Towards a better understanding of young people: The introduction of a new risk, needs and strengths assessment tool

Megan Dickie

Alex was first caught offending at age 11 years. Social services had concerns for the safety and wellbeing of Alex and his siblings dating back to when he was just 3 years old. Now 15, Alex is alienated from education and despite attempts to ensure he is in stable accommodation, he is transient and often spends time living on the street. Alex has begun using solvents regularly and says that they are a cheaper form of "getting high" than alcohol. Well known to the police, Alex has been through the youth justice process several times already.

Turning around the lives of young people like Alex is challenging, and no one-size-fits-all form of intervention exists. There is, however, a growing body of research that supports our understanding of best practice in our work with young people and "what works" within the field of youth justice. One of the findings within this research is the importance of structured and reliable assessment within the fields of care and protection and youth justice.

Often referred to as the beginning phase of work, engagement and assessment is the foundation for the social worker–client relationship and forms the basis of effective interventions.

As Greene (2008, p. 18) describes:

> *"the purpose of assessment is to bring together the various facets ... of a client's situation, and the interaction among them, in an orderly economical manner and to then select salient and effective interventions."*

In recognising that assessment is fundamental to effective intervention, Child, Youth and Family has developed and implemented a new assessment tool that is specific to working with young people. TRAX, a tool to support young people to stay on track, was developed and implemented in 2010 to be used across the organisation by both care and protection and youth justice services. This article explores the introduction of this new tool, outlining the theoretical basis of its development and discussing the practice imperatives surrounding its application.

The development of TRAX

Better assessment leads to better outcomes. This concept is supported by a significant body of research, but will also be familiar to most social workers as they engage in reflective practice. For Child, Youth and Family, the benefits are manifold and stretch across client, practitioner and organisation. Redefining the organisation's approach to assessment has meant drawing on the evidence from research, as well as the experiences of other countries.

In New Zealand, addressing youth crime is one of the government's current key priorities. As such, significant changes across the field of youth justice were seen in 2010. Central to these reforms was the introduction of new legislation within the Children, Young Persons, and their Families (CYP&F) Act 1989. Known as 'Fresh Start',

the reforms aimed to target persistent and high risk young offenders and have had an impact across the justice sector. For Child, Youth and Family, the changes have been significant and have affected how we work with children and young people who offend.

It could be argued, however, that the most significant shift is ideological. This is evident in the introduction of a new youth justice principle within legislation. The change this heralds is subtle, but very important. The principle states that "any measure for dealing with offending by a child or young person should so far as it is practicable to do so address the causes underlying the child's or young person's offending" (section 208 (fa): CYP&F Act 1989). Some argue that this blurs the line of responsibility between child protection and youth justice. While child protection may argue that 'areas of need' are best addressed by within their remit, others argue that they may be addressed within the context of youth justice. For others, this provides an opportunity to go beyond the limitations of holding young people to account and instead focus on addressing factors that impact on their propensity towards crime.

To accommodate the necessary change, we needed to ensure our youth justice practitioners had the right tools for the job. This has meant introducing a new assessment tool as well as rationalising the policy and guidelines surrounding its application. Rather than adopt a tool already in use, we determined that we would tailor our own to fit our unique cultural, organisational and legal context. Since 1999, the Wellbeing Assessment has been used to assess the needs of young people. Although this tool has served as an excellent resource, a decade on, it falls short of meeting the principles of current 'best practice'. The Wellbeing Assessment has served as an excellent foundation from which we have been able to build an assessment tool to meet the needs of contemporary practice in care and protection and in youth justice.

TRAX took nearly two years to develop and was rolled out in September 2010. The time and care needed to develop TRAX can largely be attributed to the fact that it was designed for use across care and protection and youth justice services. Working with young people in child protection is a very specific area of practice that relies upon its own models and theories. Working with young people who offend is also specialised, managing the tension between meeting needs and addressing accountability. Redefining our approach to assessment has meant drawing together both these fields of practice to find much more than a middle ground.

The result is that we have developed an assessment tool that works for all young people aged from 12 to 17 years, taking account of this unique developmental stage, and adopting specific approaches from a restorative justice perspective.

Building the tool from the theory

> *"He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast."* Leonardo da Vinci

During a training session an experienced social worker asked on what basis we were making changes to the way we assess young people. In her own words she "liked to know that things weren't pulled out of thin air". In essence, this social worker was asking what theoretical basis underpinned the introduction of this new assessment tool and wanted some validation that there were practice imperatives behind it. The ability to locate any new initiative within an evidence base is essential if we are to aspire to 'best practice'. The introduction of the TRAX assessment tool and the changes to the assessment pathway are firmly rooted in what we know works when working with young people.

