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Limits to Partnership Working: developing relationship based approaches with children and their families.

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Abstract

Located within a context of political and legislative change, social work professionals are required to navigate the tensions of organisational imperatives, which are highly procedural and metric driven, with brokering more effective relationships with children and their families. Achieving effective partnership working is premised on the development of relational ways of working with children and their families where trust is formed through negotiation and co-creation.

The recent emergence of 'Fast-track' approaches to the education of social workers, reflects a shift away from developing skills in critical and analytical reflection, towards an employer led approach, that prioritises the need to produce 'ready to practice' social workers. Alongside the changes being introduced to the education and training of social workers, we have also seen revolutionary change in the family justice system, culminating in the Children and Families Act 2014, and the 26 week timeframe for the completion of care cases. These changes can be seen to reflect a political agenda that increasingly equates efficiency with quality.

This paper explores current contradictions within social work practice. Pivotal to the discussion is defining the role of social work within a contemporary English jurisdiction. Adopting deeper relational ways of working with children and their families may help to define the boundaries of a profession that appears to have lost its identity. Rather than facing the prospect that the door is firmly closed on the possibility of reclaiming practice that both prioritises and values professional judgement and discretion, this paper reflects upon some very good examples of relational work with children and their families by social workers within the private, voluntary and independent sector.

Keywords: partnership working; relational work; reform; family law

Introduction

Within a context of political change, intensifying public sector cuts, and excessive regulation, many commentators have argued that professionals working in organisations, and agencies responsible for the welfare and protection of children, continue to rely upon instrumental and prescriptive approaches to working with children and their families (Parton, 2008; Broadhurst et al., 2010a, 2010b; Munro, 2010, 2011; Gupta, 2016; Gupta et al., 2016; Featherstone et al., 2017). The emphasis in practice has been to reduce risk, by gathering more information, and a reliance on bureaucratic, procedural and formulaic approaches to decision making. The impact for social workers is that a disproportionate amount of time is spent within the office migrating information from one document to another, with less time available for face-to-face relational work with children and their

families. Consequently, social workers have less opportunity to critically analyse and reflect upon the information that is required in order to produce a detailed and holistic assessment. The consequence of these changes to a profession that has experienced a shift away from relational work with families to a highly regulated working environment, is that social workers feel less able to use professional discretion in their work, or to be able to rely effectively upon their own professional judgement. These observations are well rehearsed; The Munro Review of Child Protection (Part One: A Systems Analysis, 2010), and the second report, The Munro Review of Child Protection (2011), made recommendations that aimed to bring to the fore the development of social work skills and respect for professional judgement and discretion. Key to this was an emphasis on rebuilding effective partnerships with children and families.

Whilst there have been other notable challenges to the bureaucratisation of social work and calls for a return to partnership working and relationship based practice (Ruch, 2005; De Boer and Cody, 2007; Broadhurst and Holt, 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Featherstone et al. 2011; Megele, 2015; Holt, 2016), this paper examines legal, conceptual and educational factors that we argue, whilst seemingly well intentioned, inevitably undermine these aspirations.

Relationship based practice

Although many have written about relationship based practice and partnership working, see for example Ruch, (2005, 2010); Trevithick (2003), there seems to be no unifying definition. This can be attributed to the complexity of social work, a profession that is engaged in working with children and families who experience a range of multiple and complex vulnerabilities within constantly changing organisational structures, wider structural and resource constraints and economic and political discourses. Nevertheless, as Howe suggests *"If you really render social work to its basics then there isn't much left other than the relationship between worker and client, practitioner and service user".* (2015, p vii, in Megele, 2015). The principle of partnership working is based upon a foundation of best practice research, which is premised on establishing positive relationships with parents, facilitates engagement with services and is substantially beneficial when seeking best outcomes for children. Partnership working elicits the details and understandings of the family that are crucially important when social workers are making an assessment of risk or determining where a child should live (Dawson and Berry, 2002; Morris, 2012).

