Defensive social work: Square peg – round hole

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A critique of Child Youth and Family and how the business model has resulted in a defensive mode of social work practice.

The year 2003 saw Child Youth and Family constantly in the media with phrases like, ‘CYF Office in Crisis’. Problems cited include lack of resources, retention and recruitment problems, huge lists of unallocated cases, lack of foster homes, etc (Claridge, 2003). Social workers are reported as demoralised, under stress and said to be ‘burnt out.’ Clearly something is wrong with the Service. I maintain that a mode of practice has developed that explains how and why this state of affairs has occurred. This mode of practice has deeply affected the work of the professional social workers and made it difficult for them to maintain the standards of the profession. I have endeavoured to identify the reasons behind this and by so doing challenge all to insist upon changes which will benefit both social workers and families.

In identifying the ‘market model’ and it’s negative effects on a public sector organisation I recognise that this critique is not new to readers. I do, however, wish to give a first hand view of the realities and the implications for the professional practice of social workers.

Social work is generally regarded as a ‘helping’ occupation. Social work is about people’s needs and wellbeing. Social work is generally not for profit but a service to be given. How, therefore, do we fit this profession inside the bureaucratic organisational structure of a government department?

Social work within a market model

The market production model which was adopted by the public sector organisations from the early 1990s embraced philosophies and resulting processes that have assisted to shape a fiscally driven, focused and accountable practice model. This included quantitative performance management, measurement of outputs, target achievement, competi-tiveness to secure funding and associated financially biased practices related to the business model. Social workers, by their visibility in working to assist families and protect children (to achieve the main objective of the welfare vote), therefore, became the focus of attention with an expectation to achieve the business model’s goal. This imperative is to enable the organisation to meet whatever its defined outcomes may be within its allotted budget or even better, under budget. Although the true business model is profit making, we have tried to fit the structure of a not-for-profit welfare service into this mould. It is hardly surprising that this undertaking has had destructive consequences. As stated by Duncan (1997):

...although the reform of the public sector was said to rely upon a private sector model of management, it would appear to be a somewhat out-dated model which has a heavy focus on quantitative performance measurement and little emphasis on service quality.

It was on this basis that the then Children and Young Persons Service (CYPS) entered the dual world of service provider and business performer.

Statutory social workers working for CYFS have the responsibility to ensure the safety and
security of children, young people and families. In social work language this would be called assessing and implementing plans to support change, but in business language this is called carrying out the ‘core business’ of the unit. It is this duality of role, depending on the perspective from which a worker’s performance is viewed, that I wish to address.

An important thrust of the business model is that it is driven by performance-based financial incentives to staff. The rewarding of staff in this way puts pressure on them to produce the required outcomes within the timeframes indicated.

In an organisation such as Child Youth and Family which is dependent on the Government budget, as opposed to its own profit-driven budget, i.e., a true business in the market sense, an anomaly occurs. If this Department is not fully resourced, or is not structured to enable the required finance or resources to be accessible to the workers, it is therefore unable to meet the care and protection needs of young people and families. The workers find themselves in impossible situations. In order to perform to their own level of integrity and practice standards, more of the social worker’s time and effort is required to bridge the gaps and keep children and young people safe. This extra work goes unnoticed as the Department hides its failings and inadequacies behind the smoke screen of fiscally driven key performance (achievement) indicators and performance measures.

These targets are deemed to be measurable but are not adequate indicators of service quality. Quality of care, safety of children and increasing self worth of individuals are difficult to measure. However, social workers struggle to meet the measurable tasks due to inadequate indicators and lack of access to resources, and an inferior service is given to clients. This state of affairs is evidenced by the Baseline Review Report. It states that although funding has increased, performance and achievement of outcomes have not. (Mersi, Pivac, Hughes, Inglis, 2003).

Unfortunately the inevitable happens and a child dies or a young person is placed in an inadequate placement. The media brings the tragedy to public notice. The first major public enquiry in New Zealand concerned ‘Baby C’ and brought to public notice the workings of the Department and litigious nature of child protection, (Pilalas et al., 1988).

Typically an internal review occurs and the social workers’ performance is examined and more often than not, found lacking, due to the insidious aforementioned situation they are in. This review includes persons within the Department employed in a watchdog position specifically to monitor the social workers’ target achievement and whether they are achieving the performance objectives set by the Department. The outcome of the review may include a specific appointment of a prominent person to conduct an enquiry and, therefore, the likes of the Mason Report and the Brown Report recommendations follow. (Mason, 1992; Brown, 2000).

