Transforming Ministry of Children and Family Development's Approach to Service Evaluation: A Jurisdictional Scan

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Abstract

This jurisdictional scan was done on the province of Alberta and their usage of their outcomes-based service delivery (OBSD) framework. The methodology employed for this jurisdictional scan was to assess the information presented within various forms of literature that highlighted OBSD's mobilization within Alberta. The literature gathered for this jurisdictional scan includes grey research, government publications, external documents developed by Children's Services and not-for-profit based reports. No particular types of literature, documents and/or findings were intentionally excluded. Additionally, no documents that solely discussed positive or constructive aspects of OBSD were examined. Rather, any and all literature that provided clear and encompassing information as to how OBSD has fared in Alberta was included. All information gathered within this jurisdictional scan has been done in order to better determine the following enquiries: 1) What theoretical constructs underpin OBSD's formulation and implementation 2) Why OBSD was implemented and how does it operate in addressing critical gaps within Children's Services strategic goals 3) How OBSD meets the needs of diverse sub-populations within child welfare, as well as dismantle the ongoing impacts of colonization amongst Indigenous Peoples if at all 4) What discrepancies, concerns or challenges exist with either the OBSD model itself and/or its process of integration within Children's Services and 5) How has OBSD evolved into Collaborative Service Delivery (CSD) since its initial conception. With these smaller directives outlined, the overarching goals of this jurisdictional scan are two-fold. The first goal was to deepen the themes and findings first discovered within the literature review, and the second goal was to present newfound information that is relative to OBSD's performance and current status within Alberta. Together, these outputs would help provide the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) a clearer understanding on OBSD within the province of Alberta.

Keywords: outcomes-based evaluation; evaluation frameworks; children's services; jurisdictional scan

The conclusions, interpretations and views expressed in these articles belong to the author(s) as individuals and may not represent the ultimate position of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

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The National Child Welfare Outcomes Matrix Re-Explored

As identified within the literature review, outcomes-based service delivery (OBSD) is based on the National Child Welfare Outcomes Indicator Matrix (NOM) (Matthias et al., 2011). While NOM was created to help establish a nation-wide evaluative framework that child welfare ministries could adapt and implement, part of the intention of the model was that it would generate greater results relating to program evaluation (Trocme et al., 2009). In this sense, NOM is not a linear or one-dimensional framework. Rather, NOM is an incredibly intricate and multi-faceted methodology that seeks to carefully balance the risk of harm to a child with what a child needs to establish safety and stability through both familial and communal supports (Trocme et al., 2009). Conducive to balancing such complex and opposing ideals, NOM was based on four key domains and ten indicators (Trocme et al., 2009) (see table 1 directly below).

Table 1.

Domains	Family and Community Support	Permanence	Well-Being	Safety
Indicators	Family moves, parenting and ethno-cultural placement matchmaking (three total)	Out-of-home placement, permanency status and moves in care (three total)	School performance and child behaviour (two total)	Recurrence of maltreatment and serious injuries and death (two total)

Although there is a lack of information as to how these categories and indicators were conceptualized and selected for integration within NOM, the aforementioned elements were intentionally chosen for their capacity to create easily tracked, anonymized and accessible data (Trocme et al., 2009). Moreover, each of the categories and indicators do not exist within silos of one another, as they are meant to work as an interconnected web highlighting the nuanced intricacies that exist within child protection (Trocme et al., 2009). These findings only further entrench what was originally conceived within the literature review, which is that Alberta has heavily utilized NOM to generate OBSD, considering the four domains are taken from NOM and put directly into OBSD (Trocme et al., 2009). Having said this, based on the literature gathered within this jurisdictional scan, it remains unclear what methodological processes Alberta used in adapting NOM in order to effectively establish OBSD. Although this does not negate the pragmatism of basing OBSD on NOM itself, what critical processes Alberta employed in localizing such a broad theoretical construct is important, as this deepens the findings presented within the literature regarding the relevance of outcomes and indicators created.