There is considerable evidence that relationship based practice and effective partnership working with families can be beneficial to practitioners and families. In a small qualitative study exploring helping relationships De Boer and Coady (2007) suggested that strong working alliances were built between workers and parents that marked collaboration, respect and honesty and the development of emotional depth and closeness. These alliances allowed the working through of inevitable difficulties and conflicts. Even where there were serious concerns about child maltreatment and children were to be removed from families, they suggest that good helping relationships remained of benefit to workers and their clients. The relationships were considered to help honest disclosures, create nurturing and supportive climates, instil hope, generate mutual ownership of service plans and increase the accuracy of assessments and appropriate interventions. This resonates with the work of Freeman and Hunt some 19 years previously (1988), where they concluded

a lack of partnership working with children's services throughout care proceedings was crucially important in respect of outcomes for children. Freeman and Hunt found that services offered to families before they reached court were often inadequate; few parents felt they had participated in decision making, most felt ill prepared for court proceedings, and the majority felt marginalised, intimidated and confused. Furthermore, the majority of solicitors lacked specific expertise in this area of law, and little support was available following proceedings.

Moreover, Freeman and Hunt identified that despite parents often denying that they had harmed their children, and holding negative views about social workers, they reacted positively to professionals who were direct, truthful and sensitive. Demonstrating respect for parents, even with small acts, could be extremely important in contributing to an effective working relationship.

Lewis-Brooke and Bradley (2011), report on a wider project concerning the development of Family Intervention Projects (FIPs), working with families with multiple problems. Following Think Family (SETF, 2008a), the initial FIPs were established, to address issues of antisocial behaviour with families who faced significant and long-standing disadvantage. These FIPs were a non-statutory service to families, offering voluntary support via multidisciplinary teams, including social work, mental health, education, youth work, and adult services. A key worker would be proactive in undertaking significant direct work with families. Not surprisingly many families involved with FIP projects had already been involved with previous forms of interventions. A crucial aspect of the key workers' role was to build a trusting relationship with parents, which focused on developing skills and problem solving, with a view to parents becoming independent. Lewis-Brooke and Bradley summarise outcome data relating to families referred to FIPs in 2009. The data suggests the intervention had a positive effect on families, with significant improvements in the referral rates for anti-social behaviour, truancy and school exclusions. The number of families escalated to child protection referrals reduced, with similar improvements in the areas of; mental health, domestic violence, drug and alcohol referrals. Importantly, by 2010 data suggested that this impact remained for families who had been followed up 9-14 months after the FIP intervention had concluded.

There have been criticisms of FIPs, based around several evaluations of the intervention that question the methodology and reporting of results (Dillane et al. 2001; Nixon et al. 2006; Gregg, 2007b), and significant challenges concerning the moral imperative of the design and intention (see for example Gregg, 2010). However, despite criticism, it does appear that the interventions had a positive impact for some families, who experienced significant and multiple problems. The key element appeared to be the skill of the social workers in building relationships, and adopting the social work values of empowerment, respect, and value for individuals. As Lewis-Brooke and Bradley suggest:

'FIP is a model that was developed to work with the most socially excluded families who have traditionally been the most difficult to engage. The success of this model would appear to be linked to its ability to be creative in its work with families and to offer intensive and at times long-term intervention to families, using the relationship between worker and service

used to build up self-esteem, and to model problem-solving skills and relationship skills' (2011, p73).

More recently innovative projects such as the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) model, that introduces a multidisciplinary problem solving approach, demonstrate how effective focused work with parents can be, when there are multifaceted and complex issues (Harwin et al. 2014).

Duschinsky and Kirk (2014), conducted a study of undergraduate students to examine the motivation for studying social work, and the findings concurred with previous research (Furness 200; Facchini and Giraldo 2012) suggesting that primary motivations focused on the ability to make a difference to the lives of the individuals and groups they would be working with. Students reported wanting to support and empower people to take control of their lives and to make informed choices, and to help give people a voice. Duschinsky and Kirk further support the work of Gilligan (2007) in stating that whilst many students were aware of structural and political issues in the causes and explanations for family difficulties, the emphasis on helping and empowering people implies that they anticipated entering a profession where relationship based working with families was pivotal to their work.

Thus there is evidence that there is a disconnect between the expectations of some social workers entering the profession in order to work with families, and the practice reality of the need to assess and process families quickly and efficiently. Given the evidence concerning the efficacy of relationship based practice in different social work contexts, and the motivations of those entering the social work profession we now discuss the constraints to partnership working embedded within the legal landscape, practice guidance and reforms to social work education.

