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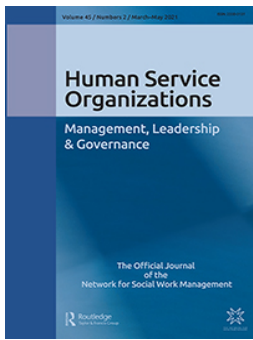
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How Do Leaders Enable and Support the Implementation of Evidence-based Programs and Evidence-informed Practice in Child Welfare? A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This review explores the findings from 12 articles that investigate how leaders in the child welfare sector support the implementation of evidence-based programs and evidence-informed practice. Systematic methods were employed for the searching, identification, and qualitative analysis of studies. The studies show leaders provide a vision for evidence-based approaches and cultivate organizational cultures for evidence and learning. Leaders support implementation through proactive planning and investment in supportive structures and processes, as well as develop capabilities for using evidence and maintaining relationships for implementation. Findings are discussed in relation to the role of leadership in bridging organizational and systemic contexts.

KEYWORDS

Leadership; management; child welfare; evidence-informed practice; evidence-based programs

Introduction

Poor well-being outcomes and safety risks have been identified for children and youth in out-of-home care across the western world (Department of Education, 2011; Huggins-Hoyt, Briggs, Mowbray, & Lloyd Allen, 2019; Leone & Weinberg, 2012; Lewis et al., 2019; Munro, 2011). Systemic transformation, based on evidence, has been identified as key to reducing the numbers of children entering child protection services and improving the safety and positive outcomes of children in out-of-home care (Commission for Children & Young People, 2019; Munro, 2011). Concurrently, “evidence” has become a catchphrase in human services (Shlonsky & Gibbs, 2004). Programs and practices based on evidence are increasingly considered promising and necessary approaches to transforming outcomes for clients and ways for child welfare organizations (CWOs) to endure unstable fiscal and policy settings (Carnochan, McBeath, & Austin, 2017; Department of Family and Community Services, 2016). Increasingly, leaders in the sector are seeking advice on accessing, developing, and implementing evidence-based programs (EBPs) and evidence-informed practices (EIPs).

The authors, an anthropologist and an executive leader, undertook this review to inform the embedding of evidence-based approaches (EBAs), both EBPs and EIPs, in the Australian CWO they work for. The aim of this systematic literature review (SLR) is to understand how leaders and managers can best enable and support EBAs to better deliver “what works” to improve outcomes for children and families. This SLR does not assess the effectiveness of a particular intervention or

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Practice points: Key roles for leaders to support implementation are proactive planning and investment in structures and processes for training, monitoring, and adapting. These require building and maintaining relationships that support the delivery of evidence-based approaches and developing capacities for utilizing evidence. Leaders enable the implementation of evidence-based programs and evidence-informed practices by being influential, championing evidence, and cultivating organizational cultures that value learning and critical thinking. The findings suggest an overarching role for evidence-based management and leadership in solving problems and seizing opportunities that arise in the overlap between systemic and organizational contexts, and encouraging grounded understandings of evidence in child welfare.

practice; rather, research on various EBAs is synthesized to explore leadership and management behaviors and approaches found to influence successful implementation.

Evidence-based approaches

While there are significant differences between EIPs¹ and EBPs,² they are often used to pursue overlapping organizational goals and have similar leadership requirements (Carnochan et al., 2017). EIPs involve dynamic clinical decision-making processes where well-researched interventions are integrated with clinical expertise, patient values, and the evaluation of solutions (Gray, Joy, Plath, & Webb, 2012; Plath, 2013; Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000; Social Work Policy Institute, 2008). In contrast, EBPs involve specific interventions that have robust evidence of success³ and prescribed implementation methods (Akin et al., 2014). While the EBP implementation literature often emphasizes the routine aspects of top-down, discrete manualized interventions, there are also adaptive processes involved in EBP implementation that are similar to those of EIPs (Carnochan et al., 2017).

There are complex factors involved between EBP adoption and sustainment, during which time practitioners need to become skilled, consistent, and committed to the use of the innovation (Klein & Sorra, 1996; Rogers, 2003; Weiner, 2020). Like EIPs, this requires the critical appraisal and systematic transferal and evaluation of evidence (Gray et al., 2012; Plath, 2013; Sackett et al., 2000). Both EIPs and EBPs involve long-term learning processes influenced by the interplay between the research evidence and implementation context (Barth, Kolivoski, Lindsey, Lee, & Collins, 2014; Gray et al., 2012; Haynes, Devereaux, & Guyatt, 2002; Moullin, Dickson, Stadnick, Rabin, & Aarons, 2019; Sackett et al., 2000). While there are differences between EBPs and EIPs, the similarities outlined above mean they require overlapping leadership supports (Gibbs, 2003, p. 6).

Implementation of evidence-based approaches and leadership

Leadership is understood within the human services literature as a multifaceted, dynamic process of influencing followers' attitudes toward work through characteristics and behaviors that motivate and cultivate shared values and norms (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass, 2008; Bass & Avolio, 1990; Moullin et al., 2019; Ostroff & Schulte, 2014). Leadership is an important driver of change and innovation both within the outer (systemic) and inner (organizational) contexts and is often associated with inspiring, top-level leadership (Aarons, Ehrhart, Farahnak, & Sklar, 2014; Barratt, 2003; Rocque, Welsh, Greenwood, & King, 2014). Transformational leadership involves inspiring and motivating others toward critical thinking and accepting different perspectives. It involves appreciating individual contributions and needs, and cultivating pride, respect, and collective values and purpose (Aarons et al., 2014; Bass & Avolio, 1990). Such proactive processes of empowering practitioners, colleagues, and clients have been found to be important in the social work profession (Finn, Torres, Ehrhart, Roesch, & Aarons, 2016; Mary, 2005; Rank & Hutchison, 2000; Vito, 2017).