Subsequently, current literature also remains unclear as to whether OBSD adapted the ten key indicators within NOM's four domains of child development. This is crucial to take into account, as the indicators established within NOM were again done so in an effort to institute consistent and non-identifying data that accurately captures the delicate balance that exists between child protection and child development (Trocme et al., 2009). As such, one could speculate that separating the domains from their indicators, or creating an entirely new set of indicators within the same domains may result in a loss of quality data compiled, or the incorrect data being collected and disseminated due to incongruency between the two groupings. Furthermore, it is critical to note the several limitations present with the NOM model as well. Despite the clear and integral role NOM has played in formulating OBSD, NOM itself appears to be scarce within existing literature, with little-to-no additional publications highlighting it's continued use within Canada's child welfare jurisdictions.

Likewise, with the most recent publication discussing NOM dating back to 2009, this brings into question how the methodological framework has been adapted to accommodate to emerging and pre-existing trends and research within the child welfare sector. As what has been conceptually understood as good practice within child welfare is constantly evolving, gaining additional clarity as to how NOM has been modernized in order to effectively meet novel challenges can provide key insights as to how the model continues to aggregate vital data. This inherent shift in understanding would subsequently impact how data is

tracked relative to a child, youth and/or family's success and well-being, thus highlighting the need for additional literature as to how NOM has been modified as a methodology since it's conception. Finally, and as discussed within the literature review, it is vital to note that NOM is, in and of itself, a top-down and systemic lens to viewing child and family development. While this presents its own unique set of benefits, neglecting to incorporate a "bottom-up" lens can hinder advancements to understanding child and family development. For example, viewing child and family development from an institutional approach could lead to a schism in understanding what service users within child welfare actually need comparative to what has been delegated to them. In order to maintain relevance and applicability, NOM, and subsequently OBSD, would need to consider the subtle and abrasive variations that exist across all forms of child and family development so these models can effectively and accurately capture any and all data relevant to each domain and indicator.

Benefits, Strategic Implementation of Outcomes-Based Service Delivery and Additional Frameworks

Now that a foundational understanding of NOM has been re-established and explored, it is necessary to examine the identified reasons as to why Alberta had developed its OBSD framework, as well as what advantages have been documented thus far. Although it remains unclear as to when exactly this shift towards OBSD began within Alberta, the process itself can essentially be broken down into three parts. 1) The theoretical frameworks preceding and underlying OBSD 2) the legislation and policies driving meaningful practice and 3) the tools needed to carry out OBSD (Government of Alberta, 2014). Beginning with the first stage, the earliest theoretical driver behind the implementation of OBSD, and subsequently the adoption of NOM within Alberta can be identified as the Alberta Response Model (ARM). Implemented in 2001, ARM sought to improve clients' experiences within Children's Services while simultaneously addressing mounting caseloads and financial costs for the ministry (Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel, 2010). Moreover, as there are a number of tenets that ARM sought to mandate within the operations of

Children's Service, the most relevant to OBSD's purpose and function would be that of ARM's goal to better understand the outcomes of children in care, how the ministry collects data and how it evaluates success (Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel, 2010).

In accordance with ARM's objectives, Children's Services recognized not only the importance of outcomes relative to the success of children, youth and families, but also in adjusting those same outcomes as a result of insights gained from evaluative measures (Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel, 2010). With ARM's implementation in 2001, the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (CYFEA) was introduced in 2004 in a governmental effort to align all of Children's Services under ARM through legislation (Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel, 2010). With the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (CYFEA) serving as the judicial backdrop to bring forth the visions and ideals ARM sought to instill, Alberta introduced the Casework Practice Model (CWPM) in 2007 an effort to better support vulnerable children, youth and families (Government of Alberta, 2014). Much like it's preceding entities, the CWPM was implemented for a myriad of reasons, including establishing more cohesive practice and unification between practitioners and families, an increased focus on multi-disciplinary work and most notably, introducing more outcomes that can be accurately quantified (Dagneau et al., 2014). Furthermore, the CWPM acted as the practice framework to embed and ground the principles of collaboration, assessment and engagement that were touted by the CYFEA as being vital to the success and safety of vulnerable children, youth and families (Dagneau et al., 2014).