The legal landscape

The principle of partnership working is enshrined within the Children Act 1989, supported at that time by a political discourse that prioritized and supported individuals and families, removing control away from the state. The legislation reflected this ideology, and implicit is that involvement with the family must be a partnership, that was premised upon the necessity of social workers adopting a relationship-based approach with parents, when important decisions were being made in respect of their children. The involvement of the state was considered unlikely to yield positive outcomes for children, except where children were considered to be at risk, and when living away from the birth family was the only option for the child (Dawson and Berry, 2002; Brophy, 2006; O' Leary et al., 2013). Contradictions and ambiguities surrounding partnership working within the Children Act 1989 focus around a general laissez faire approach that defended the birth family and children's rights and where opportunities for state intervention should be minimal. The no-order principle s1 (5) reinforced the message that the court must start from the position that no order shall be made unless the court considers that doing so would be better for the child than making no order at all.

Broadhurst and Holt (2010), provide an overview of research evidencing the difficulty of embedding the principle of working in partnership from the Children Act 1989 into practice.

Focusing on the work of Kaganas (1995), Broadhurst and Holt (2010) highlight issues in relation to the concept and parameters of partnership working with families ranging from those where children are 'in need' to those where children are 'at risk of significant harm', and they draw on work that raises issues with regard to meaningfully engaging with parents. In this paper we do not underestimate the difference between family support and intervention and the complexities of engaging in partnership working under different circumstances, rather we argue that relationship based working at any stage of helping children and families in need can be beneficial. Recognition of the difficulties of enacting the 'partnership principle' may go some way to identifying ways of working that promote the ideals but below we outline how reforms to the family justice system limit the potential for social workers to engage in relationship based work with children and their families.

Modernisation of the family courts

The modernization agenda of the family court, culminating in the Children and Families Act 2014, has been described as 'revolutionary' (Munby, 2014). Legislative change facilitated the transition to a single unified court system, and the introduction of a timeframe for the completion of care proceedings. The implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014, introduced on a statutory basis relates to changes to the timetable of proceedings and expert evidence. Section 14 of the Act deals with time limits and timetables in care, supervision and other family proceedings. The Act places the 26 week timetable set out in the revised Public Law Outline [PD 36C] in statute, inserting the provisions into s 32 Children Act 1989.

Section 32(1)(a) requires the court to draw up a timetable with a view to disposing of an application

(i) without delay, and
(ii) in any event within twenty-six weeks beginning with the day on which the application was issued.

The President of the Family Division has been explicitly clear that the 26 weeks is not negotiable or flexible and he took the steps of reinforcing this in the case of *Re S (A Child)* [2014] EWCC B44 (Fam), when he stated:

> 'this deadline can be met, it must be met, it will
> be met. And remember, 26 weeks is [. . .] a maximum,
> not an average or a mean. So many cases will need to
> be finished in less than 26 weeks.'

However, the impact of the 26-week deadline has resulted in concern being raised by commentators such as Broadhurst et al. (2013); Holt (2016); Masson (2016) that this may result in injustices for both children and their families.

Such prescription for the timely completion of cases in care proceedings may be well intentioned in terms of reducing delay for children and families within the systems of the family courts, yet what this may inadvertently do is remove scope for further relationship

based working and innovation and discretion with parents and practitioners at the very last point at which parents can demonstrate scope for change. Judgments from both the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal (*Re B (A Child) (Care Proceedings: Threshold Criteria)* [2013] UKSC 33; *Re B-S (Children)* [2013] EWCA Civ 1146) create further confusion and uncertainty for both parents and social workers.

Changes introduced with the Practice Direction 36c in 2013, and the Children and Families Act 2014 are premised upon effective relationship based approaches within pre-proceedings work, and effective diversion from court wherever it is safe and possible to do so. Where an application to court must be made, it is assumed the work has been undertaken at the pre-proceedings stage and the timeframe of 26 weeks is justified in this context. Whilst the rationale for case resolution in 26 weeks is clear in terms of the timetable for the child, the reality is the delay for the child is often merely shifted to an earlier stage in the process. There is considerable variability of practice at the pre-proceedings stage without judicial oversight in some of the most complex of cases (Holt and Kelly, 2015; Masson, et al. 2013; Jessiman et al. 2009).

Broadhurst et al. (2013), and Masson et al. (2013), identified concerns that accounts from parents involved in pre-proceedings protocols reflected considerable variability in respect of the availability of resources and the quality of pre-proceedings practice. Parental perception of the pre-proceedings process is of a highly regulated and procedural protocol that is a further attempt by the local authority to gather evidence. The pre-proceedings meeting is seen as the last opportunity for many parents – who are given a timeline for change that is driven by a hegemonic concern with the timetable for the child (Holt et al. 2013).

