible and sustainable.

Provide a framework for the data puzzle

Complex multisite workforce research requires the collection and synthesis of data from many disparate sources. Sources include existing data (e.g., child welfare services or human resources) and primary data (e.g., survey or interview). To bring these sources together in a reliable and efficient way, the QIC-WD developed a framework to bring these puzzle pieces together reliably and efficiently.



The QIC-WD framework for solving the workforce data puzzle included [“shells” for existing data](#), [data extract, transform, and load \(ETL\) tools](#), and [visualization of data](#) tracking. Administrative (e.g., child welfare services or human resources) data shells specify the dimensions, elements, and values that human service agencies would ideally track and use for workforce analysis (see QIC-WD Data Tracker, below). These data shells allow the QIC-WD work with agencies to identify available data by supporting common understanding of data resources among various agency stakeholders (e.g., leaders, managers, human resource and data analysis specialists). The QIC-

WD utilizes ETL tools to efficiently track administrative and primary data quality and availability within and across study sites.

ETL tools help the QIC-WD to efficiently verify receipt of data relative to the administrative data shells developed with each study site, and verify primary data collection (e.g., surveys). ETL tools provide efficiency and quality assurance by allowing data preparation analysts to develop data development processes prior to receipt of data, and then to quickly adapt data processing to within site idiosyncrasies and cross site patterns identified once data is received. Such data preparation includes verification data validity (e.g., Are survey measures capturing the factors intended? Does administrative data represent the elements intended?) and reliability (e.g., Are survey measures consistently computing factors within and across sites or individuals? Does administrative data capture elements consistently across time?). Efficient data preparation ultimately facilitates quality data in the hands of analysts in a timely manner, in part by allowing for tracking of data validation and quality so that both QIC-WD team members and our stakeholders can identify and work through data issues effectively.

Effective visualization of administrative and primary data provides a platform for early identification of issues (e.g., unavailable, unreliable, or invalid data) and opportunities (e.g., unexpectedly available or useful data elements). QIC-WD Data Trackers (see example below), provide evaluators a way to stay updated on available administrative data elements, and response rates for primary data collection, so they can work with study site stakeholders to improve the amount and quality of available data, and adapt analysis plans to the realities of available data.

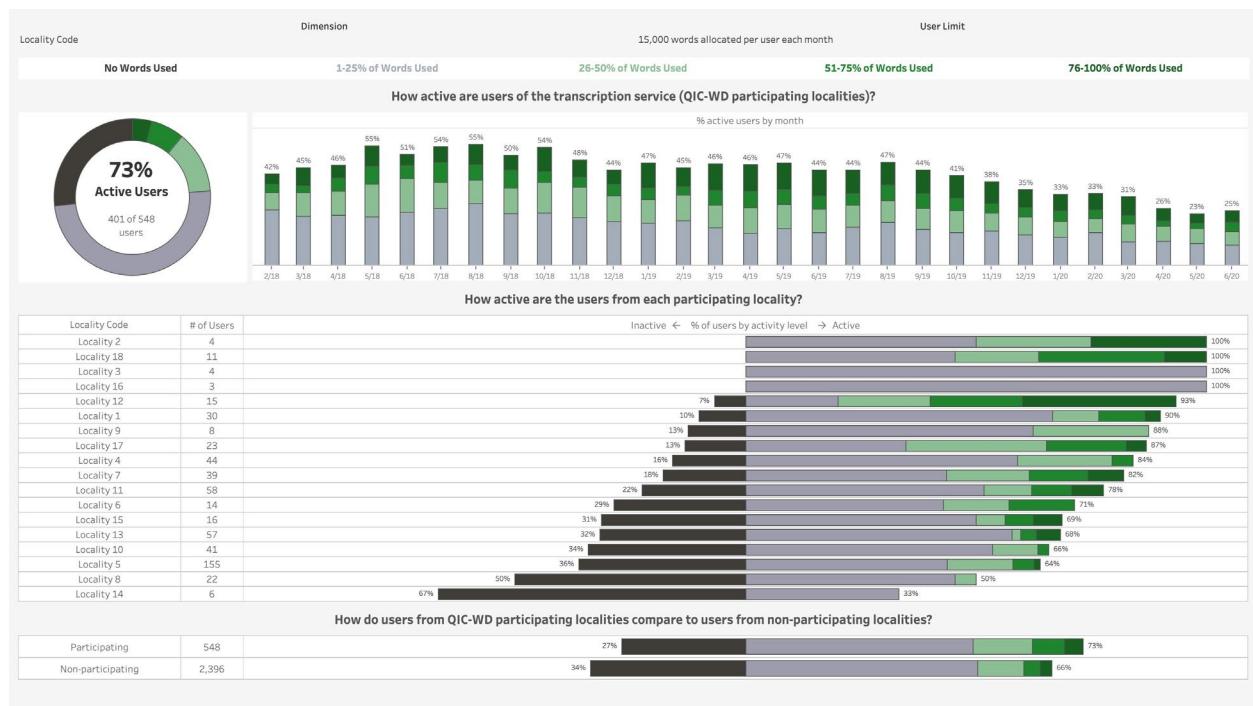
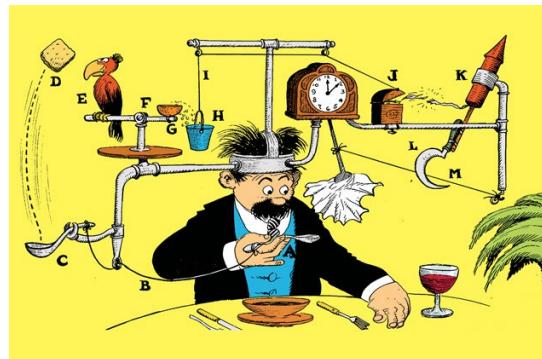
QIC-WD Data Tracker