With this information in-mind, OBSD appears to have been an inevitable progression for Children's Services, as the ARM, CYFEA and CWPM all collectively focused on the importance of implementing and establishing measurable outcomes of children, youth and families. However, the literature within this jurisdictional scan does not provide any further information regarding how precisely the ARM, CYFEA and CWPM influenced the shaping and implementation of OBSD. This is essential to note, as the lack of clear

understanding as to how the ARM, CYFEA and CWPM works in conjunction with OBSD brings into question OBSD's overall practicality as an independent model, as well as its capacity to accurately measure outcomes and indicators. Notwithstanding this gap in literature, the development of OBSD specifically within Alberta was shown to have been primarily based on the strategic notion that establishing casework practice around outcomes and indicators would lead to a more unified work model, as well as better understanding how children, youth and families experience services (Dagneau, et al., 2014). With this overarching directive in mind, there are six key goals identified within the OBSD framework (Government of Alberta, 2014):

- "To **improve the effectiveness of services** that children and families receive and experience as they move in and out of the child intervention system"
- "To provide agencies, communities and caregivers with **more flexibility to respond** to the unique needs of children and families while focusing on intended outcomes and better supporting innovative practice"
- "To use **outcomes data to align the work** between the formal child intervention system, community agencies and caregivers"
- "To develop a **community quality improvement** and **learning process** that will continue to guide joint practice and identify opportunities for improvement using evidence to guide practice"
- "To develop a service delivery system that has the capacity to **measure and focus on achievement** of agreed upon client centered outcomes as the central driver for both casework and resource allocation decisions"
- "To establish **joint accountability** for outcomes for vulnerable children, youth and families (We all want the same thing)"

Given that these are considerable goals to operationalize in the movement towards creating meaningful evaluation and casework practice, each resolution is meant to reflect the pillars collaboration, assessment and engagement that were first identified in the CWPM and CYFEA (Government of Alberta, 2014). Moreover, these directives are not the actual

outcomes and indicators established by the OBSD model for vulnerable children, youth and families, but rather what OBSD was meant to exemplify. Whilst understandable, based on the existing lack of information regarding how Children's Services adapted NOM, as well as how the ARM, CYFEA and CWPM impacted OBSD's development, this has led to a significant gap within the research as to how exactly the ministry conceptualized its current set of indicators and outcomes. As highlighted within the literature review, this gap is important as each outcome and indicator would need to purposefully measure the success of services user, as well as echo the structural targets of Children's Services so that the data composed is transparent, valid and reliable.

Nevertheless, there are benefits to OBSD's implementation within Alberta. Other initial results from OBSD have also indicated that file closures are happening at a quickened pace, children are receiving services for a briefer period of time, more children are being able to return home to their families and perhaps most significantly, other areas of Children's Services are impacted by the change in practice (Dagneau et al., 2014). Children's Services has also highlighted that OBSD has led to more transparent casework practice, clearer expectations around roles and duties of caseworkers, and external entities being better incorporated into case planning efforts (Government of Alberta, 2014). Additionally, the OBSD model takes a notable relational approach within Children's Services inter-organizational and front-line efforts, as the framework purports that all practice-related engagement is done through the lens of seeking out the potential of service users, rather than enforcing their deficits (O'Brien, 2015). This is significant, as Children's Services has remarked previously that highlighting and capitalizing on the strengths of children, youth and families was seen as vital to OBSD and its success (Dagneau et al., 2014).

As identified within the literature review, though these benefits have been outlined as by-products of OBSD, the shift in examining what happens to a client does take away importance and focus on how exactly the work is accomplished (Dagneau et al., 2014). This aside, it is imperative to acknowledge that inherent to

the perceived success of OBSD is the element of collaboration, whether this is done through a multi-disciplinary framework, or through direct practice with children, youth and families. Success for vulnerable children, youth and families is driven by meaningful engagements in which Children's Services, and those employed within it, make a conscious effort to establish purposeful and ongoing collaboration with their clients (O'Brien, 2015). Without this, it could easily be contended that the goals of OBSD, and even OBSD itself, become mute in the endeavor of seeking high quality evaluation-based data, as well as in the mission of creating safety and stability for those most vulnerable within our society. Hence, the previously identified conflictions further highlight the need for additional research to clarify not only how Children's Services established its current outcomes, but also how OBSD works with other methodologies in order to support a child, youth and/or family's determined set of indicators. Finally, it is also critical to consider that Children's Services has not released information regarding how exactly they formulated their conclusions regarding OBSD's effectiveness. The lack of transparency regarding data collection methods Children's Services utilized to comprise these initial results does bring into question the overall validity and reliability of the findings that were comprised for this jurisdictional scan, as well as OBSD's effectiveness as a model.