The hegemonic concern with the timetable for the child resonates with Featherstone et al. (2012), who suggest that opportunities to work in partnership with parents are becoming increasingly challenging due to policy and practice changes, which have resulted in highly regulated procedures and approaches to working with parents. Current research that aims to capture the scale and pattern of recurrent care proceedings continues to highlight the need for relationship-based approaches to working with parents from the point of referral (Broadhurst et al. 2015).

The 26 week rule is premised on the belief that holistic assessments have been undertaken prior to an application to court being made, therefore, once an application to court is made, the case should progress swiftly to a conclusion. In reality the quality of assessments has remained unchanged, as more time remains being spent on the gathering of information, than on the analysis and reflection of the information. This is not surprising given there have been no increase in resources, and no relaxation of the surveillance culture that continues to dominate social work practice (Egan et al. 2015). Moreover, in the case of *Re NL* [2014] EWHC 270 (Fam) there is a recognition that a deadline within the family courts may not always be in the best interests of children and families. In this case, Pauffley J stated at para 40: '*Justice must never be sacrificed upon the altar of speed.*'

In cases where the risk to a child is unacceptably high, and where decisions in respect of the permanent removal of a child away from their birth family, it is argued that the no order principle s1 (5) is fundamentally in conflict with an increasingly state paternalistic approach,

which requires the state to intervene to protect the welfare of children. This approach is evident in the inclusion of future harm, used in subsequent policy drivers that placed greater emphasis on adoption, and the development of a target culture to monitor compliance by local authorities. The drive to increase the use of adoption as an outcome for a child when their birth families were assessed to be unsuitable to meet their current or future needs, continued until fairly recently, when we have seen a gradual decline in the number of children placed for adoption.

The decline in the number of children placed for adoption is more likely to be the result of two high profile court judgments on care and adoption cases (*Re B (A Child)* [2013] UKSC 33; *Re B-S (Children)* [2013] EWCA Civ 1146, where the interpretation by local authorities is there now needs to be more detailed assurances that adoption is the best option for the child, rather than a reversal of government policy on adoption.

Notwithstanding the decrease in the number of children being placed for adoption, the rights of birth family continue to be gradually eroded from the initial point of contact with children's social care. Located within a culture of increased regulation and bureaucracy, children's social care has limited resources available to support families who are either on the edge of care, or who experience a range of vulnerabilities, but who have thus far not reached a level of risk that results in the case progressing to the next stage (Morris, 2012).

The role of the Family Court Advisor (CAFCASS) and opportunities for children to initiate proceedings and express their own views are indeed consistent with the requirements under Articles 2, 3, 6 and 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989). However, in a context of cuts to both legal funding, and the introduction of proportionate working practices within CAFCASS, the practice reality seems far removed from the rights enshrined within the UNCRC (Holt and Kelly, 2012).

Practice Guidance: Working Together

The focus on Working Together as providing a resolution to the complexities of partnership working is evident from the number of revisions from the initial policy document published in 1991, and thereafter in 1999, 2006, 2010, and 2013.

As noted elsewhere (Holt and Kelly, 2014) the revisions, and substantial reduction in length in Working Together documents between 2010 and 2013 appeared to undermine partnership working fundamentally. Working Together (2013) paid no attention to the value of partnership working and where working with parents was considered it was in the context of recognising that 'failures in safeguarding systems are often the result of placing adult needs ahead of children, or in guidance to professionals to be more cautious about parents' abilities to sustain change to overcome difficulties' (Holt and Kelly, 2014 p2-3). Working Together 2013 was described as a 'poorly constructed document containing broad generalisations, errors and inaccuracies' (Davies 2013, p15) and has most recently been revised as Working Together 2015. This document remains short at 108 pages, and we argue further undermines partnership working in practice. The key principles in the

document are that a) safeguarding is everyone's responsibility: for services to be effective each professional and organisation should play their full part; and b) there should be a child centred approach: for services to be effective they should be based on a clear understanding of the needs and views of children. (2015, p8-9), again it is clear that 'Effective safeguarding systems are child centred. Failings in safeguarding are too often the result of losing sight of the needs and views of the children within them, or placing the needs of adults ahead of children' (2015, p9).

As such we argue that the revised document perpetuates a 'hidden' constraint to partnership working.

