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**Strengthening Professional Practice -
the Role of Practice Manager
in New Zealand
Child, Youth and Family**

A research project presented in
partial fulfilment of the requirements of a
Master of Social Work
at Massey University

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2004

Strengthening Professional Practice – the Role of Practice Manager in New Zealand Child, Youth and Family

Abstract

This research considers the role of **practice manager** in New Zealand Child, Youth and Family (CYF) by exploring its contribution to professional social work practice and by reporting on the intrinsic difficulties in the role. The research adopts a strengths based approach that examines both the individual professional perspective and the organisational context. A systemic analysis probes the dynamics and complexities that confront the advocacy of ‘best practice’ in a statutory organisation.

Statutory child protection work is arguably at the sharpest end of social work practice and it is being performed in an increasingly turbulent environment characterised by continuous change, complex case dynamics and scarce resources. Social service management is often a fragile balance between delivering quality services and quantitative outcomes within fiscal constraints. Practice leadership is poised between the fiercely competing needs of staff care and client service. This research seeks to understand the role of the practice manager in this landscape and to examine how these inherent tensions are interpreted and managed by individual practitioners.

Three methodologies are used to generate the data in this dissertation – a focus group, a small number of individual in-depth interviews and a postal survey to all practice managers currently in the role. An inductive approach is used to explore the research questions and to identify common themes.

The key finding of the research is that the participants believe that the role has strengthened professional practice in CYF by refocusing the work back to ‘best practice’, and by providing professional supervision and practice leadership to staff. These improvements are seen to have promoted better outcomes for children and families. The

role faces a number of challenges – addressing the demanding work environment issues, and also realising the potential of the collective group to contribute to national practice and policy development.

This research has begun the formal evaluation of the practice manager role and it is anticipated that it will promote an ongoing discourse that both affirms and challenges the place of best practice advocacy in Child, Youth and Family. Ultimately the hope is that it will create a positive impact on service delivery to the children and families who are at the heart of this debate.

Acknowledgements

A number of people have contributed to this research project and I wish to thank them for their encouragement, support and assistance.

Firstly, sincere thanks to my two Massey supervisors Mary Ann Baskerville and Carole Adamson. Mary Ann and Carole have both been extremely thorough, challenging and supportive; their knowledge and expertise have been greatly appreciated.

I wish to thank NZCYF, especially the Chief Social Worker's Office, for permitting me to carry out this research project. I would also like to acknowledge all the practice managers who participated in this study. I am extremely grateful for the time, effort and reflection involved in the interview sessions and questionnaires. I only hope that I have done justice to the information that was given to me, and that the findings accurately reflect the participants' perspectives and views.

Finally, I wish to thank my family for their support. In particular, I would like to thank my husband, Barry, and my two children, Sam and Anna, who have been incredibly encouraging and supportive to me during the course of my study.

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