

The 'Reclaiming Social Work' model in a statutory child protection organisation and its potential contribution to Queensland social policy

Child protection is often the focus of critical social policy with the sector continuing to face a range of challenges despite reforms aimed at enhancing systems and service provisions which promote the safety and wellbeing of children. The innovative *Reclaiming Social Work* (RSW) model designed by Steve Goodman and Isabelle Trowler and originally implemented in the London Borough of Hackney in 2008, embraces a systemic organisational change in working with children and families in statutory child protection settings. This assessment will outline why the model was developed, its characteristics and its potential contribution to social policy in Queensland. In particular, it will consider how the RSW model could contribute to policy changes in respect of the emerging issues of workforce and workload issues, responding to children and families with complex needs and growth in demand for out-of-home care in line with the current Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry. The decision to focus on Queensland has been made to allow for greater analysis and is the state with which the author is most familiar. Links between the RSW model and broader social and political change will also be considered.

Goodman and Trowler developed the RSW model as they felt the child protection profession lacked expertise, a focus on working in partnership with parents, evidence based interventions and was overly bureaucratized (2012: 12-19). Previous efforts to implement reform in child protection services had resulted in systems which were highly bureaucratic and focused on compliance with performance indicators which were negatively impacting on the ability of professionals to engage productively with families (Munro 2011: 5).

The RSW model is based on a whole systems approach to organisational change comprising of mutually dependent elements considered necessary for effective child protection practice. These elements include shared organisational values, a structure based on multidisciplinary social work units lead by a consultant social worker, local systems which improve practice and reduce administrative bureaucracy, a collaborative and respectful style of working with families, recruitment of high quality practitioners who have the complex skills required to implement effective practice, and use of evidence based methodologies such as systemic family therapy and social learning theory in working with families. The fundamental value of RSW is reported to be keeping children safely together with their families wherever possible (Trowler and Goodman 2012: 14-25). The model was applied across the service from investigation and assessment to out-of-home care teams. It is known that for such organisational and cultural change to occur, it is necessary for senior and middle managers

and frontline staff to share the same aspirational goals which Goodman and Trowler report to have achieved through their accessible leadership style (Spratt 2001: Trowler and Goodman 2012).

Further attention will now be given to the areas of the structure of the social work units and local systems which support the work of practitioners and as such, improve outcomes for children and families. Whilst in a traditional statutory child protection model there would be a team leader who supervises approximately seven frontline workers each carrying a caseload of children and/or families, the RSW unit comprises of a consultant social worker, a second social worker, a children's practitioner, a unit coordinator and a clinician (Mason 2012: 112). The unit shares a caseload with the consultant having overall case management responsibility. In this way, families are provided with continuity in that they are not reliant on one member of staff for their support however questions have been raised about how the work gets done if all professionals are sharing the workload and whether there are grievances about pay differences (Averill 2012: Trowler and Goodman 2012). Regular unit meetings are held to discuss cases and this is not only the main mechanism for supervision, but provides a forum for critical reflection, professional development and decision making in a multidisciplinary context by professionals who have an intimate knowledge of the family (Trowler and Goodman 2012: 19-21). The local systems which are in place are said to support practitioners and service delivery with administrative functions being completed by administrators, enabling practitioners to spend more time in direct work with families.

It is assessed that the RSW model has the potential to positively contribute to social policy in the child protection sector and this will be considered with reference to the current Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (the Inquiry) which has been established to review the child protection system (Commissions of Inquiry Order 2012: 1-3). The Inquiry has identified a range of emerging issues including workforce and workload issues, responding to children and families with complex needs and growth in demand for out-of home care which will now be considered in more detail (Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (QCPCI) 2012).

Workforce and workload issues

The recruitment, retention, training and development of frontline staff have been the debate of previous Queensland government inquiries (QCPCI 2012: 15-16). The state has found it difficult to recruit and retain frontline staff with the abilities required to undertake the complex work of child protection with issues contributing to workforce instability including the wide qualification profiles of staff eg. employment of social workers, teachers, lawyers; the limited

number of staff in frontline roles; high levels of administrative regulation and scrutiny; financial disincentives; and high caseloads (Healy and Oltedal 2010: 255, 267-270). Accordingly, current concerns of the Inquiry have identified that the core skills and knowledge of frontline staff has been moderated by the recruitment of those with a broad range of qualifications (QCPCI 2012: 16). Conversely, it is evident within the RSW model that the positions of the consultant and social worker within units are held only by those that are social work qualified and staff undergo a rigorous assessment process which is able to identify practitioners who have the skill, competence and strong set of personal qualities required to work in this complex and demanding field (Trowler and Goodman 2012: 23). The London School of Economics and Human Reliability evaluation of the RSW model also found that workload stress was significantly reduced in the units compared to traditional teams, there was enhanced support for staff and increased ability to reflect and discuss practice, the multidisciplinary units helped staff to make more informed interpretations of family dynamics, the structure including the reduction of bureaucratic constraints enabled frontline staff to spend more time in direct work with families, and there was increased staff morale and reduced sickness levels (Munro 2012: 110). There is therefore compelling evidence to indicate that features of the RSW model could positively contribute to addressing many of the workforce and workload issues currently faced in Queensland.