With respect to Early Help the document makes clear that effective early help means agencies working together to identify children and families who would benefit from any early help; undertaking and assessment of the need for early help; and to provide targeted early help services to address the needs of a child and their family which focuses on activity to significantly improve the outcomes for the child (2015, p12). Further local agencies should have in place effective ways to identify and assess emerging problems and potential unmet needs for individual children and families (2015, p12). When talking about 'good assessments' the document remains focussed on child centred practice and whilst holistic approaches involving families and communities, and a direct reference to 'building on strengths as well as identifying difficulties' (2015, p21) appear briefly, the emphasis on information gathering and recording and total lack of reference to relationship working seems problematic. There is one reference that states 'Services may also focus on improving family functioning and building the family's own capability to solve problems; this should be done within a structured, evidence based framework involving regular review to ensure that real progress is being made' (2015, p14).

We argue that whilst the document emphasises the importance of good assessment and information sharing it nevertheless does not promote partnership or relationship based working, indeed those words are never used.

Arguably the document mirrors 'deficit based approaches' in working with families. Deficit-based approaches have traditionally been used in social work as they focus on ways to help identify the needs and problems within a family. This approach indicates the aspects of the family that are failing, and thereby reliant upon resources from outside of the family. A significant problem with this approach is that is often comes too late, when families are in crisis rather than a relationship based approach at a much earlier stage where strengths within the family can be identified and built upon (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993) and as illustrated in the example of the FIPs. Research has shown that deficit-based, professionally driven approaches are not as effective at creating sustainable change as strengths-based, relationship-based approaches (Bogenschneider and Olson, 1998). Whilst there is scant reference to working using strengths and holistic approaches the language of Working Together (2015) could be argued to reflect a value for money approach that recognises the context of scarce resources and limited time for the child.

Power, parental perceptions and relationship based working

As outlined earlier relationship building is central to effective partnership work with children and families. The very nature of social work practice is inherently tense as families who find themselves within either a child protection, family justice system or both; or who require early help are experiencing a range of vulnerabilities that are distressing. The events that precipitate the involvement of children's social care together with the fear of parents losing their children, and the complexities of navigating an array of professional relationships within this context will inevitably impact upon relationship based working and the development of respectful and trusting interactions and practices. It is not surprising, that within an increasingly risk averse culture, parental perception of power and the way it is used by social workers will have a significant impact on the feasibility of partnership working (Munro, 2011).

This supports findings from a study by Dumbrill (2006) where power was identified as a primary influence on parents' perception and reaction to interventions. Dumbrill identified two perceptions of power, firstly parents perceived power as being used over them as a form of control, or, secondly as being used with them occasionally as a form of control, but also as a form of support.

The study also identified three dominant forms of response to these perceptions of power. As Tew (2006) suggests within the context of social work, service users who essentially lack power can and do find ways of resisting or subverting whatever expectations may be placed on them, thus they become seen as difficult or manipulative. In Dumbrill's work some parents fought against practitioners by openly challenging them or they 'played the game' by demonstrating disguised compliance. Others were able to work together with practitioners to form partnerships. Parents who responded in a negative way by openly opposing or feigning cooperation described their experience of social work involvement negatively and felt that power was being used over them in an effort to coerce. Parents who felt that workers were using power with them, by acting as an advocate or positive agent of change, tended to respond more positively to intervention and worked towards agreed goals. Interestingly there was no evidence found of a correlation between a parent's commitment to work with the local authority, where the relationship was of a voluntary as opposed to statutory nature.

The findings of this study suggest that the way in which parents perceive the use of power has a direct impact upon their reaction to support and interventions and their capacity therefore to work in partnership. The response of parents at the initial point of contact with the social work in response to child protection concerns was to assume they risk losing their children. The approach taken by social workers during this initial contact was crucial to effective partnership working between the parent and social worker.

Parents interviewed as part of this study reached the same conclusions about the nature of interventions, they were all of the view that child protection services were more powerful than they were as parents. A defining difference was whether they could foresee this power being used over them in an oppressive and disciplinary manner, or with them as a source of support. The majority of the parents (16 out of 18) described their experiences of child protection services utilizing power in a way that they considered negative. Seven of these

accounts included feelings of significant oppression and described social workers and/or their employers power as absolute, tyrannical, or frightening (Dumbrill, 2006 p30).

These feelings appeared to stem from scepticism in regards to the credibility of the child protection system, not agreeing that plans were in the best interest of their children or due to a perception that their social worker had pre-conceived assumptions about the concerns within the family (see also Jessiman et al. (2009); Holt (2016). It is interesting to consider where such pre-conceived assumptions, if parents are accurate, emanate from. If partnership working is effective then information should,even in the most difficult of circumstances be transparent from all parties.

