The myth of best practice: Learning from the worst

Vaughan Milner

Vaughan Milner is Director of Family and Community Services for Presbyterian Support Otago. He has been involved in social work for 30 years in both Government and NGO sectors in New Zealand. He has a particular interest in sustainable change through social action, and the interdependence which supports and encourages change.

Abstract

This article explores the subversion of professional judgment by the myth of best practice. Learning through the process of practice and reflection and client evaluation is promoted as the most effective and appropriate tool for developmental practice improvement. The argument is advanced that working on the basis of praxis through active supervision, debriefing, peer modeling and client input is more appropriate than using mechanistic systems of practice appraisal imported from engineering and health sectors. A supportive organisational environment is essential for effective practice. Theoretical and political dimensions are examined, including careless and poorly defined use of the term ‘best practice’ and the impact of risk management and procedural systems designed to deal with the exception rather than the usual. A framework for reaching consensus about effective work is proposed.

Introduction

The practice of social work carries the challenge of dealing with uncertainty most of the time. There is a high reliance on workers using professional judgment in a range of situations where the consequences of wrong or poor decisions may be significant. (Dodds 2003).

The principles of ‘do no harm’ and of leaving people ‘no worse off and preferably better off’ are well-worn practice truisms. Carrying out these principles in practice is easier said than done in a world of increasing complexity, specialisation and scrutiny.

Blame, retribution, media exposure and litigation where mistakes occur are part of the societal embrace of individualism and new right ideology (Banks, 2001; Parton, 1999). Managerialism counters with ideas of continuous quality improvement and constraint of
professional autonomy through performance targets tied to resourcing. Bureaucracy responds with systems that are designed to minimise exceptions. Governments regulate. The combined result is more and more complex rules, work that is procedurally driven and defined, and less flexibility for ‘judgment calls’ (Jordan and Parton, 2004). How have social workers and organisations that employ social workers responded in such an environment?

The idea of best practice emerges as the golden chalice of aspiration. Refining, confining and defining generalised elements, frameworks or systems for practice as the ‘best’ promote the twin illusions of certainty and assurance as to what the client or stakeholder can expect. This article explores a variety of influences, assumptions, definitions and theories about ‘best practice’. The idea of contextualised development through reflection and active learning from our mistakes is discussed, using examples from Child Protection and preventive child and family social work. An organisational framework to support this approach is suggested in which the dynamic nature of processes used to care for staff reflect the intricacies of providing effective services for clients (Vanstone, 1995).

**Defining best practice**

There are differing definitions of best practice depending on the discipline and theory base. In the field of Knowledge Management, for example, the concept of best practice implies that there is a best way to do something; that the best way should be identified and codified, with the subsequent requirement that similar things are done according to that code. It assumes the desirability of such an approach. Best practice also assumes a stable and repetitive relationship between cause and effect (Snowden, 2003). In social work Ferguson (2003) describes best practice as ‘a concept of excellence and best’ that is grounded in research that explores meaning for all of the stakeholders. Critical Best Practice in Ferguson’s view has four elements: the identification of the best practice that is occurring; use of critical theory as an interpretive frame; evidence-based practice supported by robust information on what works; and the use of practice-based evidence and experiential knowledge in the processes of service development. The difference between the two definitions is social work’s focus on the context of practice and the exploration of meaning. Without clarity about the meaning being used or the theoretical base, this assumption of definition enables differing management, organisational or ideological agendas to drive best practice and to change the context of social work. As a result there is a danger that best practice becomes another facet of neo-liberal control of the profession, a mythical poorly formed delusion rather than a description of what works. Unquestioning acceptance of ‘best practice’ standards or organisational or policy prescriptions of ‘best practice’ is a subversion of professional responsibility and potentially dangerous. The challenge for the profession is to move away from promoting best practice in a rather loose and ambiguous way as a desirable state or preferred tool; and to move towards understanding that constant dialogue, reflection, and curiosity enable a focus
on what works.

Professionals are people too

As a beginning social worker in southern New Zealand in the mid 1970’s I was told the story of a Boys Welfare Officer employed by the Child Welfare Division of the Department of Education in the Otago/ Southland area in the 1960s. The worker put up a case to the Head Office in Wellington for the installation of a heater in his car. The argument advanced was that working in Tapanui in the winter meant a lot of time in sub-zero temperatures and snow. Traveling in a car without a heater was depicted by the worker as injurious to health and above and beyond the call of duty. The proposal was supported by local management and duly forwarded to the superintendent.

The reply was brief. It read ‘If Mr x proceeds about his duties with the briskness and efficiency expected of a Boys Welfare Officer he will have no need of a heater. Request declined.’ (Comer, circa 1976).