On the verge of independence, a young person is neither adult nor child. The physical, emotional and mental development of this stage of life is unique. Erik Erikson (1902–1994), a renowned psychologist who concentrated his life's work on human development, claimed that adolescence is primarily concerned with forming identity

(Carlson & Buskist, 1997). This striving for identity is characterised by a search for new experiences, social connectedness and engagement in risky behaviour, and is known to bring about its fair share of trials and tribulations.

And as the following quote portrays, the turbulence of adolescence is not confined to today's youth:

> *"I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words ... When I was young, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly wise [disrespectful] and impatient of restraint."*
> Hesiod, 8th century BC

Most young people negotiate their way through this period to become well-adjusted adults. However, a minority will struggle to circumnavigate the 'boulders' that appear on the road to self-identity and independence.

For those without the resources and support that help in the development of resilience, this period can be particularly difficult.

Some will push every social norm and boundary and be tagged 'at risk'. This group will often come into contact with the law, have difficulties within the education system, and be over-represented in mental health and addiction services.

Engagement and assessment is a critical phase of social work practice. It usually forms the first stepping stone in the client–practitioner relationship across most fields – whether it be child protection, justice, health or one of many other specialised areas where social work involves working directly with clients. The assumption is intervening appropriately requires sufficient information about a problem or situation (Greene, 2008). The perspective that prevails as a theoretical basis for most social work assessment (ibid.) is that the interaction between people and their environment is fundamental.

Rosetti (1980, p. 50) believes that "adolescence constitutes perhaps the most intensive period of adjustment between the individual and his social environment". This means that in order to understand the situation of a young person and try to intervene effectively we need a theoretical framework that is firmly located in understanding the relationship between the person and their environment. This is a key aspect of social work knowledge and expertise.

The closely aligned 'systems' and 'ecological systems' theories provide the basis for understanding and interpreting the individual within the context of their environment. Systems theory is able to "provide social workers with a conceptual perspective that can guide how they view the world" (Kirst-Ashman & Grafton, 2009, p. 9). Originally described by Goldstein (1973, p. 110) as "a framework for gaining appreciation of the entire range of elements that bear on a social problem", systems theory and the Unitary Approaches defined by Goldstein (1973) and Pincus and Minahan (1973 and 1977) still resonate today.

Following a 'person-in-their-environment' perspective, the ecological systems theory also explores the effect the environment has on the child (Kirst-Ashman & Grafton, 2009). The ecological model first proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes four levels (micro, meso, exto and macro[2]) of interaction between the person and the systems that impact on their experience. The model provides a tangible way of understanding the interaction between people and the systems that impact on them. The approach helps us to understand that...

..."effective social work intervention occurs by working not only directly with clients, but also with the familial, social and cultural factors that affect their social functioning" *(Pardeck, 1996, p. 2).*

Te Whare Tapa Whā is a model of Māori wellbeing developed by Mason Durie (1998). It has been influential in the development of TRAX.

2 i.e. between individuals, between groups of individuals, between systems that peripherally impact on individuals, and the societal system.

Te Whare Tapa Whā is a model that describes the interaction of systems from a cultural perspective unique to Māori. Using the image of a wharenui (meeting house) with its four sides, four cornerstones or components of health are described. These are:

- Taha Wairua (faith and connection to spiritual realm)
- Taha Hinengaro (thoughts and feelings – connection between mind and body)
- Taha Tinana (the capacity for physical growth and development)
- Taha Whanau (belonging, caring and sharing within family and wider social systems) (Durie, 1998).

Each of the dimensions share equal standing. Maintenance of equilibrium among them reveals itself in the health and wellbeing of an individual (ibid). This model recognises the importance of exploring cultural considerations and family/whānau viewpoints alongside physical and emotional development and faith and spirituality.

Finally, it is essential that reference is made to the strengths-based approach born in the 1990s. It could be argued that this school of thought, more than any other, has helped transform the paradigm of traditional problem-based assessments towards a more client-centred and 'hope' engendered approach in social work. The basic assumption of strengths-based theory is that "people possess unique strengths, skills and abilities ⁝ [and are able to] create solutions where none seem possible" (Graybeal, 2001, p. 233). Based on this view there has been a dramatic shift in focus from pure appraisal of a client's deficits towards a more holistic assessment that enquires about the unique strengths that a client has.

