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Social workers’ perspectives: How can children and young people who have had contact with both Care and Protection and Mental Health Services be supported to experience positive outcomes?

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

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2018
Abstract

This thesis explored social workers’ perspectives on how children and young people who have had contact with both care and protection and mental health services can be supported to experience positive outcomes. Through thematically analysing semi-structured interviews conducted with social workers, it examined the barriers to positive outcomes and the ways in which social workers are able to utilise practice approaches which can make a positive difference in the lives of children and young people. A particular focus was given to the ways that neoliberal beliefs shaped the policy environment that governed social work practice under the Fifth National-led Coalition Government between 2008 and 2017. The thesis found that, even in this environment, social workers were able to choose to practice according to social work approaches that make a difference; particularly strength-based practice, child centred practice, focusing on family, and collaboration.

The findings of this thesis imply that social workers can make a difference regardless of the policies that govern them. However, barriers and gaps in services cannot be overcome by social work practice alone and need attention from policy makers. In particular, effective intervention for complex trauma that takes into account the long developmental course that trauma related difficulties take and involves both clinical and family-based interventions needs to be prioritised by policy makers.
Acknowledgements

I want to start by thanking the social workers who gave up their time to meet with me and contribute to this thesis. Your passion, your expertise, and your bravery in sharing your experiences and opinions are invaluable to me.

To my supervisors, Dr Nicky Stanley-Clarke and Dr Michael Dale, thank you so much for all of the help that you gave me throughout the last two years. Thank you for your insight, advice and expertise, for making me laugh, and for never giving up on me.

Josh, my husband, my hero and my rock. I literally would not have done this without you. Thank you for the hours you spent proof-reading, listening to me and encouraging me. I’ll never forget your many very wise words and your endless patience with me! “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour. If they stumble, the first will lift up his friend.” – Ecclesiastes 4:9-10. Thank you for always lifting me up.

Thank you to my family who always supported me. A special thanks to Caro and Brian for driving me around back roads to interviews, to Christine for taking care of me for all those months, and to Chris and Rhonda for praying for me and encouraging me.

Kim, thank you for making me feel like everything would be ok even when I thought I was never going to finish! I really appreciated your encouragement, your proof-reading, and you sharing your own experiences with me so I could feel I was not alone.

To all of my colleagues in Oranga Tamariki, Mental Health and the community over the years, thank you for inspiring me that together we as a society can make a difference in the lives of children and young people. In the words of Commissioner James Gordon, “you’re going to make a difference. A lot of times it won’t be huge, it won’t be visible even. But it will matter just the same.”

And to the children and young people who I have worked with, thank you for amazing me with who you are and for inspiring me to want to help others who go through what you have been through. C. S. Lewis said that “hardships often prepare ordinary people for extraordinary destinies,” and that is what I believe for you.
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