Meeting The Needs of Diverse Populations Revisited

As first identified within the literature review, Children's Services faces challenges in its overrepresentation of Indigenous children, youth and families. The ministry itself recognizes that this is a pertinent concern, as Children's Services has acknowledged and embedded collaboration with Indigenous communities into its organizational directives (Children's Services, 2021). In an effort to address this, practitioners within Alberta envisioned OBSD as being a potential means to ensuring that there are better and more culturally responsive resources and practices in place within Children's Services (Dagneau et al., 2014). However, this is not to say that Children's Services does not incorporate any

Indigenous-specific frameworks into their agency. To elaborate, Alberta currently utilizes certain Indigenous-specific practices within Children's Services, such as the Indigenous Cultural Understanding Framework and the Indigenous Speaker Series (Children's Services, 2021). Both of the aforementioned frameworks play an important part of Children's Services mission to reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in care, as each initiative aims to increase cultural competency amongst staff, as well as cross-cultural learning (Children's Services, 2021).

Likewise, there is a specific Indigenous relations branch known as the Indigenous Partnership and Strategic Services Division within Children's Services (Children's Services, 2021). Although it remains unclear as to how this branch was designed, the Indigenous Partnership and Strategic Services Division is meant to regulate and oversee how Children's Services navigates relations with local Indigenous communities (Children's Services, 2021). This includes how the ministry provides holistic practices and services, strengthening relations to external stakeholders and consulting on policy-related initiatives (Children's Services, 2021). In a sense, OBSD appears then to be supplementing Children's Services operations relating to cultural competency and Indigenous relations, as the aforementioned branch appears to play a large and critically leading role within this area. Moreover, the literature gathered within this jurisdictional scan does not highlight how any of the aforementioned Indigenous-specific frameworks and division influenced the formulation of OBSD, if at all.

This is critical, as the indicators and outcomes purported by OBSD could potentially conflict with the work done by the Indigenous Partnership and Strategic Services Division, the Indigenous Cultural Understanding Framework and the Indigenous Speaker Series. Therefore, it remains unclear as to how OBSD has integrated traditional Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and how effectively they engaged in these processes. The lack of clarity on how OBSD and the Indigenous Partnership and Strategic Services Division within Children's Services work in tandem with one another, as well as the ambiguity relating to the cultural relevance of the outcomes and indicators

within OBSD could result in a fractured path as to how Children's Services achieves its directives within this area.

Finally, as this particular point has been discussed briefly within the literature review already, there is also a lack of data regarding how Alberta has created it's OBSD framework to be reflective of the needs of other sub-populations within Children's Services. This includes those of racialized descent, the differently abled, any person who identifies with the LGBTQ2S+ community, and those of immigrant, refugee and/or newcomer status, to list a few. Unlike Children's Services Indigenous Partnership and Strategic Services Division, current literature does specify whether the ministry has a comparable branch for highlighting and integrating specialized practice amongst these aforementioned sub-populations. This is notable, as it brings into question what internal or external consultation methods Children's Services utilized in their formulation of OBSD to ensure that it does not contribute to the further oppression these children, youth and families may already experience given their intersectional identities. Moreover, the lack of properly formed indicators and outcomes capable of gauging each individual's circumstances and unique identities could result in skewed data regarding how the ministry evaluates the effectiveness of their own services in order to better serve these niche populations. Although this would be difficult to implement, it is necessary for the safety, well-being and success of vulnerable children, youth and families.