The approaches described above provide the theoretical foundation for the development of a new assessment tool. TRAX is in fact based on the amalgamation of these approaches, and this has helped to develop a tool that is broad enough to comprehensively explore a young person's wellbeing and situation.

A youth justice paradigm

> *"The cure for crime is not the electric chair, but the high chair."* J. Edgar Hoover

There has been growing interest in the field of youth justice. How we can turn around the lives of young people like Alex has become a key political agenda item and is omnipresent in the media. In New Zealand, this is perhaps due to the rise in the frequency and severity of crime committed by young people (Chong, 2007). The cost of youth crime to society is significant in both human and financial terms, making it one of the key issues of today.

The growing interest in youth justice has mirrored an increase in our understanding of the best ways to work with young people who offend. We now know that a small number of young people are responsible for the majority of serious offences (ibid.).

We also know that our intervention with them needs to be intense, address the underlying causes of offending, and be provided at the earliest opportunity *(McLaren, 2000; Becroft, 2004).*

The paradigm shift from 'nothing works' to 'what works' within the field of justice has occurred over the past 50 years (McLaren, 2000; Andrews & Bonta, 2007; Day,Howells & Rickwood, 2004). There is a vast body of research that demonstrates there are strategies that work in the management and rehabilitation of offending populations. Of all the research there is none perhaps more influential than the "Risk-Need-Responsivity" (RNR) model first formalised in 1990 by Bonta, Andrews and Hoge. This approach has been adopted in other youth justice jurisdictions across the globe, including the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada (Andrews & Bonta, 2007).

Although there have been adaptations over the years, the three founding principles of the RNR model are:

- **Risk Principle –** Match the level of service to the offenders risk to re-offend.

- **Need Principle** – Assess criminogenic needs and target them in treatment.
- **Responsivity Principle** – Maximise the offender's ability to learn from a rehabilitative intervention by providing cognitive behavioural treatment and tailoring the intervention to the learning style, abilities and strengths of the offender (Andrews & Bonta, 2007, p. 1).

The RNR model provides a framework for intervention within youth justice. Central to this framework is the use of comprehensive risk and needs assessment tools. When a comprehensive risk and needs assessment is combined with a service delivery targeted at those who are most 'at-risk', the impact on rates of recidivism can be marked (Thompson & Stewart, 2006).

There is, however, a science behind the type of assessment tool used and evidence suggests that contemporary youth justice systems need to adopt a 'fourth generation tool' in order to achieve the best results. Experts such as Andrews and Bonta (2007) believe a more comprehensive tool, which captures both static (amenable to change) and dynamic factors (not able to change), and allows for a level of professional discretion, is much more reliable and beneficial (ibid).

Fourth generation tools aim to predict the likelihood of reoffending by giving a measure of risk, and also identify the factors contributing to, or underlying, the offending behaviour.