The moral of the tale was that briskness and efficiency were part of doing the job well and being a good social worker. Social work manuals of the era reinforced the importance of punctuality, attire, deportment and the correct way to speak and write, particularly to Magistrates or other officials. In more recent times the qualities of a good social worker have been defined as care of others, the courage to accept responsibility for decisions, scepticism about the claims of authority, self criticism, honesty, egalitarian relationships, perseverance and clarity of thought (Hugman and Smith, 1995). Conversely, bad social workers could be expected to be self-serving, indecisive or evasive about accepting responsibility, disempowered, naive, power-hungry, and lacking in resolution and clarity. Most social workers probably fall somewhere in between, pretty much like the client group they serve. The resulting struggle with the ambiguity of being (Husband, 1995) is at the heart of both the clients’ and the social workers’ relationship and stories. This is the stuff of the soul of knowing life first hand and existing in that context (Moore, 1992). After all, professionals are people too.

The contextual dynamic

For risk-averse bureaucracies, managers and some social workers the uncertainty of the day-to-day work cannot be left to the vagaries of an individual professional’s judgment. Policies, procedures and practice tools are established to lessen risk and provide greater assurance about what will be done (Jordan and Parton, 2004). The challenge for the profession is to be explicit about the theories, assumptions and agendas that make up the frame (Morley, 2003). Promotion of best practice models needs to be critiqued through a reflective practice process that takes account of the context in which the activity occurs (Connolly, 2001; Fook, 1996;
O’Donoghue, 2003). Such an approach can be problematic given the powerful political and organizational forces that often drive the introduction of ‘best practice.’

The current implementation of The Baseline Review (2004) by the Department of Child Youth and Family provides an example of the inherent tension for practitioners. The Review identified that the process of risk assessment used by the Department needs to be supplemented by other tools, both for managing hugely increasing demand for child protection investigations, and for lessening organisational risk. Projects are now underway to develop further tools to supplement the Risk Estimation System and to share the risk of demand management. Funding for increased numbers of social workers has also been approved. Given the highly politicised, reactive and crisis-driven context CYF operates in, such measures on their own are unlikely to be effective. Attention to relationships and the ethos that empowers staff and improves their professional capability are essential elements for CYF to achieve what is expected from the Baseline Review. In order to enable reflective practice in an organization like CYF there needs to be significant attention paid to ensuring social workers are adequately supported by supervisory expertise and practices. Enhanced communication with management and development of agreed common goals across the organization are also essential. Additionally, encouragement of curiosity about the effectiveness of the work done through client evaluation, and more active peer review and action research processes will enhance outcomes for clients and improve organisational creativity and energy. The management activity and organisational focus need to be based firmly on the staff and the relationships within and external to the organisation that are critical to good enough work (Turnell, 2004, Vanstone, 1995).

**Learning from the worst**

It is in our thinking and talking about what does and doesn’t work that the general context of social work needs to be more actively recognised (Fook, 1996). Much of our work is in being alongside ordinary people in their often extraordinary struggles with day-to-day experiences. Occasionally such work becomes very public because of a dramatic or horrific event such as the death of a child. Official reviews and inquiry into such situations invariably identify a whole raft of things that haven’t worked, or that have gone wrong. Months and sometimes years of complex intervention and work are simplified into failure and ‘worst practice’ on the basis of a poor outcome. The argument Ferguson advances is that even in those situations there will have been actions that were effective. From such a perspective a case can be made that there is valuable learning about what works when we examine the worst rather than the best. Interestingly Snowden supports this view in his discussion about Managing Serendipity in the field of information technology. He points out that it is the stories of failure that spread in organisations; that this is natural practice; and that imposing structured processes onto natural learning and knowledge transfer is both unwise and potentially dangerous.
(Snowden, 2003). It seems there is a consensus possible across disciplines that learning can occur from the worst.

Within social work there is increasing recognition of the utility of research techniques and disciplines as part of a more rigorous examination of what works on an ongoing basis. The extent to which social workers formulate hypotheses, analyse situations and apply ‘practice knowledge’ or ‘practice wisdom’ is variable and differs from worker to worker (Klein and Bloom, 1995; Sheppard, Newstead and Ryan, 2001). Using critical reflective practice provides a way for this to be done routinely, naturally and developmentally, rather than as a reaction to failure (Fook, 1996). Intuitively I would also contend that widespread use of critical reflective practice in the context of learning social service organisations would reduce the likelihood and incidence of worst outcomes. A critical practice ethos in most of those situations can make a difference because of ongoing agreement and identification about what actions are working and the intimate involvement and ever-present voice of the client in the reflective dialogue. Having moved from CYF to an NGO I have seen at first hand the day-to-day use of such an approach in complex child protection situations in work with foodbank clients. In my mind there is considerable merit in enduring operational dialogues about effective work between clients and workers and managers. Learning from the worst should not solely be a by-product of dramatic outcome failures or blaming. Learning from the worst is the shadow cast by active worker, organisational and client reflection on the small steps of social work that occur day in and day out. To this end a model for Effective Practice is proposed to guide such critical reflection in the workplace.