In child welfare, leadership occurs from those in both formal and informal roles across the system, from driving decisions to adopt EBAs to managing, supervising, and implementing (Aarons, Ehrhart, & Farahnak, 2014; Bernotavicz, McDaniel, Brittain, & Dickinson, 2013; Moullin et al., 2019; Spillane, 2006). Research suggests that leadership from the top that is role modeled throughout the organization creates a culture and climate for adopting and implementing EBAs (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006; Barratt, 2003).

Understanding how leadership supports EBAs can help to develop leaders and managers to better support adoption, implementation, and sustainment. However, there is a significant gap in research on

¹Also known as evidence-based practices.

²Also called evidence-supported interventions and evidence-based models.

³Grounded in a hierarchy of evidence with randomized controlled trials (RCTs) considered the ultimate form of evidence (Barends & Rousseau, 2018).

leadership in child welfare, particularly in relation to EBAs (Reichenpfader, Carlford, & Nilsen, 2015; Sarros, Cooper, & Santora, 2011). The process of implementing EBAs is understood to be critical in determining the outcomes achieved for clients, as appropriate interventions can fail if implemented poorly (Handley, Gorukanti, & Cattamanchi, 2016; Moullin et al., 2020; Wolfenden, Albers, & Shlonsky, 2018). The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) maps successful EBA implementation to achieve socially significant outcomes, which involves: an effective research-based intervention tailored to client needs; implemented in a well-planned, purposeful, and adaptive way; and supported by an enabling environment and intentional learning process (Casey Family Programs & National Implementation Research Network [CFP & NIRN], 2017). While leadership is a component in a number of implementation frameworks, there is little empirical research that clarifies where, when, and how leadership works in the development and implementation of EBAs (see Aarons et al., 2016; Mildon, Dickinson, & Shlonsky, 2013). This paper aims to address this gap.

Research objectives

SLRs provide a method for thematically mapping a body of empirical research literature to confront applied problems (Crisp, 2015). The purpose of this SLR is to bring together findings from empirical research on how leaders support the adoption, implementation, and sustainment of EBAs in CWOs. All included studies have been evaluated for quality, and study results were synthesized and compared. The methods for study identification and in-depth analysis of the results follow.

Method

Search strategy

The following databases relevant to leadership and management were searched from February–July 2019: Emerald, Taylor and Francis, Wiley, EBSCO, ProQuest, Sage, British Library, Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science, APAFT (Australian Public Affairs Full Text), and Expanded Academic. The search strategy combined terms from the four columns of Table 1. The reference lists of relevant articles, as well as the Implementation Science Journal and What Works for Children’s Social Care Evidence Store, were also searched for relevant articles.

Study criteria

The studies reviewed had both quantitative and qualitative designs and ranged from observational to quasi-experimental. The inclusion criteria were limited to articles written between 1960⁴ and 2019 and published in peer-reviewed journals. Studies were restricted to English-speaking countries with broadly comparable socio-cultural backgrounds to Australia (i.e., New Zealand, Canada, the United

Table 1. Systematic review search terms.

Leaders/Managers	EBPs	Child Welfare	Implementation
lead*	"evidence-based"	"child* abuse"	"implementation"
manage*	evidence*	"child* neglect"	implement*
	"evidence-based programs"	"child welfare"	
		"child* protect* service*"	
		(youth AND mental health)	
		(child* AND mental health)	
		"youth justice"	
		"juvenile justice"	

⁴While reference to EBAs emerged in the literature around 2000, a much earlier date of 1960 was chosen as a cutoff to capture any earlier studies on leadership and evidence in child welfare.

Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA)). To be eligible for inclusion, a study had to involve organizations working in child welfare and the use of evidence. The study had to explicitly target leadership or management in the research questions or have them as a major finding.

Selection of studies

The searches returned 530 records; 247 duplicates were removed using EndNote online, leaving 283 records. A total of 204 records were removed based on title screening; 79 were screened on abstract, 61 were excluded, leaving 18 to be screened during the full-text review, of which 6 were excluded leaving 12 total included articles (see [Figure 1](#)).

A combination of critical appraisal tools was used to guide the screening of studies. Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) (2017) was used for the qualitative and quasi-experimental studies and Parris and Peachey (2013) for studies that involved mixed quantitative and qualitative methods. Empirical studies that were included in the full-text review were graded according to the research type – quantitative (Qant), qualitative (Qal), or mixed (Qant/Qal) – and research quality – high, medium, low. Studies were rated high-quality if they scored “yes” to seven and above out of the 10 JBI (2017) criteria and/or the 10 Parris and Peachey (2013) criteria. The studies that scored five or six were rated medium; anything below four was rated low and excluded. Of the 18 studies included in the full-text review, six were excluded: four on relevance (one not involving child welfare, one not involving EBAs, and two not having findings on leadership), and two studies were excluded for being of low quality. Of the remaining 12 studies included for analysis, eight were graded high-quality and four medium-quality (see [Table 2](#)). The quality ratings were used to check the research quality of the included studies and to balance findings in line with the quality of the studies. In addition, journal rankings were considered, but did not change the quality ratings of the studies. Findings were synthesized for their relevance to the research question on leadership support for EBAs, and relevant findings were extracted.

An inductive content thematic analysis was undertaken by the first researcher, where themes were derived from the key findings of the 12 studies. Study findings were combined and compared, and the connections between themes were explored. Consecutive steps of data analysis and conceptual development were undertaken with three coding strategies based on values, processes, and leadership behaviors; analytic memos were drafted on tensions and overlaps (Charmaz, 2005; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Key findings were discussed with and reviewed by the second author at several stages throughout this process. The NIRN implementation science framework (CFP & NIRN, 2017) was chosen to structure the analysis as it was developed for the application of a large and diverse continuum of child welfare EBP and EIP frameworks in a real-world context. The NIRN provides a simple structure to map both the complex cultural and procedural aspects of leadership and the concrete supportive behaviors raised in the included studies. Findings were divided into supporting implementation (how this is done in practice) and providing an enabling context (contexts in which interventions can be successfully implemented) (Casey Family Programs & National Implementation Research Network (CFP & NIRN), 2017, p. 12). Moullin et al.’s (2019) SLR of the application of the EPIS (exploration, preparation, implementation, sustainment) framework captures overlapping and iterative stages, adaptive processes, and individual, organizational, and systems levels of implementation similar to the NIRN framework. The role of leadership as a factor bridging the dynamics, complexity, and interplay between the organizational and systemic contexts, explored by Moullin et al. (2019), is drawn on in the discussion section of this paper.

