Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
Experts in Uncertainty

Social Work in Child Protection

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Social Work

at Massey University

Palmerston North

Shannon Pakura

2008
Abstract

This research examines what motivates child protection social workers and the factors which support them to continue practicing in New Zealand’s statutory agency, Child Youth and Family. Child welfare services are under stress with increasing workloads. The work is difficult and the hours are long. Workers manage ambiguity, uncertainty and they make judgments that no other agency or professional is called upon to make, within a system that requires them to constantly reassess priorities and Attracting and retaining workers in the child protection field of practice is a priority for Child Youth and Family.

The thesis examines the motivating factors which encourage a social worker to remain practicing in the statutory child protection field. Understanding and strengthening these factors may assist New Zealand’s statutory child protection agency; Child Youth and Family to increase the capability, capacity and experience of its professional workforce. Two methods were used to gather information for this study; in-depth individual interviews and a focus group. An inductive approach was used to identify common themes and challenges.

The key findings of the research showed that the quality of supervision and the relationships with one's supervisor and other professionals are critical. Self-care is a priority for the individual and operational policies must be clear, concise and accessible. Business and social work values guide the leadership of the statutory child welfare organisation. Workloads need to be manageable. Services to Maori require re-investment. A culture of acknowledging and celebrating the achievements of the agency and its staff should be infused throughout the organisation and the general public made aware of the efforts and hard work of these professionals.

The findings have identified that the needs of statutory child protection social workers are modest. Providing the systems that help sustain them in their role and ensuring the support mechanisms are operating will assist Child Youth and Family to recruit and retain a competent, experienced and resilient workforce to support and provide services to New Zealand children and their families.
Acknowledgments

Completing this study would not have been realised without a number of people who have been steadfast in their support, encouragement and guidance.

Firstly, to my two Massey supervisors Mary Nash and Robyn Munford; Mary and Robyn’s infinite patience, their quiet and supportive approach created a safe environment to ask questions and to learn new skills. They provided the motivation and encouragement to complete this thesis. My heart-felt thanks to you both.

To the brave and courageous social workers who took part in this study. New Zealand’s vulnerable children benefit from your commitment, passion and determination. Thank you for agreeing to be part of this study.

To my mother, Barbara Williams and my friend Robyn Hooper, you nurtured my spirit, encouraged and have supported me in all of my endeavors.

    Tenei te mihi atu ki a koutou katoa.

Finally, to my brother who passed away 05 August 2006.

    This is for you Hira
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section One Literature Review</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter One</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attraction to Child Protection Work and Support Mechanisms for Staff</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context and Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Attraction to the Child Protection Role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Support Mechanisms for Child Protection Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Two</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resilience and the Strengths and Challenges of Child Protection Work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context and Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualising Resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilient Workers in the Child Protection System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths and Challenges of Child Protection Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Section Two

### Chapter Three

### Research Methods  
- Research Process and Methods  
- Ethical Procedures  
- Summary

### Section Three Voices and Findings

### Chapter Four

#### The Findings of the Individual Interviews
- Themes  
- The Attraction of Child Protection Social Work  
- The Support Mechanisms  
- The Strengths and Challenges of the Role  
- Summary

### Chapter Five

#### The Findings of the Focus Group
- The Attraction of the Child Protection Role  
- The Support Mechanisms that are Important to the Role  
- The Strengths and Challenges of the Role  
- Summary
Section Four: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

Chapter Six
Discussion of the Findings 102
The Attraction of the Child Protection Role 102
The Support Mechanisms for Child Protection Social Work 105
The Strengths and Challenges of Child Protection Work 113
Summary 121

Chapter Seven
Conclusion 122
Key Finding 122
Key Recommendations 125

References 131

Appendix One: Approval from Massey Ethics Committee 145
Appendix Two: Approval from CYF Research and Access Committee 146
Appendix Three: Information Sheet 149
Appendix Four: Interview Guide for Individual and Focus Group Interviews 152