Element level

Data Type	Unit of Analysis	Data Element	Elements Available		Select Level
			Site 1	Site 2	
Case Assignment Data	Supervisor – Case/Stage	DATA SUBMISSION DATE	●	●	Data Type All
		QIC-WD SITE FROM WHICH DATA WERE SUBMITTED	●	●	
		REPORT PERIOD END DATE	●	●	
		REPORT PERIOD START DATE	●	●	
	Worker – Case/Stage	ASSIGNMENT END DATE	●	●	
		ASSIGNMENT START DATE	●	●	
		CASE/STAGE ID (OR OTHER CASE LEVEL IDENTIFI..)	●	●	
		SUPERVISOR UNIT ID	●	●	
	Worker – Case/Stage	ASSIGNMENT END DATE	●	●	
		ASSIGNMENT START DATE	●	●	
		CASE/STAGE ID (OR OTHER CASE LEVEL IDENTIFI..)	●	●	
		WORKER ID	●	●	
		WORKER ROLE ON CASE	●	●	
Child Welfare Data	Caregiver	CAREGIVER DOB	●	●	Unit of Analysis All
		CAREGIVER ETHNICITY	●	●	
		CAREGIVER ID	●	●	
		CAREGIVER SEX	●	●	
		RACE OF CAREGIVER	●	●	
	Caregiver Response Event	CAREGIVER AGE	●	●	
		CAREGIVER HAS/HAVE ALCOHOL ABUSE PROBLEM	●	●	
		CAREGIVER HAS/HAVE DRUG ABUSE PROBLEM	●	●	
		CAREGIVER ID	●	●	

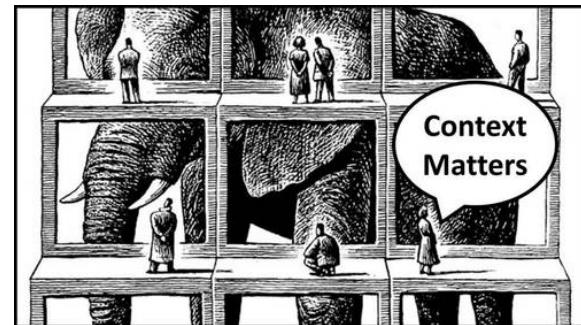
Learn from natural variation

Any intervention in an applied context will not be implemented with complete fidelity. Rather than trying to “control” every variable in applied context, which seems all the more unreasonable in a post COVID-19 world, the QIC-WD is robustly measuring workforce intervention implementation so as to: (1) guide development, (2) reveal where implementation has gone awry, (3) support identification of advantageous intervention innovations or adaptations, and (4) provide context for analysis and interpretation of outcomes. Where variations exist due to local circumstances, such as the pivot to remote work due to COVID-19, or differences in the use of transcription services among child welfare workers in different localities (see data visualization below), careful documentation of the implementation process can extend our understanding of what elements are key to achieving desired outcomes and how various adaptations affect them. For example, time studies in one of our sites confirmed that caseworkers involved in a job redesign to strengthen the child welfare workforce were able to continue teaming despite working remotely as a result of the pandemic. In these ways the QIC-WD is able to leverage real-world workforce environments to identify what works, for whom, and when.