Description of studies

Eleven of the studies are from the USA and one is from Australia. They all involve organizations or agencies that include a child welfare focus; the US studies are primarily multi-state and multi-organizational rollouts of EBPs, while the Australian study involves only one organization. Half of the studies (Aarons et al., 2014, 2016; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Willging, Green, Gunderson,

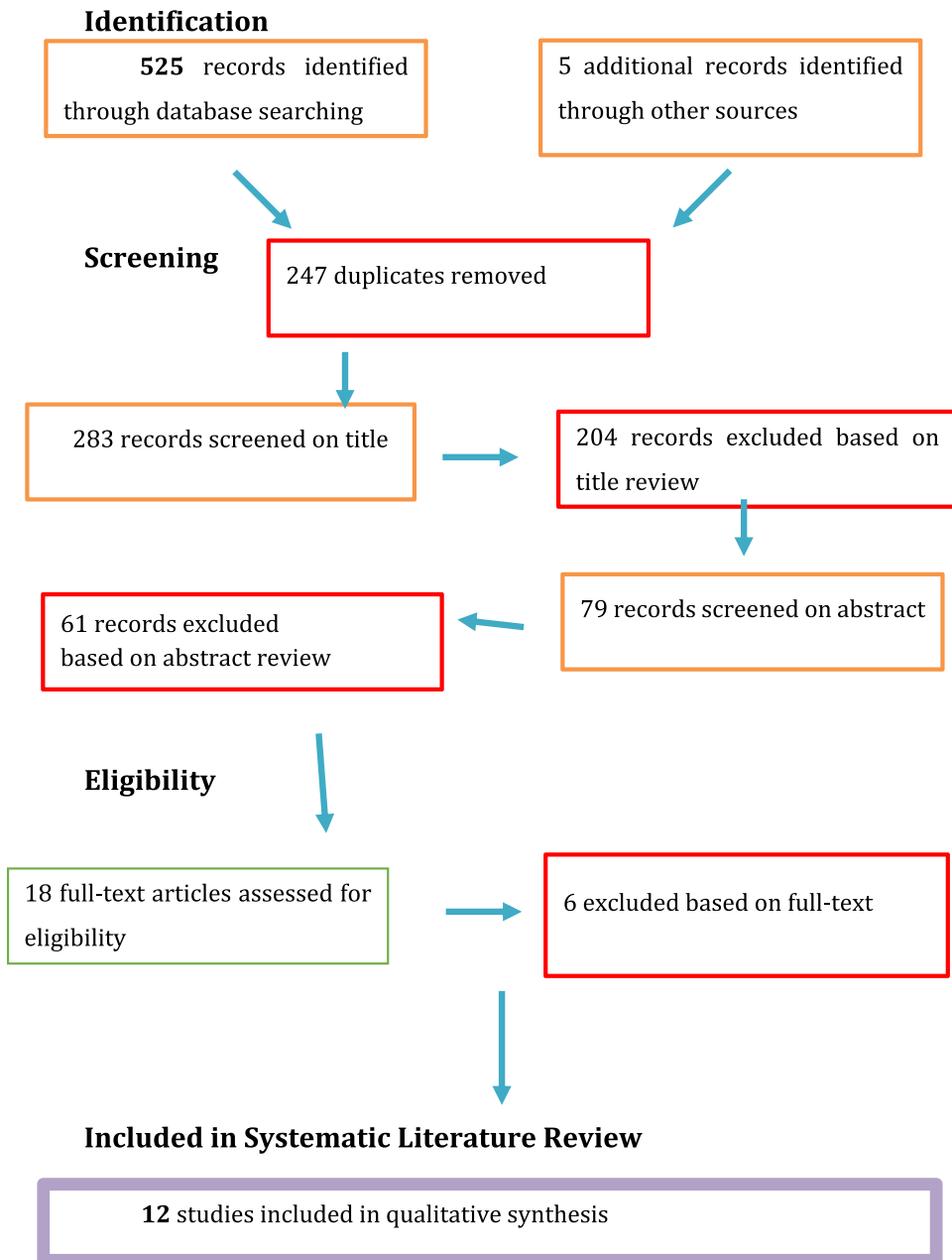


Figure 1. Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) study selection flow diagram.

Chaffin, & Aarons, 2015; Willging et al., 2018) are on the same longitudinal state-wide implementation, sustainment, and scale-up of the EBP SafeCare, designed for families involved in or at risk of child neglect and child protection involvement. However, each study has a different focus and uses different data. Table 3 provides more details of the included studies.

All studies conducted original data analysis on the perspectives and experiences of those working on EBAs to understand how leadership was part of the processes that shaped successful adoption, implementation, and/or sustainment. Six studies targeted participants only from the inner context,

Table 2. Quality rating criteria for studies.

