

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.

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.

Ariella Bond

2018

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.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to all families and those who are working to support them.

Firstly, I want to acknowledge the social workers who participated in this study, generously giving up their time for the interview, and openly sharing their stories. Without you this thesis would not be possible. Thank you!

I would like to thank my supervisors Professor Robyn Munford and Professor Jackie Sanders for their patience, support, and advice. Thank you for guiding me through the process and encouraging me with the writing. Your input and knowledge of the topic area has been incredibly helpful. Your genuine desire to ensure families are supported to achieve wellbeing has, and will continue to, inspire me.

To my husband Sam, I could not have completed this thesis and my Masters without your support, encouragement, and understanding. At times you had more faith that I would finish this than I did. Thank you for believing in me and being my rock! Thanks also to my parents for the love of learning that you instilled in me. I wouldn't be where I am today without you!

Finally, thank you to the many incredible social workers that I have had the privilege to work alongside over the past decade. Your commitment to families and passion for the mahi constantly inspires me. I cannot name you all here, but you are my inspiration, and have been my supporters, listening ear, and encouragers along this journey.

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

4.3b Recruitment	34
4.3c Data collection	35
4.3d Data analysis	37
4.4 Reflections on the research process	40
4.5 Sample characteristics	41
4.6 Conclusion	42
Chapter 5: Social work practice in the early years	43
5.1 Introduction	43
5.2 Participants and early years organisations	43
5.2a Criteria for involvement	43
5.2b Scope of the role	44
5.2c Length of interventions	45
5.3 Positive outcome stories	45
5.4 Conclusion	48
Chapter 6: Effective practice and good outcomes	50
6.1 Introduction	50
6.2 Time	50
6.3 The support relationship	51
6.3a Why the support relationship is crucial	52
6.3b The support relationship takes time and commitment	52
6.3c Developing the support relationship	54
6.4 Cultural responsiveness	57
6.4a Cultural awareness	58
6.4b Cultural humility	58
6.4c Reconnecting to culture	59
6.4d 'Insider' cultural connection	60
6.5 Determining what support a family needs	61
6.5a Conducting a thorough assessment	61
6.5b Being needs-led and flexible	62
6.6 Balancing a child focus with family support	64
6.6a Balancing a child and family focus	64
6.6b Child safety	65
6.6c Focusing on developmental needs	66
6.7 Providing meaningful support to the family	68
6.7a Support for external and internal factors	68
6.7b Capacity to parent	71

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