A particular concerning finding by Dumbrill (2006) (again reflecting Freeman and Hunt, 1988) was that parents felt unable to discuss or challenge plans for their children, as they believed that decisions would be made regardless. Parents also felt powerless when considering challenging authorities in a formal manner in a judicial setting. This was not only due to financial constraints but also because of their capacity to cope with the strain of such a process emotionally, considering the cumulative effect of this in addition to pre-existing concerns.

Despite these findings, nine parents highlighted that child protection services used power in a positive way that enabled them to make positive change. The same sample also identified periods where they felt the social worker was using power over them, suggesting that parents perceive the use of power as fluid and changeable. This is a relatively sophisticated understanding of power, and perhaps as Tew (2006) suggests, social workers might draw upon his matrix to reflect upon what is being experienced in interactions with families. In his paper he outlines a compelling example of social workers engaging in work with women who have experienced domestic violence to outline how the recognition of the interpretation and operation of different forms of power might elucidate the nature of interactions and inform analytical and reflective practice

Parents in Dumbrill's study identified other positive experiences including times when social workers acted as advocates for parents and supported them to access services. Parents felt this evidenced partnership working, as they were all able to work together to provide remedies to injustices. There are clearly opportunities within the context of child protection practice for good partnership working. It requires a relationship-based approach to working with families where the knowledge and skills of social workers can support parents who experience family support systems, child protection and legal procedures as particularly stressful.

Reforms in Social Work Education

Within a climate of concern around the unfilled posts for qualified social workers, and therefore the increased burden on those working in the profession, and a growing concern raised by employers about the readiness to practice of those leaving Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Social Work Task Force report 2009a), a number of 'fast track' approaches to social work education have been introduced since 2010. These approaches include Step Up to Social Work (specifically concerned with targeting improvements in

children's social work, 2010), Frontline (2014), and Think Ahead (specialising in mental health, 2016). These programmes are delivered at postgraduate level and funded by the government. The impetus driving the development of fast-track approaches to training is to increase the quality of workers entering the profession, and to enable local employers to have a substantially increased input to the initial training for social work students, and to develop new routes for practitioners in social work.

Step Up to Social Work, paved the way for the introduction of a new regional partnership model between employers (in practice Local Authorities) and HEIs; with the aim of producing qualified social workers that were better equipped to meet the needs of local communities. Step Up to Social Work was implemented in England in 2010, and was in the first instance, eight regional partnerships of local authorities involved with two HEIs who contributed academic delivery of the programmes. Following roll out of Step up since 2010, entry qualifications for the course are a minimum of 2:1 honours degree, or a minimum of 2:2 honours degree plus a higher degree, in any discipline other than social work. The programmes are full time over 14 months (Post Graduate Diploma in Social Work) or 18 months (Masters in Social Work), and trainees receive a bursary for the duration of the course. In terms of programme structure and curricula, HEIs have some input to the curricula, and they remain bound by professional standards of the PCF (Professional Capabilities Framework) and regulations of the HCPC (Health and Care Professions Council) and QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) in Higher Education. Within the programmes trainees will be expected to complete a minimum of 170 days placement.

Frontline is a slightly different graduate programme, but nevertheless it is a 'fast track' approach in so far as the programme leads to a postgraduate qualification in social work. Entry requirements are the same as with Step Up to Social Work. Trainees spend the first five weeks in a residential training programme to be delivered entirely by Frontline as of 2017, and thereafter will work within local authorities with vulnerable children and families. In year one each trainee will have undertaken 200 days of placement (on the job training) and 46 days of study, and will be eligible for a Postgraduate Diploma in Social Work. In year two practitioners will continue working within Children's Services Departments and will enhance professional development by continuing to study via an on-going leadership development programme, leading to the Masters qualification in social work. The academic aspects of Frontline programmes will be delivered by an in-house team of social work experts and accredited by the University of Bedfordshire.

These initiatives introduced different ways of recruiting candidates; the use of regional assessment centres rather than recruitment via individual HEIs, and will often use a form of psychometric testing alongside the more traditional interview, written test, and group scenario based assessment. As seen below, these approaches may be robust in the first instance, but any attempt to roll these out to more traditional social work education providers with applicants with very different profiles may be problematic.