JBI critical appraisal checklist for qualitative research	
1	Is there congruity between the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology?
2	Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives?
3	Is there congruity between the research methodology and the methods used to collect data?
4	Is there congruity between the research methodology and the representation and analysis of data?
5	Is there congruity between the research methodology and the interpretation of results?
6	Is there a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically?
7	Is the influence of the researcher on the research and vice-versa addressed?
8	Are participants and their voices adequately represented?
9	Is the research ethical according to current criteria or, for recent studies, is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body?
10	Do the conclusions drawn in the research report flow from the analysis or interpretation of the data?
JBI critical appraisal checklist for quasi-experimental research	
1	Is it clear in the study what is the “cause” and what is the “effect” (i.e., there is no confusion about which variable comes first)?
2	Were the participants included in any comparisons similar?
3	Were the participants included in any comparisons receiving similar treatment/care, other than the exposure or intervention of interest?
4	Was there a control group?
5	Were there multiple measurements of the outcome, both pre and post, the intervention/exposure?
6	Was follow-up complete and, if not, were differences between groups in terms of their follow-up adequately described and analyzed?
7	Were the outcomes of participants included in any comparisons measured in the same way?
8	Were outcomes measured in a reliable way?
9	Was appropriate statistical analysis used?
Checklist for mixed quantitative and qualitative research (from Parris & Peachey, 2013)	
1	Was the study clearly focused?
2	Was sufficient background provided?
3	Was the study well-planned?
4	Were the methods used appropriate?
5	Were the measures validated?
6	Were there applicable and adequate number of participants?
7	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous with adequate statistical methods?
8	Were the findings clearly stated?
9	Are the findings transferable and useful for application in other contexts?

two from only the outer context, and four involved participants from both inner and outer contexts. Six studies had managers, leaders, or policymakers at the system level as research participants and seven studies had participants who were managers, executives, and program directors of organizations. Eight studies involved EBA practitioners, with just over half including staff reports of leaders or supervisors as an aspect of the study. In line with the dominant focus on understanding processes and systems that facilitate EBA implementation, the majority of studies involved participant self-reports on implementation experiences. Studies used analytical approaches, such as the case study method, grounded theory, and network analysis, and models of structures, processes, and behaviors involved in successful implementation (see Table 3).

The majority of studies (eight) were qualitative, three were a mix of qualitative and quantitative, and one study was purely quantitative. The qualitative studies employed a range and combination of methods, including semi-structured qualitative interviews, focus groups, and qualitative self-report online surveys (see Table 3). Quantitative studies used online surveys to map networks and to measure the association between leadership behaviors, innovation climate, provider attitudes, and EBP sustainment.

Results

Together the 12 studies indicate the important role of leadership in both establishing practical support for EBA development, adoption, implementation, adaptation, and sustainment, and creating conditions in which EBAs will thrive in the child welfare sector. Leadership supports for EBAs involved proactive planning and investment in supportive structures and processes, including building the capabilities for gathering and using data and the relationships required to enact EBAs (ten studies included these

Table 3. Characteristics of the studies included.

Authors	Setting	Participants	Research focus & themes	Intervention/ Evidence-base	Study design	Critical appraisal
Aarons et al. (2014). Collaboration, negotiation, and coalescence for interagency-collaborative teams to scale-up evidence-based practice	USA: a large county in South-West	Child welfare system administrators, community-based organization (CBO) executive directors, local foundation leaders and advisors ($n = 15$); home visitors/seed team members, supervisors, trainers/coaches ($n = 39$)	Examine the role of collaborative processes in a large-scale county-wide implementation of an EBP to reduce child neglect (SafeCare) EPIS (Exploration, Preparation Implementation, Sustainment) & Implementation phase Interagency Collaborative Team implementation models. ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EBP Implementation (SafeCare)	Semi-structured individual, small-group interviews, or focus groups. Iterative thematic data analysis.	QAL HIGH
Aarons et al. (2016). The roles of system and organizational leadership in system-wide evidence-based intervention sustainment	USA: two states, 87 counties, 11 service systems, CBOs	Administrators (state, county and agency ($n = 44$); EBP providers ($n = 162$))	Examine leadership in both the outer service system context and inner organizational context for EBP sustainment (SafeCare). Used EPIS model (sustainment phase) ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EBP Sustainment (SafeCare)	Web-based survey of administrators (Leadership Competence Scale of the Program Sustainability Index) & Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) of providers (on their immediate supervisors). Interviews & Focus groups. Mixed-methods integration: Convergence & expansion.	QNT HIGH QAL HIGH

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Authors	Setting	Participants	Research focus & themes	Intervention/ Evidence-base	Study design	Critical appraisal
Aarons and Sommerfeld (2012). Leadership, innovation climate, and attitudes toward evidence-based practice during a state-wide implementation	USA: state-wide child welfare system, 30 teams	Case managers ($N = 140$)	Comparison of the associations of leader-member exchange with team innovation climate and provider attitudes toward adoption and use of EBPs of children's service providers implementing an EBP compared with those delivering Service As Usual (SAU). ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence	EBP Implementation (SafeCare)	Experimental design. Web-based survey (MLQ), 3 waves of data collection. Service providers rated their immediate supervisor. SafeCare vs. SAU. (Multiple Group Path Analysis) using Quantitative Surveys MLQ, Leader-Member Exchange Scale, Team Climate Inventory & Evidence-Based Practice Attitude Scale.	QNT HIGH
Akin et al. (2014). Implementation of an evidence-based intervention to reduce long-term foster care: Practitioner perceptions of key challenges and supports	USA: state-wide	implementation	Practitioners ($n = 28$)	Identify the key supports and challenges of implementing an EBI in a child welfare setting as perceived by frontline practitioners ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EBP Implementation (Parent Management Training Model Oregon)	

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Authors	Setting	Participants	Research focus & themes	Intervention/ Evidence-base	Study design	Critical appraisal
Exploratory case study design. Semi-structured interviews. Theoretical thematic analysis: six factors of implementation based on a literature review (process, provider, innovation, client, organizational, and structural).	QAL HIGH					
Akin et al. (2016). A study in contrasts: Supports and barriers to the successful implementation of two evidence-based parenting interventions in child welfare	USA: state-wide evaluation project, 5 counties	Practitioners (n = 5); agency CEOs (n = 2); county-level Site coordinator (n = 4); state-level site coordinators (n = 3); state grant project director (n = 1)	1) What supports and barriers led to the successful implementation of Strengthening Families Program? 2) What supports and barriers led to the failed implementation of Celebrating Families (CF) ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EBPs Implementation (Strengthening Families Program & Celebrating Families)	Semi-structured interviews. Modified induction methodology: same six factors of implementation as Akin et al. (2014).	QAL MED

