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Social Work Practice in the Early Years:
A Focus on Wellbeing

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Social Work at Massey University, New Zealand.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examined social worker’s perspectives of effective social work practice in the early years of children’s lives. Through analysing first-person accounts from social workers, this research project sought to gain an understanding of what practices social workers believe contribute to wellbeing and to good outcomes for families during the preschool years. This thesis also examined barriers to effective practice as identified by the participants.

In order to achieve this aim, 10 semi-structured interviews were carried out with social workers all of whom had worked in the profession for at least two years. These interviews were thematically analysed using a qualitative inductive approach.

The research found that the support relationship social workers build with families is crucial to ensuring good outcomes, as is working collaboratively with other agencies, and working to support families where structural and systemic issues create challenges for family life. Participants also described a number of factors that impeded their ability to achieve this effective practice, including expectations from agencies and funding bodies that limited the time they could spend with families, and a lack of support for enacting change at a structural level.

Findings from this research have implications for all social work service providers supporting families in the early years. The findings indicated that service providers have a responsibility to ensure that social workers have the time and skills to develop a strong supportive relationship with families. Furthermore, service providers working with families in the early years must consider how social workers are supported to: collaborate with other agencies; and to identify and work to change structural issues that impact on family life and compromise wellbeing. Further research and exploration is needed to determine the factors that contribute to effective practice including the best ways of supporting service providers and social workers to engage in interventions at the micro, meso, and macro levels and facilitate wellbeing for families in the early years.
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Approval for this research was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract..................................................................................................................................................iii

Acknowledgements...............................................................................................................................iv

Chapter 1: Introduction .........................................................................................................................1
  1.1 The study ......................................................................................................................................1
  1.2 Rationale and background to the thesis ....................................................................................2
  1.3 Chapter outlines ...........................................................................................................................5
  1.4 Conclusion ...................................................................................................................................6

Chapter 2: The context of social work practice ....................................................................................7
  2.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................................7
  2.2 The international and local context of service provision ...........................................................7
  2.3 Legislation and social service delivery .........................................................................................10
    2.3a Statutory child welfare ..............................................................................................................11
    2.3b Non-government organisations ..............................................................................................12
    2.3c Education ................................................................................................................................12
  2.4 Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................13

Chapter 3: A review of effective practice and associated challenges ..................................................14
  3.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................................14
  3.2 The importance of the service-user relationship .........................................................................14
    3.2a Strengths-based approaches .....................................................................................................16
    3.2b The importance of time ............................................................................................................17
  3.3 The role of culture .........................................................................................................................18
  3.4 Material circumstances ..................................................................................................................20
  3.5 Working collaboratively ...............................................................................................................22
  3.6 Offering a range of intervention modalities ...............................................................................22
  3.7 Challenges and barriers ...............................................................................................................26
    3.7a Neo-liberalism, managerialism and the service-user relationship ...........................................26
    3.7b The tension: Individual and structural approaches .................................................................27
  3.8 Conclusion ...................................................................................................................................29

Chapter 4: Research methodology and methods ..................................................................................31
  4.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................................31
  4.2 Qualitative methodology .............................................................................................................31
  4.3 Methods ........................................................................................................................................33
    4.3a Ethical protocols .........................................................................................................................33
6.7c Developing parenting skills ................................................................. 72
6.8 Conclusion ................................................................................................. 75

Chapter 7: Challenges to achieving effective practice ........................................ 76
7.1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 76
7.2 Collaboration ............................................................................................... 76
7.3 The impact of administrative tasks ............................................................. 77
  7.3a Positive aspects of administrative tasks ................................................. 78
  7.3b Struggles with administrative tasks and funding requirements ............... 78
  7.3c Proposed solutions .................................................................................. 80
7.4 The challenge of cultural matching ............................................................. 81
7.5 Influencing societal issues .......................................................................... 81
  7.5a Identifying issues ....................................................................................... 82
  7.5b Limited attempts at change ..................................................................... 82
  7.5c Voices are not heard ................................................................................ 83
  7.5d An example of a social issue: Housing .................................................. 83
7.6 Conclusion ................................................................................................. 85

Chapter 8: Discussion ....................................................................................... 86
8.1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 86
8.2 Micro level: Relational-based social work .................................................. 87
  8.2a The crucial foundation ............................................................................. 87
  8.2b Who is responsible? ............................................................................... 89
  8.2c The support relationship and child wellbeing ......................................... 92
  8.2d Challenges to establishing positive support relationships ..................... 93
8.3 Meso level: Collaboration .......................................................................... 94
8.4 Macro level: Perspective and action .......................................................... 95
  8.4a Awareness of structural factors ............................................................... 96
  8.4b Barriers to change and working within the system ................................ 96
8.5 Conclusion ................................................................................................. 97

Chapter 9: Conclusion ....................................................................................... 99
9.1 Summary of the findings ............................................................................ 99
9.2 Recommendations and implications for policy and practice ..................... 102
9.3 Reflection on the research process ............................................................ 103
  9.3a Limitations .............................................................................................. 104
  9.3b Areas for further research ..................................................................... 105
9.4 Conclusion ................................................................................................. 108
References .................................................................................................................................................. 109
Appendix A: Email confirmation of low-risk ethics application granted ......................... 124
Appendix B: Information sheet ............................................................................................................. 126
Appendix C: Sign-up sheet ....................................................................................................................... 129
Appendix D: Participant consent form - Individual ............................................................................. 131
Appendix E: Interview guide .................................................................................................................. 132
Appendix F: List of initial codes ............................................................................................................. 135