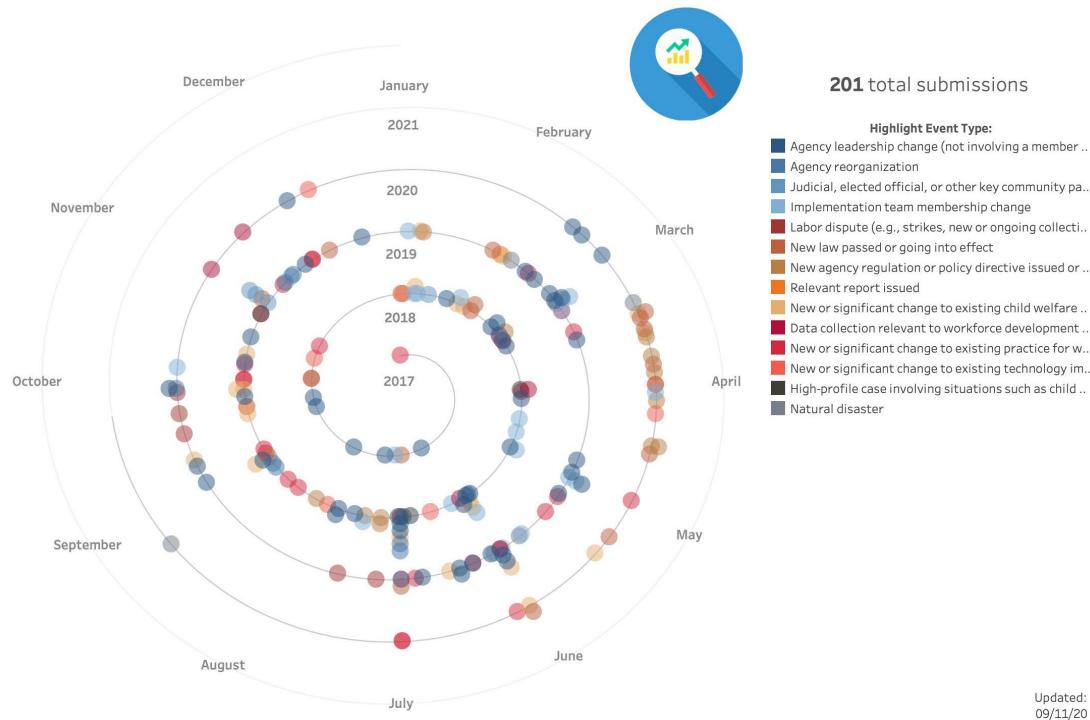
Context matters

Part of the natural variation that occurs in study or intervention implementation is due to the context in which it occurs. As such, documenting the context of applied research is key for project implementation risk management (e.g., threats to study validity due to factors like COVID-19), measurement, analysis, and dissemination. The context in which child welfare agencies operate is important for understanding workforce development and the types of interventions the QIC-WD is investigating. Issues such as politics (e.g., leadership changes), law and policy (e.g., changes in agency mandates, guidelines, or practices), economics (e.g., income distribution and unemployment), health (e.g., COVID-19), social changes (e.g., social justice demonstrations), and others may all bear on how and to what extent workforce interventions are effective, and how evidence of their effectiveness is analyzed, interpreted, and disseminated. To monitor and document such dynamic changes to the study environment, the QIC-WD implemented “site chronicles,” a survey/diary tool to capture the date, character, and magnitude of events of significance to the workforce. Child welfare agency team members routinely use the site chronicle to report the details of factors in the local environment, such as a change in leadership or practice, that may impact the workforce and hence our research. This data can then be analyzed within and across study sites to supplement analysis, interpretation and dissemination (see data visualization below).



Chronicle: Timeline

 **QIC-WD** QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER
FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
 Children's
Bureau



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For more information about the QIC-WD, visit qic-wd.org or contact: Michelle Graef, Project Director, at mgraef1@unl.edu.

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