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Authors	Setting	Participants	Research focus & themes	Intervention/ Evidence-base	Study design	Critical appraisal
Carnochan et al. (2017). Managerial and frontline perspectives on the process of evidence-informed practice within human service organizations	USA: 11 human service	organizations (HSOs)	Supervisors (37%); middle managers (28%); executives (17%); frontline staff (9%); admin/support staff (6%) (N = 473)	Processes and challenges of working with multiple types of evidence to inform practice decisions, enhance services & agency operations ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EIP	
Qualitative, open-ended online survey, self-report. Grounded theory analysis.	QAL HIGH					
Ehrhart et al. (2018). Leading for the long haul: A mixed- method evaluation of the Sustainment Leadership Scale (SLS)	USA: 7 child welfare systems, 22 CBOs	EBP practitioners Survey (n = 157) Focus group (n = 95)	Mixed-method approach to examine leadership during the Sustainment phase of EPIS using the Sustainment Leadership Scale (SLS) (adapted from the Implementation Leadership Scale (ILS)) ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EBP Sustainment (SafeCare)	QUANT: Web-based survey. Providers rated their first-level supervisors. Confirmatory factor analysis used to examine the factor structure of the SLS. QUAL: Focus groups, perceptions regarding SafeCare sustainment & first- level supervisors; deductive methodology, framework approach using SLS. Mixed-method integration: convergence & expansion found.	QANT HIGH QAL MED

(Continued)



Table 3. (Continued).

Authors	Setting	Participants	Research focus & themes	Intervention/ Evidence-base	Study design	Critical appraisal
Palinkas et al. (2011). Social networks and implementation of evidence-based practices in public youth-serving systems: A mixed-methods study	USA: 12 California counties	System leaders & program managers Interviews ($n = 38$) Survey ($n = 176$)	Examine the structure and operation of social networks of information and advice and their role in the implementation of EBP SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EBP (Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care) Implementation (using Stages of Implementation Checklist)	Qualitative semi-structured interviews & web-based survey to create a quantitative sociometric data set. Grounded theory for qualitative data & structural analysis for quantitative data. Exploratory & confirmatory mixed-method design: Convergence, complementarity, and expansion.	QANT MED QAL MED
Plath (2013). Organizational processes supporting evidence-based practice	Australia: 1 large non-government HSO	Disability workers ($n = 20$); executives ($n = 2$); managers ($n = 8$); team leaders ($n = 3$); clinical specialists ($n = 2$); national program & directorate staff ($n = 9$).	Explore the organizational processes to support EIP implementation ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EIP & EBP implementation	Case study methodology, semi-structured qualitative data focus groups. Thematic coding based on pre-determined themes.	QAL MED
Rocque et al. (2014). Implementing and sustaining evidence-based practice in juvenile justice: A case study of a rural state	USA: juvenile justice in Maine Public sector	Department officials, corrections staff, researchers & advisors/consultants ($n = 14$)	Events & processes that contribute to development/implementation/sustainment of EBAs ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	Development, Implementation, and Sustainment of EIP & EBPs & Evidence-Based Decision-Making	Case study: interviews & written material, evaluations. Framework analysis	QAL HIGH

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Authors	Setting	Participants	Research focus & themes	Intervention/ Evidence-base	Study design	Critical appraisal
Willging et al. (2015). From a “perfect storm” to “smooth sailing”: Policymaker perspectives on implementation and sustainment of an evidence- based practice in two states	USA: 2 states, 9 service systems	State & county policymakers: directors ($n = 6$); deputy directors ($n = 6$); division directors ($n = 5$); program managers & administrators ($n = 7$); analysts ($n = 3$)	Perceptions of EBP sustainment, implementation challenges, approaches to overcoming those challenges, and the importance of system-level contextual factors in ensuring successful implementation EPIS model. ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EBP implementation & sustainment (SafeCare)	In-depth, semi-structured interviews across 3 stages of implementation. Iterative process of qualitative analysis based on EPIS model.	QAL MED
Willging et al. (2018). Perspectives from community-based organizational managers on implementing and sustaining evidence-based interventions in child welfare	USA: 9 service systems (private, nonprofit CBO)	CBO managers ($N = 25$)	What CBO managers perceive to be the most important factors impacting the implementation and sustainment of an EBI in nonprofit organizations that deliver child welfare services EPIS model. ENABLING: Transforming Building organizational culture that values evidence SUPPORTING: Relationships Developing evidence-based practices Planning & resourcing	EBP implementation & sustainment (SafeCare)	Semi-structured individual & small group interviews. Iterative process of qualitative analysis based on EPIS model.	QAL HIGH

supports in their main finding: Aarons et al., 2014, 2016; Akin et al., 2014; Carnochan et al., 2017; Ehrhart et al., 2018; Palinkas et al., 2011; Plath, 2013; Rocque et al., 2014; Willging et al., 2015, 2018). Visionary, committed, and transformational leadership was key to creating an enabling context, championing EBAs across organizational and systemic contexts and embedding organizational cultures that value evidence and learning (seven studies had this as their main finding: Aarons et al., 2016; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Akin et al., 2016; Plath, 2013; Rocque et al., 2014; Willging et al., 2015, 2018). As depicted in Table 3, the majority of the studies touched on each of the major thematic areas of both supporting EBAs (planning, developing relationships, and evidence-based practices) and providing an enabling context for EBAs (transformational leadership and building organizational cultures that value EBAs). There was also significant overlap between these thematic areas; for example, processes of developing proficiency in evidence utilization (to support EBAs in practice) were also found to build enabling environments. This is discussed further in the discussion section.

Supporting the development, implementation, adaptation, and sustainment of evidence-based approaches

The studies found three key elements of proactive leadership that influence the development, implementation, and adaptation of EBAs: 1) planning, resourcing, and responding; 2) developing practices for gathering, using, and appreciating the evidence; and 3) maintaining good relationships (Aarons et al., 2014, 2016; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Akin et al., 2016, 2014; Carnochan et al., 2017; Ehrhart et al., 2018; Plath, 2013; Rocque et al., 2014; Willging et al., 2015, 2018).