Although the Department has maintained that many of the problems from Brown’s report are being addressed, the Baseline Review found that ultimately the changes have not been extensive enough to bring about the required changes to performance and client outcomes (Mersi, Pivac, Hughes, Inglis, 2003:1).

The Department makes promises and some changes following enquiries and reviews, however, these changes often appear ineffective and do not produce the desired result. Assurances include promising to improve social workers’ performance, as they are the public face of the Department. To ensure the workers get it right, and to show evidence of change to accountability systems, those in authority have inserted another layer of watchdogs, auditors, performance managers, and such like persons. This change has an intended dual purpose. It shows that some recommended changes are being made, but in my view it also ensures that there is another layer of accountability between the risk (being the client) and those in top management.

These watchdog positions are usually occupied by experienced and relatively highly paid persons within the Department who no longer want to work as social workers or supervisors as it is so risky, demoralising and basically hard work, and they have, therefore, offered themselves
for other positions within the framework. A picture can be seen to be forming. Organisational priorities require people employed to analyse and define the measurements, someone to manage when it doesn’t work and someone to audit more closely to try and make it work. The focus of the organisation is on achieving the targets rather than the true purpose of providing services to the people. Thus the ‘people’ content of the organisation becomes top heavy with administrative and management staff all endeavouring to justify their positions and receive their bonuses and/or progression up the salary scale. To support this structure a huge proportion of the welfare budget is consumed. This is a possible explanation as to where the extra funding has gone, as identified in the Baseline Report.

However, the quality of services from CYFS has remained variable. This has occurred despite a more than 50% increase in baseline funding from the end of 1999 to the end of 2002. (Mersi, Pivac, Hughes, Inglis, 2003: 1).

Due to the indicated pressures, greater risks are generated and eventually the inevitable occurs. The media seize the moment and the business leaders are embarrassed once again.

What is the managerial solution? More checks and balances, more personnel to watch those workers, more changes in policies and procedures. The outcome is a cycle of defensive social work practice

**Defensive social work practice explained**

Defensive social work practice is where the profession establishes practices that limit the risk of being sued, or scrutinised by the media, rather than being in the best interest of the client (Harris, 1987).

In order to prevent ongoing media attention of the inevitable child or youth care disaster, those in social work management have developed cumbersome defensive procedures and policies to be monitored by the aforementioned ‘watchdog’ levels of the structure. These procedures and policies increasingly place the social worker in an inquisitorial role that changes the helping and supportive relationship the social worker may have developed with the client. This, therefore, diminishes the trust between worker and client, paradoxically increasing the risk to the client but is designed to decrease the risk to the Department.

The primary role of management within this model is to come within budget and keep out of public notice. Team building, creating positive staff relations, ensuring favourable working conditions, and most importantly delivering a quality service to clients, becomes secondary. For management, therefore, success is rated by meeting budgetry controls and low media interest, rather than by changes in families to reduce care and protection risks and reduce youth offending.

Supervisors become task focused due to the demands placed on them to ensure their social workers meet their targets. Supporting and enabling their social workers to explore innovative practice methods and techniques is stifled by the stringent accountability demands. Decision making processes become lengthy, cumbersome and onerous to all. A culture of suspicion and blaming is created. Social workers are bound by the policies and procedures due to the accountability system set in place. They are torn between the dichotomy of following the formalised approach of a stringent set of procedures and using their own initiative to assist families. Their choice, which is really ‘Hobson’s choice’, is determined by the defensive practice in place which demands their response.

Social workers and their supervisors are, therefore, working at the end of this hierarchal structure, managing with diminishing resources due to the money being spent to meet the defensive practice systems. They cite:

…too many administration tasks including data inputting, reactive instead of pro active work, policy changes not always in client’s best interest, crisis management and containment (Smith, 2001). They are also ‘punished’ by not progressing up the salary scale due to not meeting targets.
determined by their employer.

Unfortunately, any practice initiative which has been created as a tool to assist social work practice, ie, Risk Estimation System (Sigurdson and Reid, 2000), has been captured by management as a reporting target to measure performance. This system was established as a proactive tool or instrument to assist social work decision making rather than dictate outcomes and used as a mandatory time framed reporting instrument.