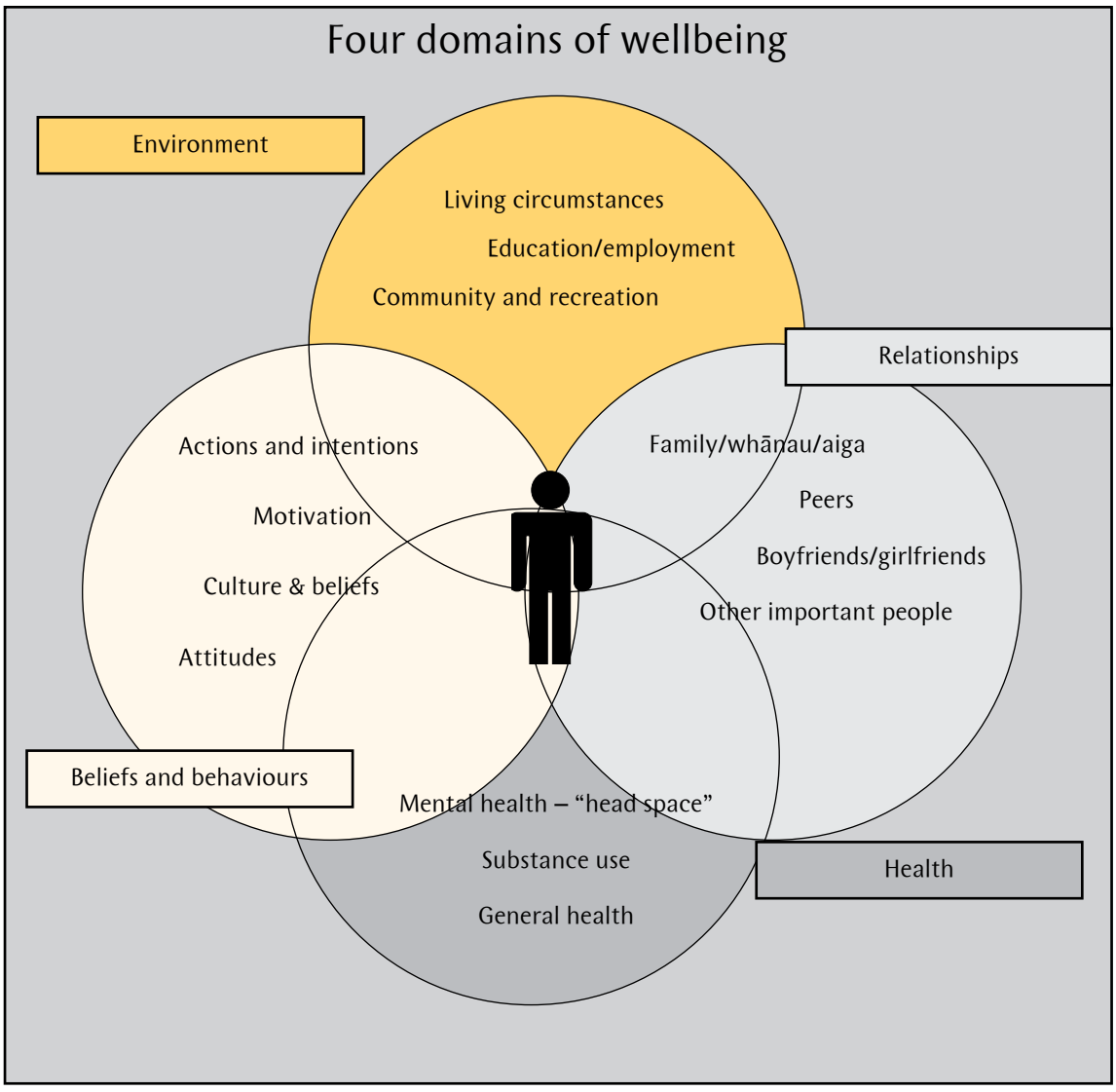
Research identifies variables associated with the likelihood of an individual re-offending. These variables can either be dynamic or static. Dynamic factors include aspects such as criminality of peers and attitudes and beliefs; static factors on the other hand, include things like age of first offence (Andrews & Bonta, 2007). Whilst earlier risk assessment was primarily concerned with the identification of static factors, fourth generation tools capture both, but are more concerned with those that are dynamic. These dynamic factors that are known to be empirically associated with offending behaviour are called 'criminogenic needs' (Thompson & Stewart, 2006). Researchers and practitioners alike argue that this approach is more beneficial because it gives an indication of risk, but also captures the underlying causes and provides guidance for intervention (Andrews & Bonta, 2007; Thompson & Stewart, 2006, Day et al, 2004).

Fourth generation tools utilise knowledge gained from 'what works' alongside professional discretion and responsivity. The inclusion of professional discretion means that these types of tools balance the use of scientific evidence and clinical decision-making; ultimately there will be a level of 'override' available to practitioners to influence the overall judgement of risk. The responsivity principle is an important addition to the RNR model as it takes into account individual difference. Responsivity factors are "those that could influence how interventions might be best delivered taking into account individual differences" (Thompson & Stewart, 2006, p. 22) and include aspects such as age, gender, disability and culture.

Walking the line between wellbeing and accountability

> *"Everything in life ... has to have balance."*
> Donna Karan

Developing an assessment tool for use in both child protection and youth justice requires that its theoretical underpinnings come from both fields of practice. The result is a tool that is young person-centred, allowing practitioners to analyse both the offending behaviour and the young person's general wellbeing. Whilst care and protection practitioners are able to view the young person's wellbeing as paramount, those working in the field of youth justice have to balance wellbeing with accountability and public safety. In the view of Principal Youth Court Judge Andrew Becroft (2004, p. 10), "generally we have been successful in holding young people accountable and encouraging them to accept responsibility for their behaviour. However we



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have been less successful in addressing their needs, addressing the causes of their offending and assisting them not to re-offend".

TRAX allows practitioners to look at the young person as a whole – to analyse their strengths, needs and risks – and supports practitioners in this careful balance.