Planning, resourcing, and responding

Essential to EBA success was having adequate structures and resources for implementation (Aarons et al., 2016; Akin et al., 2016; Plath, 2013; Rocque et al., 2014). Proactive, forward-thinking leaders took the initiative to secure funding and establish organizational procedures for staff procurement, and referral mechanisms⁵ (Aarons et al., 2016; Akin et al., 2016; Ehrhart et al., 2018; Willging et al., 2015, 2018). Systems-level leaders, such as policymakers, were important in initiating planning meetings and early training activities (Willging et al., 2015), as well as embedding EBPs in contracts, official plans, and funding agreements (Aarons et al., 2016). Planning enabled EBP sustainment amidst diverse and often precarious funding sources (Rocque et al., 2014; Willging et al., 2015, 2018). While Aarons et al.'s (2016) quantitative study found that transactional leadership was not significantly associated with EBP sustainment, qualitative studies (Akin et al., 2014, 2016; Plath, 2013) identified important roles for frontline leaders in monitoring EBPs and intervening when quality standards were not being met.

Leaders and managers were identified as needing skills and plans for resolving implementation issues as they arose (Aarons et al., 2016; Akin et al., 2014; Ehrhart et al., 2018), including responsiveness to the multiple and complex needs of client families (Akin et al., 2014). Leaders also played a key role in establishing efficient supervision structures and feedback processes (Ehrhart et al., 2018; Plath, 2013). Akin et al. (2016) found it was essential to implementation success to have a manager designated to lead the planning and organizing of EBP partnerships.

Building capabilities in utilizing evidence

Ensuring EBAs were developed and implemented by knowledgeable and skilled practitioners required staff qualifications, training, coaching, monitoring, and evaluation (Akin et al., 2014; Plath, 2013; Rocque et al., 2014). The practices of seeking and using evidence involved both practitioners and leaders engaging in cognitive processes of questioning, assimilating knowledge, researching, and analyzing (Carnochan et al., 2017). Cognitive capacities were needed to understand and create logic models as well as measures of service quality and outcomes (Carnochan et al., 2017).

⁵Delays in staff procurement and referrals were barriers to implementation success (Akin et al., 2016, p. 38; Willging et al., 2015, 2018).

Developing and maintaining relationships

The studies reflect that EBA development and implementation often comprises collaborations between diverse stakeholders involved in social networks that span multiple organizations, agencies, and government departments (Aarons et al., 2014, 2016; Carnochan et al., 2017; Palinkas et al., 2011; Rocque et al., 2014). Important external stakeholders identified by the studies included agency funders, courts and ancillary services, advisory and task-force groups, and researchers (Akin et al., 2016; Rocque et al., 2014). Partnerships with independent researchers enabled organizations to implement and evaluate EBAs that utilize professional, client, and stakeholder values and expertise (Carnochan et al., 2017; Rocque et al., 2014; Willging et al., 2015).

The quality of leaders' relationships influenced EBA implementation. Relationships were harnessed to address skepticism or confusion surrounding the program fit, to mitigate competition with other programs, and to secure and share resources for EBPs (Carnochan et al., 2017; Rocque et al., 2014; Willging et al., 2015). Willging et al.'s (2015) participants cited a poor history of collaboration as driving implementation failure. In contrast, managers of CWOs with fully sustaining EBPs took part in networks for initial program exploration, which remained essential to sustaining the program (Willging et al., 2018). Building enduring system-level relationships with shared commitment, accountability, and responsibility involved trust, openness, respect, and understanding (Aarons et al., 2016), and the negotiation of politics and power relations (Aarons et al., 2014). CWO leaders saw themselves and government officials as "stewards" working together to foster service delivery infrastructures in which all stakeholders supported the EBP over the long-term (Willging et al., 2018).

Collaborative relationships between organizational leaders, implementers, and clients were also important (Akin et al., 2016, p. 36; Willging et al., 2018). The setting of a vision for evidence and championing particular interventions by influential leaders can be conceptualized as a one-way, top-down process. However, findings show that follower buy-in was not guaranteed, and resistance to change was a key barrier to implementation (Akin et al., 2014; Rocque et al., 2014). Cultivating a shared purpose and values and acknowledging individuals' support are two-way processes between leaders and frontline staff (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Akin et al., 2016). The influential role of leader-follower relationships in enhancing staff buy-in and willingness to perform their work duties was both a qualitative (Aarons et al., 2014; Akin et al., 2016; Plath, 2013; Rocque et al., 2014; Willging et al., 2015) and quantitative finding (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Ehrhart et al., 2018).

EBA implementation involves interactive processes of informing, engaging, discussing, supervising, role-modeling, and teamwork (Aarons et al., 2014; Akin et al., 2016; Carnochan et al., 2017). Staff implementing EBAs were found to need frequent, direct, supportive, and high-quality coaching and supervision with delineated roles and responsibilities and clear and reasonable expectations (Akin et al., 2014, 2016; Carnochan et al., 2017). Practitioners desired that their individual needs and contributions during EBA implementation be appreciated by leaders (Ehrhart et al., 2018; Plath, 2013). Leadership qualities associated with being supportive were being patient, flexible, perseverant, and available to answer questions (Aarons et al., 2014; Akin et al., 2014; Ehrhart et al., 2018). Carnochan et al. (2017) suggest that senior agency leaders cultivate new communication methods to support the sharing of data and evidence throughout the organization.

Enabling context: transforming and embedding cultures for evidence-based approach success

The studies reviewed found that leaders created an enabling context for EBA success through committed, transformational leadership and by embedding organizational cultures that value evidence.