The social worker’s work environment is far from adequate. Due to the data input role of the social worker to capture the measurement of outputs, and monitor practice in this defensive model, it has become such a large component of their social work task that they are increasingly defined and viewed as clerical workers. This is evident by the reclassification of the social worker’s work space under the ‘open plan’ model and the incorrect assumption that the main focus is clerical, requiring interaction amongst the workers. A social worker’s interaction in fact is with the client and, therefore, their work space needs to be private, and conducive to reflection and assessment. I have endeavoured to find literature on work space settings within the professions and the effect of the ‘open plan’ model on practice. This has been very difficult to find. It would appear that Child Youth and Family by adopting the open plan model was following the model of the time used by other government departments such as Work and Income.

Social worker graduates enter the Department with aspirations of implementing their recently acquired skills and new found knowledge. They become overburdened with the bureaucratic systems, oppressive policies and the dwindling accessible resources, and soon leave. The Department then experiences difficulty in recruiting professionally qualified staff and resorts to placing emphasis on procedures and guidelines rather than on discretionary practice of the professional. These endeavours by the Department to ultimately increase public confidence in the performance of the service, take precedence over trust in the workers’ professional practice. This has affected the relationship between management and the professional social worker, and has a detrimental outcome for the client.

The tentacles of globalisation and associated neo-liberal economic influence affecting professional practice, appears to not only have reached Aotearoa New Zealand’s welfare service and created this dilemma, but is also evident in Britain. This struggle between market management and professional practice has prompted a call for trust and confidence to be established (Smith, 2001). This problem, therefore, is not unique to Aotearoa New Zealand but the solutions, however, will need to be home grown and sincere.

The ambiguity of the social work role within this structure

If the social worker is directed by management to implement excessive policies to eliminate all levels of risk, this is working in a defensive way.

The social worker is, therefore, working in a model of practice that is basically opposed to the best practice of their chosen profession. The first three of the 10 practice standards set by the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers refer to;

…the social worker establishing an appropriate and purposeful working relationship with clients and working with an awareness of Tangata Whenua culture as well as other cultures.

…the social worker acts to secure the client’s participation.

…the social worker’s practice assists clients to gain control over her/his own circumstances.

The remaining standards refer to the social worker having a knowledge of skills, own ability and community resources, and working within an accountability system which respects the profession.

These standards support Principle 5 of the Children Young Persons and their Families Act 1989 which states that, ‘family group should participate in the making of decisions affecting child or young person...’ This is the basic piece of legislation which underpins social work within the Department.
Social workers need to refocus on these standards and principles. (The) social worker’s first obligation is to the person and his or her social environment, and we accept secondary obligation to the organisation and institutions that house our work (Trute, 2002). Working in the public field of individuals and families, there is always risk due to all external and internal influences affecting people. Social workers have to be allowed to use their skills, knowledge and expertise alongside guidelines, and I emphasise the word ‘guide’, to assess outcomes in relations to their clients. This assessment is made within the systems of safety established for the worker and client ie; practice-focused guidelines and professional supervision. I say that when this assessment ability is totally abrogated in favour of written policies dictated by management and audited and monitored to the point of totally diminishing the social workers’ and supervisors’ academic and professional abilities, self worth and confidence, then the following occurs:

…social workers believe they do not feel valued by the organisation or supported in providing a quality social work service (Mersi, Pivac, Hughes, Inglis, 2003: 27).

At this point practice becomes totally bureaucratic and dangerous to the social work profession.

At this critical junction of impending registration we need to ensure that true social work ethics and values are examined to ensure levels of competence. We need to ensure that no one organisation hijacks the process to achieve its own ends. We need to reclaim social work for what it really is. We need to stand up and say that statutory social work can work without the burden of a market model with outdated performance measures and defensive practice methods. We need to distance ourselves from defensive practice methods and truly provide strength-based practice. This vision needs to be supported by a management regime that provides realistic guidelines, a strong and supportive professional environment, adequate resources, and most of all a trusting two-way communication system.

The client-focused strength-based practice needs to be a genuine method of working from the stronger points of client families. It needs to actually occur and not be a cliche that is lip service given for appeasement to the public in the form of Departmental statements containing shallow promises. Most of all we need to value social workers and treat them as worthy professionals.

References

ANZASW Standards of Practice.