Responding to children and families with complex needs

It is well known that risk factors including parental mental health, domestic violence, substance misuse, housing instability, history of trauma, poverty and social isolation are factors that can impact on parenting (Bromfield in QCPCI 2012: 11). Families with children at risk of contact with the statutory child protection system have a number of complex needs requiring multiple service responses (QCPCI 2012: 12). The RSW model offers frameworks for working with families with these complex needs. Firstly, RSW utilises systemic methodologies in working with families which acknowledge and address the interconnectedness of relationships and complexity of concerns to achieve lasting change eg. it will not simply be a mother's drug misuse that is addressed, but her relationships, housing and financial situation as well (Pendry, 2012: 27). Behavioural based therapeutic interventions are also used particularly by clinicians and occur in the family home as opposed to a clinical setting (McCafferty 2012: 55). Evaluation of the RSW model has found that use of these evidenced-based methodological approaches has provided an enhanced capacity to assist families to make positive changes (London School of Economics in Munro 2011: 110). Secondly, Queensland's policy focus on the management of risk is known to affect the way frontline staff assess children's needs and can preclude staff from effectively engaging with families (Higgins and Katz 2008: Kojan and Lonne 2012). The ability to

engage parents and have them participate in statutory child protection processes is known to be crucial to addressing concerns and improving outcomes for children (Darlington, Healy and Feeney 2010; Schiltroth: 2012). The structure of the RSW units allows the development of client relationships to be at the fore. In what is described as 'institutional inertia' the unit structure enables resources to be mobilised quickly and this assists in building relationships with families eg. the unit coordinator can fill in forms to obtain a day care place, obtain funding for clothing and arrange a taxi for a hospital appointment, in turn addressing multiple stressors related to child care, finance and transport (Schiltroth 2012: 70-71). These are tasks generally completed by a frontline worker but which may take many weeks due to workload pressures. Finally, the RSW structure allows for a range of professionals to reflect on and have input into what intervention is most appropriate for a family, enables practitioners with different skills to work with a family often resulting in different and more positive outcomes, and provides a context in which families gain confidence in their own strengths and resilience (Trowler and Goodman 2012: 16-17). The RSW model therefore provides an alternative structure for working with families and children with complex needs which could benefit thinking in Queensland social policy.

Growth in demand for out-of-home care

The demand for out-of-home care placements has consistently increased over the last 10 years and is the most expensive option open to the state (QCPCI 2012: 13). The Inquiry's terms of reference ask whether the current use of available resources across the child protection system is adequate and whether resources could be used more efficiently (QCPCI 2012). As is discussed above, the RSW model offers alternative models of intervention and organisational change which are assessed to have resulted in more families demonstrating an ability to achieve change and keep their children safe. As a result, the London School of Economics and Human Reliability evaluation found that there had been a significant reduction in the number of children requiring out-of-home care and a lower number of children being subject to a child protection plan for a subsequent time. Goodman and Trowler identify that with the reduction in the number of children requiring out-of-home care, significant resources had been released which could be used elsewhere in the service (2012: 18).

RSW offers a model for systemic change in statutory child protection however the broader focus of Australian social policy in this sector has been on the investment in prevention and early intervention services. The 2009 National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children proposes a public health model to respond to childhood abuse and neglect through a continuum of services targeting vulnerable families which was determined crucial for

reducing the number of families who come into contact with the statutory system (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). In Queensland there had been significant investment in prevention and early intervention services however the QCPCI is yet to determine how effective investment in such services has been (QCPCI 2012: 11). In the current state budget, the Queensland government has made significant funding cuts to these services (Collins 2012). It is therefore unclear how effectively early intervention services have integrated with the statutory system to reduce the risk to vulnerable children or whether they have the financial viability to do so.

Regardless of the policy focus on prevention and early intervention, there continues to be a rise in the number of notifications received by the statutory authority in Queensland and there is a current Inquiry which identifies a range of issues in providing child protection services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2012: QCPCI 2012). Whilst there would certainly be significant challenges of organisational and systemic change in implementing the RSW model, the identified issues warrant consideration of reframing the way in which statutory services are provided (Higgins and Katz 2008: 47). It is acknowledged that Goodman and Trowler did not discuss the financial implications in employing RSW and given the fiscal repair measures evident in Queensland's current state budget, this must be measured. Over the last decade, Queensland has clearly implemented reforms based on recommendations from several inquiries which highlights the reactive nature of policy development in this sector (Higgins and Katz 2008: 47). RSW was not the result of such an inquiry and provides an innovative, forward thinking model for working with vulnerable children and families which has delivered a range of positive outcomes for frontline staff, children and families.

RSW is an innovative whole systems approach to organisational change in statutory child protection organisations which is assessed to have facilitated a skilled and dynamic workforce in which improved outcomes for children and families have been achieved in the London Borough of Hackney. The RSW model provides a system in which practitioners can engage constructively with families in the statutory context but with less bureaucratic and administrative constraints. This assessment has shown how the RSW model could influence social policy, particularly in Queensland to address issues related to workforce and workload, responding to children and families with complex needs and the growth in demand for out-of-home care. Queensland is currently subject to a Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection and as such, the need to reframe the statutory system has been explored. This is considered vital despite the broader social policy focus of investment in prevention and early intervention services.

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