Visionary, committed and transformational leadership

Leadership was required to establish and maintain a vision for EBAs, with organizational leaders garnering support from decision-makers at the organizational and systems levels and frontline supervisors championing EBAs to providers (Aarons et al., 2014, 2016; Ehrhart et al., 2018; Plath, 2013; Rocque et al., 2014; Willging et al., 2015). Qualitative data revealed the importance of the “strong leadership” of stable, influential leaders committed to using evidence (Akin et al., 2014, p. 285, 2016, p. 36; Plath, 2013 p. 178; Rocque et al., 2018, p. 1033; Willging et al., 2015, pp. 28–29, 2018). Willging et al. (2015) found changes in senior leadership to be a major factor in the failure to implement and sustain EBPs, and Akin et al. (2016) found committed leadership to be important for both executives and managers. Visionary leaders and higher-status individuals, like agency directors, administrators, and EBA experts, were important brokers, facilitators, and collaborators for implementation success (Akin et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2011; Rocque et al., 2014; Willging et al., 2018).

Aarons and Sommerfeld (2012) and Aarons et al. (2016) found that transformational leadership, involving leaders motivating followers to take up shared goals, values, and behaviors of driving evidence-based innovations, influenced staff willingness to adopt EBPs and EBP sustainment. Quantitative data at the systems and team levels demonstrated that leadership predicted future sustainment and differentiated between sites with full, partial, or no sustainment (Aarons et al., 2016). Quantitative and qualitative data converged for the importance of inner-context transformational leadership for EBP sustainment (Aarons et al., 2016). Aarons and Sommerfeld (2012) found that transformational leadership had a strong and direct association with an innovation climate during implementation and was also associated with more positive staff attitudes toward EBPs.

Embedding organizational cultures that value evidence and learning

Ten of the twelve studies included findings regarding the importance of organizational cultures that value evidence and learning (Aarons et al., 2014; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Akin et al., 2014, 2016; Carnochan et al., 2017; Ehrhart et al., 2018; Plath, 2013; Rocque et al., 2018; Willging et al., 2015, 2018). However, little detail was given about the characteristics of an organizational culture that supports EBAs and how leaders build this. Leaders were responsible for cultivating an organizational culture valuing evidence, data, and outcomes that was conducive to the uptake and sustainment of EBAs (Aarons et al., 2014; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Willging et al., 2015, 2018). Implementation practitioners attributed their buy-in to EBAs to supervisors, leaders, and policymakers communicating their own enthusiasm and knowledge about the model (Akin et al., 2014, p. 290; Ehrhart et al., 2018; Plath, 2013). Leaders’ communication of the value alignment of the EBP model to the organization shaped perceptions that the model was a good fit for the organization and clients and reinforced the use of it (Akin et al., 2014, 2016). Aarons et al. (2014) found experts’ authority and well-supported interventions shaped a shared set of beliefs around the importance of evidence and a commitment to EBPs.

As well as valuing evidence, organizational cultures supportive of EBAs valued processes of learning. A “trial and learn” orientation was found to create an open, safe, and engaging work climate and sustain a learning environment associated with successful implementation (Akin et al., 2014, p. 290; Carnochan et al., 2017). A culture of critical reflection, involving providing accessible research information and taking staff feedback on board, was seen as important for engaging staff and incorporating frontline evidence to enhance EBA implementation (Plath, 2013).

Gaps and limitations

The authors approached this research as an SLR to reduce bias and guide a higher standard of selection and analysis (McDonagh, Peterson, Parminder, Chang, & Shekelle, 2013). While self-report data has the potential for bias, qualitative methods like case studies, in-depth interviews, and longitudinal

research can offer fine-grained and holistic insights that include how respondents conceptualize, understand, and experience leadership and EBAs (Moullin et al., 2019, p. 11). This review reflects the challenges involved in integrating quantitative and qualitative research findings. While the mixed-methods studies and qualitative data in the included studies converge with and expand on the quantitative data, their comparison within the thematic analysis of this SLR has limitations. Methods for including the underutilized source of qualitative research in SLRs require further development (Dixon-Woods, Fitzpatrick, & Robert, 2000).

Rather than the ideal situation of shared screening and analysis, the second author's leadership duties restricted their input to reviewing and discussing the findings. However, the opportunity to bring together child welfare leadership experience with social science perspectives offers the potential for unique applied insight (see Parris & Peachey, 2013).

A major limitation of the SLR is that more than half of the studies are from the same long-term, multi-sited implementation of the SafeCare EBP. However, the sites, participants, and areas of focus vary and are not a repetition of findings. While the findings could be skewed toward the particularities of SafeCare or the emphases of the researchers involved, there were many synergies with the results from the other included studies involving different EBAs and researchers.

This review focused on studies in societies with dominant Anglo-Celtic cultures. The diversity of child welfare leaders, followers, and clients, including First Nations people and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, should be addressed in future research. In addition, more studies specific to EBA implementation and leadership in Australia are needed. These would be useful contributions to shape EBA responsiveness to families' cultural backgrounds, community values, and individual preferences (see Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Discussion

Together the 12 studies, with their varied participants, research questions, and leadership foci, illuminate tensions and complexities concerning the diverse functions of leadership to both support implementation and enable organizational and systemic cultural change needed for EBAs to reach their potential to deliver positive outcomes for children, youth, and families.

The studies reveal that the active engagement in implementation of both systems (outer context) and organizational leaders (inner context) is vital for a strategic climate for implementation (Aarons et al., 2014, 2016; Willging et al., 2015). There are many similarities in leadership behaviors and approaches in the inner and outer contexts, with leadership key for moving innovations into large public service systems and community-based service organizations (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012). Both involve championing EBP adoption as well as being proactive, perseverant, knowledgeable, and supportive of staff during implementation, but manifest through roles and responsibilities at different levels (Aarons et al., 2016; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012).