The Evolution of Outcomes-Based Service Delivery into Collaborative Service Delivery

As a significant portion of this jurisdictional scan has been placed on the development and implementation of OBSD within Alberta by reviewing the findings first highlighted within the literature review, it is important to acknowledge how Children's Services has fared in its continued use of the model. Although the Government of Alberta's Website lists OBSD as being pivotal to their work within Children's Services, the website does not list any other updated information and data regarding the model itself, aside from the framework's tenets and practical implications (Government of Alberta,

2023). Likewise, it is also important to note that OBSD has undergone an evolution since its introduction. At the time of writing this jurisdictional scan (February 2023), OBSD is now known as Collaborative Service Delivery (CSD) (Barraclough, 2019). This shift occurred in 2016, as the provincial government began to focus more heavily on joint practice between the government and non-government entities, developing increased findings on the quality of their services provided and creating more malleable funding that can be utilized within or across Children's Services (Barraclough, 2019).

Comparative to its predecessor, CSD is more explicit in its use of various practice methodologies and frameworks within child protection, how it intends to better support vulnerable children, youth and families and how it aims to establish and reinforce unity and cohesion within Children's Services (Edmonton Region Child and Family Services, 2016). However, much like OBSD, there continues to be a lack of accessible and comprehensive research regarding CSD's formation and effectiveness within the province. While there is some clarification as to what has changed in OBSD's transition to CSD, there still appears to be some ambiguities regarding the granular details as to what specifically has been altered and what has been kept the same in this changeover. This is imperative, as understanding what Alberta has chosen to preserve with OBSD, and what they have discarded or adapted in the transition to CSD brings into question the effectiveness of OBSD as an independent framework. Without a clearer understanding of OBSD's transformation, additional data produced by Alberta regarding the benefits and effectiveness of CSD may not have retro-active carry over or application to OBSD. This would also mean that there is a lack of clarity as to how CSD is currently situated within Children's Services.

Limitations & Scope

Given the information presented within this jurisdictional scan, there are a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration when reading through this independent report. Furthermore, and as discussed at length previously, the intent or scope of this jurisdictional scan is that it is meant to provide a

brief overview of OBSD within the province of Alberta based on open-access literature and data. This jurisdictional scan also does not provide a complete and thorough analysis of the model, its intended use and the benefits that have been outlined. Additionally, this jurisdictional scan is not intended to provide clear direction, next steps and recourse regarding MCFD's decision to adopt an outcomes-based evaluative framework (OBEF) regarding child, youth and family intervention. As adopting a new form of service framework evaluation is a significant decision, more research should be gathered and assessed as needed in order to address the current gaps in literature and findings as it relates to OBSD. Several of those gaps are identified here within this jurisdictional scan, they are as follows:

1) The Data is Privatized. This jurisdictional scan is comprised largely of open-access literature, such as gray research, government reports and independent writings developed by third-party professionals and/or organizations. As such, there is still potentially a considerable amount of research and literature that has been developed on OBSD within Alberta that has not been made public. This is crucial to note, as the privatized data or literature may yield significant findings further detailing not only the pragmatism latent to OBSD, but also the challenges or barriers that impacted its implementation. The trials encountered through Alberta's implementation of OBSD in particular was not highlighted as heavily within this report, as such information was not openly available for review and inclusion. With only limited access to very particular data sources, this jurisdictional scan was in-turn only able to capture a brief and narrow glimpse of OBSD within Alberta.

2) The Data is Limited. In relation to the first limitation identified, not all of the open access data compiled for this jurisdictional scan is recent data, meaning that several of pieces of literature date as far back as the early 2010's. This is significant to take into consideration, as the access to current references does not provide a clear and empirical understanding of OBSD within Alberta. Moreover, information regarding Alberta's implementation of OBSD remains unclear. As nine regions from across all of Alberta adopted OBSD

from 2009 to 2013 (Dagneau et al., 2014), it is uncertain to what extent OBSD has been implemented within the province. Furthermore, and as this has been discussed several times already, there is also a lack of clarity regarding how exactly Children's Services developed its findings regarding OBSD, particularly in relation to the benefits that were identified. Without a greater understanding regarding the research processes Alberta used to gather its data regarding OBSD, this brings into question the reported benefits that were highlighted within this jurisdictional scan.