**Effective practice in context – explaining the diagram**

The effective practice diagram shows how dimensions of practice wisdom, client experience, the organisational environment, and critically reflective practice provide the context for achieving consensus on what works. Curiosity, creativity, empowerment, and action underpin the contextual framework and draw the differing dimensions together. The quadrant of practice wisdom/client experience shows the interaction of clients’ and workers’ experience, knowledge and qualities. Client experience/critical reflective practice brings together the shared relationships and the importance of understanding and working with the complexities of the client’s world in a respectful and reflective way. Inclusive learning organisation/critical reflective practice highlights the components of effective management, professional supervision and care of staff essential to a dynamic learning environment. Practice wisdom/the inclusive learning organisation identifies the significance of finding common ground about goals and data gathering across the organisation. The ethos for getting on with the work supported by the organisation comes from encouragement, self-responsibility, scepticism and clarity, all present as a prevailing culture across all members of the organisation. The consensus emerges from the total context, where clients, workers,
managers and the organisation focus on what is working.

**The organisation**

Organisationally, a framework that supports and models critical practice is essential. This framework needs to enable working in a climate of progressive uncertainty, and allow staff time to process the occasional but inevitable nitty gritty nastiness they encounter in their work. The nature of relationships and the quality of the workplace’s caring for staff is more important than structures in this respect. At the same time the organisation has to be clear about its expectations and must have established administrative procedures: policy and professional support processes based around supervision and debriefing; effective workload monitoring; and a forum for staff discussion, debate and reflection.

Accessible and visible management and team leadership is equally significant. Such an environment is a frame and a point of reference that staff can rely on in the midst of chaos. In management-speak hard infrastructure is essential in organisations where the front end is soft in terms of dealing with the unpredictable, difficult and sometimes dangerous (Ballard, 2004). Central to this environment and frame are the issues of relationships and the exercise of authority. Chaotic and abusive clients can be mirrored by chaotic and abusive organisations and vice versa. My view is that social work management is social work practice and when conceptualised as such provides a way for social service organisations to focus on effective practice. O’Donoghue (2003) partially moves towards this view of supervision as social work practice. Workers operate well in an environment where they are treated as responsible thinking adults who know their business and can contribute to the organisation’s development in a responsible way. Vanstone (1995) articulates inclusive management, effective communication, common goals and a curiosity about results as a management model suited to the function and purposes of social service organisations. Above all, managers must have heart for the work being done and be able to translate social work perspectives and issues into understandable language for boards, chief executives of agencies and their funders.

**Clients as stakeholders and partners**

The voice of clients and their presence in organisational processes is critical to understanding what works and what is effective (Duncan and Sparks, 2003). Social work organisations seem to be more ambivalent about including clients as stakeholders and active partners than health providers or schools. Boards of trustees and health consumer groups are systemically entrenched in mandated roles. Within social work the inequality of relationships, particularly where workers are in social control roles with statutory power, undoubtedly contributes to this ambiguity. Notions of exercising authority skillfully (Turnell, 2004), research with client
empowerment as a key principle (Maidment, 2004), and practice approaches based on dimensions of respect, empathy, curiosity and time (Milner, 2004) provide some of the opportunities for client feedback, and partnership in service development and in identifying effective practice.

In the United Kingdom the Social Care Institute for Excellence has recently released a report examining client participation in services at Governance and evaluative levels. It concludes that there is much to be done to fully incorporate client involvement in partnership and for organisations to use client suggestions for service improvement.

In New Zealand iwi providers and grassroots self-help organisations are likely to have active client service input. NGOs will frequently have client partnerships through volunteer programmes, participation at board level and regular evaluation processes. A recent report by the New Zealand Christian Council of Social Services (2004) provides some insight into the range of client involvement in service development through the evaluation feedback loop. There is no similar process in statutory social work by CYFs but their move towards a strengths-based approach may encourage greater involvement by clients and greater presence of the client’s voice. The more widespread the practice of actively supporting clients involvement in services becomes the more likely it is that organisations and practitioners will learn and reflect on what works on a regular basis.

The shared solution is best

Reliance by organisations and workers on technical-rational processes focused on risk and audit subverts social work knowledge, skill and creativity, ignores the client’s voice and partnership, and creates a hollow and illusory myth of best practice. The importance of building from the core social work practice context of ambiguity and uncertainty is essential (Jordan and Parton, 2004). What happens in practice relies in the end on the worker’s judgment, skill and ability to appreciate and make sense of multiple complex perspectives. The increasing and ill-defined use of the term best practice needs reflection and debate if we are to be true to the roots of social work. Curiosity about what works is a central step amidst the small steps of social work. Sharing stories about our worst moments, and learning from our mistakes or less than satisfactory efforts, informs the development of wise practice and sustains the successful changes of clients. Regularly reaching a consensus with all involved that the work is effective, gives an assurance about work in progress. Such an assurance is invaluable because it is anchored in the context of clients, workers, managers and organisations facing uncertainty together. It can’t get much better than that.

References

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