Outer-level leaders are key in establishing and advocating a mission and vision for EBAs, initiating policies, contracts and proactive planning, and driving collaborations and strategies for EBA survival (Aarons et al., 2016; Rocque et al., 2014). The leaders of organizations are positioned where system-level demands and frontline needs converge (Willging et al., 2015). They need to be knowledgeable about EBAs, bring the experiences and knowledge of frontline practitioners into decisions, make practitioners feel valued, and provide corrective guidance during implementation (Aarons et al., 2016; Ehrhart et al., 2018; Plath, 2013). Important inner context leader qualities are curiosity, critical reflection, trust-building and cooperation (Carnochan et al., 2017; Willging et al., 2015). Organization leaders need to balance priorities of creating their organization's culture to influence implementation, with their important role as collaborators with other organizations and agencies (Aarons et al., 2014; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012). As Willging et al. (2018) found, leading an organization to sustain EBPs required working with external funders and policy makers to build support for EBPs over the long-term.

Many of the studies identified the importance of collaborative, coordinated leadership across the inner and outer contexts. Implementation climate can be positively impacted by organizational, county and state level leaders having a shared strategy (Aarons et al., 2016, p.1004; Willging et al., 2015). The most influential networks appeared to be those that extend beyond service system jurisdictions and took place during cross agency and county meetings (Palinkas et al., 2011). Social networks involved leaders and practitioners of organizations, clients and community members, both public and private sectors, and various departments and agencies (Aarons et al., 2014; Akin et al., 2014; Carnochan et al., 2007; Plath, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2011; Rocque et al., 2018). These networks were opportunities to observe effective implementation, and to enhance EBA knowledge, critical reflection, complex reasoning, and research understanding. These findings suggest that leaders should capitalize on existing social networks and build new influence networks to positively influence implementation (Palinkas et al., 2011).

Successful leadership approaches and methods can vary depending on contextual factors, including the funding and policy environment, organization, intervention, implementation stage, and leader's role. For example, reciprocity is important during service-as-usual and transformational leadership during implementation (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012). The studies identified leadership from supervisors up to agency directors. Future research on the cross-level alignment of leadership would be useful to explore in which contexts transformational leadership approaches can have the most impact and which specific relationships and leadership behaviors can create conditions for EBA success (Aarons, Ehrhart, Farahnak, & Sklar, 2014; Aarons et al., 2016; Ehrhart et al., 2018).

Several leader actions, orientations, and behaviors fit into the thematic categories of both enabling and supportive leadership and occur in spaces where organizational and systemic contexts overlap. For example, collaborations offer external information, opportunities, and resources that support implementation on the ground; at the same time, organizations and practitioners who take part contribute to cultivating systemic evidence-based learning cultures (Aarons et al., 2014, 2016; Carnochan et al., 2017; Palinkas et al., 2011; Rocque et al., 2014). As well as increasing competence, training to deliver EBAs also contributes to a sense of collective purpose toward improving outcomes (Akin et al., 2014; Ehrhart et al., 2018; Plath, 2013). Leadership approaches and abilities that span roles and contexts suggest priorities for the training and development of emerging leaders. These include communication, negotiation, critical thinking, building trusting relationships, a shared purpose, planning, and problem-solving.

Tensions are to be expected in the complex field of child welfare, where EBPs are being implemented with urgency alongside processes for long-term systems change and the development of more dynamic EBAs. EBAs are driven by multiple goals, including learning, stakeholder engagement, compliance, and innovation (Carnochan et al., 2017). The reviewed studies identify the need for leaders to negotiate tensions between processes of driving a future vision and maintaining fidelity to existing practice. A related tension is that of influential, proactive, committed leadership, which was associated with both enabling and supporting implementation (Akin et al., 2014; Plath, 2013; Rocque et al., 2018). "Strong" leadership was also found to be in tension with the sharing of authority necessary in collaborations involving inner and outer context leaders where complex agendas and styles require careful negotiation (Aarons et al., 2014).

Willging et al. (2015) found that a long-term commitment to innovation guided by evidence was key to community-based organizations managers' approaches in sustaining systems. Similarly, Rocque et al.'s (2014) case study situates EBA success within the broader systemic processes of evidence-based decision-making or evidence-based management. This indicates a comprehensive orientation of evidence-based leadership might bridge the tension between compliance-oriented processes and the development of dynamic evidence-informed innovations (Barends & Rousseau, 2018). This links back to the influential leadership function of social networks in EBA work, which hinge on interpersonal relationships and are shaped by both the ability and willingness of individuals to engage with one another and commit to improving outcomes for children and young people (Aarons & Palinkas, 2007; Palinkas et al., 2009; Valente & Davis, 1999). This brings us full circle to leadership basics of

influencing attitudes and embedding shared values and norms. An added level for EBAs is a leader's ability and willingness to critically engage with evidence emerging from child welfare practice (Carnochan et al., 2007). This suggests a need for further research articulating and analyzing cultures within child welfare that value evidence and learning and embed norms of using evidence, and how leadership influences these.

Rather than implementation climate being limited to a particular program or culture to an individual organization, bringing together studies on leadership in the inner and outer contexts suggests the importance of shared beliefs and values that coalesce and circulate in multiple directions in the space between organizational and systemic contexts (Aarons, Fettes et al.). The leadership of organizational and systems leaders plays an important bridging role (see Moullin et al., 2019). Exploring empirical data on these complex, multi-level, and intertwined processes can contribute to embedding a practical understanding to reframe evidence from a buzzword to a grounded and evolving understanding of “what works” for children and young people as well as for child welfare leadership.

Conclusion

Despite the complexities and limitations of this SLR, the findings reflect the important role of leadership across the child welfare system to support and enable the adoption, implementation, and sustainment of EBAs. This review indicates leadership for real-world evidence-based practice is multi-layered, involving collaboration between funders, policymakers and organizational leaders, building evidence-based organizational cultures and supporting ground-level practitioners.

Supporting EBAs involves leaders driving proactive planning, being responsive and adaptable, developing practices for gathering and using evidence, and maintaining meaningful relationships with followers and collaborators. Developing an enabling context involves influential and transformational leadership that champions EBAs and cultivates shared cultures that value evidence and encourage learning and critical thinking.

Disclosure statement

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