Perhaps understandably aspects of these approaches remain largely untested, since these initiatives are relatively new, and to date only one evaluation of Step Up to Social Work commissioned by the DfE has been undertaken (Smith et al., 2013). This evaluation, which looked at short term outcomes only, identified strengths in terms of processes and

outcomes of the initial programmes, including: a recognition that course content were seen as being broadly fit for purpose and capable of meeting the needs of such an intensive training programme; programme delivery and support was appropriate to the needs of trainees; a recognition of the potential strength of partnership arrangements; a positive value of the programme by participants; a recognition that recruitment and selection criteria and resources were robust and effective mechanisms for selecting high quality trainees; good academic results, and a perception by employers that trainee attributes and skills are positive. Balanced against these strengths were some concerns about the feasibility and desirability of a generic social work qualification in the context of deliberately targeting improvements in children's social work; the targeted nature of recruitment having an impact reducing the diversity of the workforce; the level of support needed for trainees on such a demanding programme and crucially the importance of funding to support the local authorities and the trainees. It was suggested in this evaluation that *"Despite positive indications, we should be wary of drawing unqualified conclusions about the efficacy of the Step Up to Social Work model in securing numbers of high quality social workers with the attributes to deliver better outcomes for children and families'* (Smith et al. 2013 p16).

Any initiative that promotes better outcomes for children and families is to be supported, our concern with these 'fast track' programmes is that they do not allow the time or space for the development of critical, analytical, and reflective thinking that is crucial in relationship based practice. Whilst trainees enter the programmes with undergraduate and/or postgraduate qualifications, it is difficult to envisage the transferability of many other previous academic learning experiences to those of the skills and attributes needed in a social worker that can exercise professional judgment and discretion in complex situations that involve a sophisticated understanding of human behaviour. The evaluation above identified a key strength in that graduates from the programmes appeared to be ready to practice in a way those from conventional programmes were not. Reasons suggested were *'This may partly have been attributable to the capacity for the programme to learning to its application in practice contemporaneously, but also to the way in which trainees were embedded and supported within the organisational context of the local authority from the beginning of the programme '* (Smith et al. 2013 p15-16*)*.

Our difficulty here is that employers might have been acknowledging a greater readiness to practice precisely because the trainees were embedded within organisations, perhaps the trainees were able to better gather information, fill in forms and migrate information in office based work, but were they better able to engage in what Ferguson terms *'… an analysis and understanding of the day to day 'practice risks' that pervade social work and child protection'*? (2011, p 209).

As a result of two influential yet contested, reviews of social work education, Narey (2014) and Croisedale-Appleby (2014) programmes for Social Work Teaching Partnerships (SWTPs) were developed and co-funded by the Department for Education and the Department of Health. The development of these SWTPs were a response to issues identical to those that resulted in the 'fast track' programmes to a social work qualification, that is a need for greater partnership between employers and providers of social work education in order to produce high calibre social workers more ready for practice upon qualification, but in this context within the traditional HEI education route. In Children's Social Care – a vision for

change (DfE, 2016) it was noted that *'We will expand the Frontline and Step Up programmes to bring more excellent practitioners in via work based graduate training, and we will expand Teaching Partnerships between universities and employers to ensure students are properly prepared for the social work task'* (2016 p5).

The intention of the SWTP programmes was to build upon existing partnership arrangements between local authorities and HEIs, but in a more formalised way, and the initial tenders for funding for these programmes involved applications from local authority led partnerships, that had to meet eligibility and stretch criteria in eight areas of social work education, practice and CPD. Eligibility criteria were conditions partnerships had to satisfy in order to be eligible for funding, stretch criteria were higher standards in areas of education, practice and CPD that funding might help partnerships to achieve.

Initially four pilot SWTPs were identified, developed and implemented partnership arrangements, Greater Manchester, North West Midlands, South East London and South Yorkshire. These had a mix of the number of HEIs and partners involved, some including only local authorities and HEIs, others including some PVIs; and not all local authorities or HEIs in the geographical areas participated. An evaluation of these four partnerships (Berry-Lound et al. 2016) is outlined briefly below.

The benefits of the more formalised partnership arrangements included: the view that statutory placements will benefit students as will having practitioners involved in teaching; opportunities for HEIs to build stronger links with employers and better reflect the workforce needs of employers in their recruitment and curricula; allowing academic staff to refresh knowledge of practice; a positive impact from direct involvement from employers in decision making with regard to HEIs; opportunities for practitioners to further learn from theoretical concepts and research and an increased level of involvement by service users in admissions processes and curricula delivery.