The diagram explains the model used to develop TRAX and has been derived from the theories outlined within this article. The young person is in the centre, with the four domains of environment, relationships, health and their own beliefs and behaviours surrounding them. The young person and the factors that surround them are in a constant state of interaction with one another. Each domain consists of a series of sub-domains – for instance within the environment domain, living circumstances, community and recreation and education and employment are all covered. A series of factors are considered within each sub-domain. Under the heading of living environment, for example, enquires are made

about the young person's home life as part of a set of key considerations such as safety, stability and supervision. Similarly the area of education and employment explores the young person's engagement, attendance and achievements.

Each of the factors considered has the potential to act as a source of strength, need or risk. Quite simply, the areas of need identified within TRAX will be the targets for intervention. For instance, if a TRAX assessment was completed with Alex, it would highlight that there were areas of need regarding education, alcohol and drugs, and his living situation.

The inclusion of strengths is important as, unlike deficit-based models, it allows for better understanding of a young person's situation and provides a platform of hope on which intervention can be built.

For Alex, we know little of his strengths at the moment, but if we were to complete a TRAX and enquire about strengths we might start to see a more hope-engendered future for him.

The factors considered in each sub-domain include both static and dynamic factors that are correlated with the likelihood of reoffending. These factors are relevant to both child protection and youth justice workers: aspects such as engagement in education are equally important to both fields, but their meaning is interpreted in different ways. Through the child protection lens, when a young person is not attending school this is an area of need that impacts on wellbeing; through the youth justice lens, when a young person is not attending school, their idle time and lack of participation in education places them at greater risk of future offending. Because TRAX has been built digitally within CYRAS, the Child, Youth and Family case recording system, it is able to include unique features that go beyond the limitations of paper-based assessments. These features include the ability to select the field of practice at the beginning of the assessment. Features, such as an offence analysis and a measure of offending-related need are unique to the youth justice version and give life to the 'risk principle' referred to in the RNR model.

Drawing on diverse theories and models to develop a tool for use in youth justice and care and protection has been challenging, but ultimately has yielded a better result. The reality for many of our high-risk young people is that they come into contact with both care and protection and youth justice services in the organisation. Using the one tool to help understand and assess their situation offers greater consistency.

Bridging the gap from theory to practice

> *"In theory there is no difference between theory and practice, in practice there is."* Yogi Berra

The development of an assessment tool on its own is not going to lead to reduced offending or better outcomes for young people at risk. The tool is merely a vehicle. Although TRAX aims to support a practitioner's analysis and guide targeted intervention, it is essential that we consider the practice imperatives for the introduction of a new tool. This means considering the framework within which the tool is applied, as well as the practitioner's ability to engage, analyse and apply critical thought to their assessment.

The development of TRAX provided a unique opportunity to reconsider the assessment pathway within Child, Youth and Family. As part of the project, we undertook an evaluation of how the existing assessment tools were being used and a review of the policy, legal and practice context within which assessment occurs. This revealed that the approach to assessing young people within care and protection and youth justice could be strengthened. Practice varied and although policy was adhered to, there seemed to be few examples of going beyond policy and using assessment as a means of achieving better planning and outcomes for young people.

Redefining the operational policy, providing guidance on assessment with young people and delivery of training are just some of the tangible

steps taken to improve the assessment pathway. We know that not all children or young people referred to Child, Youth and Family on the basis of offending or care and protection require an indepth social work assessment, however determining who does can at times be difficult. Therefore the approach is two-fold: improve the policy and place greater emphasis on using consultation and professional judgement to determine the need. In tackling these, we have updated Operational Policy and placed particular emphasis on ensuring all those considered 'high-risk' go through a comprehensive assessment process using TRAX and that this information is available for key decision-making points such as family group conferences and Court.

A practitioner's willingness, skill and ability are quintessential to undertaking thorough, considered and meaningful assessment; similarly their ability to take assessment findings and translate them into enduring and effective interventions is crucial. Like a builder who can never blame his tools, social workers have been trained to translate the use of a resource such as TRAX into practice. Engagement with the young person, their family/whānau, and other professionals is essential; so too is their ability to analyse and interpret the information gleaned. From here, effective intervention is born.

The beginning of this article started with a brief description of Alex and the challenges he was facing. Tales of lives like Alex's are commonplace in the field of social work.

This means having the belief that there is hope and potential for change is a prerequisite for the profession.

TRAX is a resource to help social workers in their efforts to be agents of change. Alex needs someone who can walk alongside him and understand his needs, hopes, dreams and strengths; however he also needs someone with the expertise to guide, advocate and act. If Alex had the kind of social worker with these practice skills who undertook an assessment using TRAX, the context of his situation would be better understood. The social worker's ability to analyse the situation entirely would mean that Alex's strengths, needs and risks would be clearly identified so that effective intervention planning could begin.

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