3) Outcomes-Based Service Delivery's Transition to Collaborative Service Delivery. The final limitation of this jurisdictional scan worth noting is the lack of information regarding OBSD's transition to CSD in 2016. As this transition is not the limitation per se, it is rather the lack of further expansion onto what exactly changed with OBSD to CSD that presents as being more cause for critical analyses. With the lack of information regarding both CSD's current state of operation and effectiveness within Alberta, as well as OBSD's transition to CSD, this brings into consideration how successful OBSD was in shifting Children's Services understanding of evaluation based on the usage of outcomes and indicators. In this regard, considerable attention would need to be paid to CSD and its relationship with OBSD, such as what changes were made in the transition between the two models and how CSD builds on the foundations established by OBSD, NOM, ARM, CYFEA and CWPM.

Key Findings and Conclusion

This jurisdictional scan, as well as the literature review in which it is based on, have reflected Alberta's usage of OBSD within the province. Although much of the information highlighted within this jurisdictional scan discussed at-length the theorized and potential gaps of OBSD, particular findings have also reflected OBSD's effectiveness in supporting vulnerable children, youth and families. The documented findings regarding OBSD's benefits and impacts in revolutionizing how the province conducts evaluation based on the usage of indicators and outcomes does reflect some sense of practicality, although there are important caveats to take into consideration. Having said this, there are

three overarching principles or concluding themes that have greatly impacted OBSD's implementation within Alberta.

Firstly, OBSD was not implemented in isolation. Several other frameworks were acting alongside OBSD, including NOM, the ARM, CYFEA and CWPM, to list a few. With these other legislations and theoretical methodologies working in tandem with OBSD, there is no gauge available to determine just how effective OBSD has been as an independent tool in evaluating the experiences of service users through the usage of indicators and outcomes. With this in mind, it is critical to note how OBSD would have been in its trajectory had these other frameworks not been operating in conjunction. Secondly, OBSD had a clear intention and purpose to its formulation and rollout. As reflected within the findings, Children's Services had a distinct objective outlined in their implementation of OBSD and as such, introduced a set of well-defined goals in order to achieve their directive of better evaluating the success of children, youth and families through outcomes and indicators.

The succinct and linear nature of OBSD enabled Children's Services to better address existing gaps that existed at the time, as well as establish a tangible projection for what the ministry wanted to achieve in its future endeavors, all while protecting and enhancing the well-being of vulnerable children, youth and families. In this sense, OBSD was implemented to not only address the deficits that plagued Children's Services at the time of its introduction, but also with the hopes that it would act as a conduit in leading the ministry to fulfilling its transformation in casework practice. Thirdly and finally, OBSD was not envisioned as the "best practice" approach to evaluation and engagement within Children's Services. With the evolution of OBSD into CSD, it appears that Children's Services continued to monitor, assess and re-evaluate the model's trajectory since its initial implementation. As OBSD was an entry point for Children's Services in their utilization of outcomes and indicators within evaluation and casework practice, there was a continued progression with regards to how the model was engaging vulnerable children, youth and families within Alberta.

With all these elements taken into consideration, OBSD appears to have been an essential step forward for the province out of a much larger and more intricate strategy in understanding how Children's Services can better support vulnerable children, youth and families. Nevertheless, it is essential to note the main gap highlighted within this jurisdictional scan is that there is a lack of empirical and open-access data on OBSD. This includes how OBSD was theoretically and practically devised, how it has been adapted to meet the needs of diverse sub-groups within child welfare and in what ways the model is actively addressing generations of colonial harm done to Indigenous populations within Alberta. This is not to say that OBSD currently does not address these apertures, or that it is incapable of doing so, but rather that existing research on the model does not elaborate on how these points of consideration were addressed in OBSD's conception and execution.

In sum, this jurisdictional scan has expanded on the findings first presented within the literature review that provides new insights as to how OBSD has fared within Alberta, as well as presented new information regarding the model's implementation that was not discussed previously. While the jurisdictional scan has revealed more regarding what has worked well for Alberta in their implementation of OBSD and how they have achieved this work, the gaps that have been highlighted still bring into question the minutiae's of the model and how precisely it was implemented. The initial conclusion drawn from the literature review was that should MCFD choose to adopt an outcomes based evaluative framework into their ministry, careful attention would need to be paid to how this is done, as this would ultimately be the determining factor in the new model's success and longevity. Given the information presented within this jurisdictional scan, that conclusion remains the same.

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