Challenges that were identified concerned the nature of the partnerships in several ways. Not all HEIs, nor employers in geographical locations took part in the formalised partnerships and this led to concerns about the impact on for example, the ability to manage student placements; some HEIs and employers felt that they wanted to join partnerships part way through in order to be involved in some of the initiatives of the partnerships (i.e. exploring and meeting stretch criteria for CPD activities); some partnerships prioritised service user led developments more than others; there was a need for clear governance structures and dedicated staff involved in the management underpinning partnership activities which had taken time to fully operationalise; and there were some concerns around the allocation of funding to partnerships and to allocation partners involved in different aspects of work to address the stretch criteria.

Once again the concept of partnership is being held up in government directives to enhance outcomes for children and families. Since the inception of SWTPs the government have further rolled these out across England with more partnership agreements and arrangements being implemented since 2016 (these will run from 2016 to 2018). Again, in principle this may seem a useful initiative, however we argue that there are some fundamental difficulties. At this time there appears to be no transparent information on

how many SWTPs there are, how they vary in constitution, how funding has been allocated, or how they will be evaluated given such complexities. Anecdotally diversity ranges from partnerships between one HEI and a very small number of local authorities, through to five or six HEIs and twelve local authorities, information with regard to other employers is also not available; funding to each SWTP seems to vary between approximately £450,000 and £5,000 000; the balance between the input of employers and HEIs to the partnerships is consistently evolving, which introduces challenges for both HEIs and practitioners; and the timescales of achieving the objectives in some of the stretch criteria seem unrealistic. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of SWTPs is that the formalisation under government directive may undermine significantly the previous effective working relationships that had been developed by HEIs, local authorities, PVIs, service user groups and other voluntary agencies. This is likely to be a function or the number of HEIs and LAs involved in different partnerships and there may lessons to be learned as partnerships continue to evolve. Nevertheless, again anecdotally, there do seem to be some positive aspects to SWTPs so far, for instance they allow a transparent and robust consideration of systems and processes between partners, and they facilitate dialogue between partners that might otherwise have not occurred.

Conclusion

Located within a changing political context, developments in the family justice system and reforms to social work education in England intend to produce rapid procedural decision - making, fast-track postgraduate training, and more effective undergraduate social work education, so that decision making and judgements with respect to children, families and vulnerable populations can be efficiently enacted to produce optimal outcomes. At face value these innovations seem laudable, and there is evidence of good practice in many areas of statutory and non-statutory social work. However, we argue that many of these developments present tensions between aspiration, implementation and practice. Furthermore, we contend that whilst reforms may appear to have a system based alignment, they often remain isolated in their necessity to adhere to domain specific targets and regulation whilst at the same time engaging in relationship based work with families.

At its core, social work is about establishing and maintaining relational ways of working that can be described as 'intimate social work practice'. We contend that, if social work is to be effective in navigating the tensions inherent within an increasingly bureaucratic and highly procedural contemporary family justice system, it must be built upon this premise. There is evidence that individuals entering social work education, regardless of the form of training provider, support the view that outcomes for individuals and families can be enhanced by adopting relational ways of working, as opposed to perpetuating what is a highly bureaucratic model of data collection and risk management. Social workers require a supportive environment where they can develop the knowledge, skills and experience that will enable them to feel confident in exercising discretion and professional judgement.

At a political level, the revision of procedures and systems in response to the most recent high profile media cases may seek to reassure the public that the government is responding to protect individuals who experience a range of vulnerabilities, but we argue that this approach shifts the focus away from achieving more innovative ways of working. Over the

last 40 years successive Inquiry Reports, Serious Case Reviews and Learning Lessons Reviews rehearse the same recommendations, despite repeated changes to policy and legislation that follow these tragic events. If social work practice is to reclaim a relational approach to working with children and their parents, what is required is a radical rethink –a move away from the computer and achieving targets, towards more face-to-face contact, with discretion and professional judgment at the heart, and the support and voice to challenge the family justice system when timescales and resources are unrealistic. If we are to create a family justice system that has children and their families firmly at the heart, the government, members of the judiciary, employers and teaching providers must work together more effectively to support such a flexible and relational approach. If relational ways of working continue to be sacrificed in order to achieve efficiency savings, then we must accept the consequences of a welfare policy that is intolerant to both the recipients of welfare and professionals who are tasked with ensuring their rights are protected.

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