
From student to employee: A conversation about transition and readiness for practice in a statutory social work organisation

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Statutory social work organisations are a key site of practice learning and for the “construction and development of knowledge and worker expertise” (Noble, Heycox, O’Sullivan & Bartlett, 2007, p.25). This learning primarily occurs during supervised placements and employment. Placements, a core component of social work education, are critical for the development of students as beginning practitioners (Chilvers & Hay, 2011; Noble, 2011). The transition from student to employee is a unique point in the development of a new practitioner that has been little examined in the social work context in Aotearoa New Zealand.

New graduates may face several challenges as they undertake this transition. The flexibility of student life disappears, pressure to perform and manage multiple tasks increases and supports that were in place for a student may no longer be provided (Seden & McCormick, 2011; Walker, Crawford & Parker, 2008). There may also be considerable expectations on new graduates to immediately have knowledge of the organisational structure, social work role and daily tasks. Less time is usually available for reflective practice due to the demands of the daily work (Agllias, 2010). Graduates who have previously been on placement within the employing organisation may have further expectations placed upon them due to their student practice experience. Readiness for this transition may be affected by the graduate’s academic ability, practice skills, placement experience, training and personality attributes.

This article developed out of a three-way conversation exploring issues around readiness

for practice and the transition from student to employee within the Child, Youth and Family context. The three involved in this conversation are a recent Bachelor of Social Work graduate, a Child, Youth and Family staff member and the Director of Field Education from Massey University.

Background

Towards the end of 2011, Doctor Kathryn Hay, Director of Field Education, Massey University, was invited to write an article for the Child, Youth and Family practice journal that explored issues pertaining to readiness for practice and the transitional process from student to new employee in a statutory setting. Kathryn invited a recent graduate, who had been on placement at Child, Youth and Family and was subsequently employed by the same site, and a Child, Youth and Family staff member to collaborate as co-authors and to meet for a focused recorded discussion, guided by a set of questions. This discussion provided the basis for the reflections on practice readiness presented below. This follows a brief introduction of the organisational context and the participants.

The Child, Youth and Family site where the student was placed has a long history of having tertiary students on placement. In 2011 the site had five students from Massey University on placement, four of these were concurrent. The students began their placements after the successful completion of pre-requisite academic papers and also pre-placement preparation teaching. The site

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organises its student placements through a liaison person, who facilitated communication between the site and the institution. Primary supervision and support for students is provided by their assigned supervisors, and occasionally by their practice leaders. Leanne Franklin has held the role of liaison since 2010. Leanne is employed by Child, Youth and Family and has previously supervised students on placement in the organisation. In the liaison role Leanne is the initial point of contact for the tertiary staff organising placements. She organises and facilitates the interview panels for potential student placements and liaises with Child, Youth and Family staff who will be the field educators, supervising and supporting the students during the placement. Throughout the placement Leanne continues to be the first point of contact for the tertiary providers and assists with the resolution of issues.

Amy Hardyment completed her Bachelor of Social Work at Massey University in 2011. She undertook her final placement at a Child, Youth and Family site between July and October 2011 and applied for a social work position at the same site prior to completing her placement. Her application was successful and Amy began her employment contract two weeks after concluding her placement. Although her placement was within the care giving team, she was subsequently employed as a care and protection social worker in a team focused on young people.

Dr Kathryn Hay is also the Coordinator for the Bachelor of Social Work extramural placement papers. As part of this role Kathryn is responsible for finding appropriate placements for students, monitoring the placements and making the final assessment decisions. Kathryn works closely with both the students and the agencies to ensure effective and successful placements for all of the stakeholders.

Becoming ready for practice

Amy's first choice for her final placement was Child, Youth and Family. Her previous placement had been in a small community organisation and Amy was keen to have a more challenging experience that would provide her with significantly more

direct client contact. Amy was also aware of the value of having her final placement in an agency that might be able to offer her future employment opportunities.

Considering knowledge, skills and values

Overall Amy believed the academic work she had completed at Massey University enabled her to be ready for the placement as well as employment. In particular she highlighted the importance of learning "the practical skills ... like relationship building, academic writing ... the interviewing skills, just how to relate to people". She also noted the value of understanding how government policy is made, especially given the statutory nature of Child, Youth and Family.

Bogo (2006 , p.xiv) emphasises the importance of having a body of knowledge and skills that:

can be used in different ways based on the mandate of the agency, the procedures of specific models, specialised information about populations and problems and the needs of the particular client in the relationship with the worker.

Two skills that Amy believed could have been taught more extensively at Massey University were having challenging conversations with families and being able to de-escalate conflict situations. Whilst she acknowledged some work had been undertaken in these areas, Amy supported having more extensive practice in the classroom environment. Amy also reflected that increasing her knowledge of mental health disorders and how to effectively utilise some of the tools associated with this field of practice would also be valuable in her work as a Child, Youth and Family social worker. Specific teaching on mental health issues at Massey University, during the induction process at the agency, and also during continuing professional education may also assist with increasing confidence for new social workers in this area of practice.

Leanne emphasised the importance of conflict management skills to effectively manage

challenging situations. There is a tension between being child-centred, while wanting to support families, and ensuring that social workers are treated with a level of respect. Both Amy and Leanne commented on the necessity of having the confidence and skills to keep oneself safe as a social worker and suggested that training associated with this should continue to occur at Massey University and Child, Youth and Family.

From a Child, Youth and Family perspective, Leanne mentioned several other skills and values that she expects in a social work student or new graduates. These included having initiative, time management skills, the ability to seek help and ask questions, confidence, computer skills, and good written communication, and being non-judgemental. Furthermore she stressed that “the engagement skills of people are really important as well and it comes down to that passion and that belief that people can change”. Having sufficient knowledge of social work models and theories and being able to apply these appropriately in practice was also viewed as critical so that students and new graduates have a rationale as to why they’re doing what they’re doing (see Bogo, 2006).

Apart from skill and knowledge development, Amy identified several values that she considered to be core to her social work practice, such as patience, caring, endurance, and passion for the work. Amy also highlighted empathy and hope:

“You can’t really work here unless you can empathise with clients because I guess they go through such tough situations and even having [Child, Youth and Family] involved in their life can be a huge thing for a lot of people ... you have to believe that the clients can change or otherwise what’s the point?”

Finding the ‘fit’

Child, Youth and Family provides a substantial number of placements to social work students annually. Many students thrive in this context, while others do not wish to apply for a position in the agency upon the completion of their placement. A student’s suitability for employment is in part dependent on their “fit” with the

organisational structure and ethos. According to Leanne:

“There are students that have come through that just don’t fit [Child, Youth and Family]. I think they need to have integrity, initiative, be able to build relationships and have a bit of get up and go to fit in with the team.”

Although some of these attributes may be able to be learned, personality type is also a component. Leanne believes a passion for the type of work is also a necessity:

“To work for Child, Youth and Family you need to believe in the work that you are doing because every day you’ve got to represent your organisation and if you don’t have that passion I think you’d struggle working here.”

While all graduates must possess sufficient academic aptitude to complete their professional social work qualification, not all of these people will be able to manage the high level of stress or have the resilience to sustain them in the statutory environment. Massey University endeavours to prepare their graduates for working in challenging social work environments; that said, certain graduates may be better able to adapt and cope with a more pressured social work position. This view is endorsed in research on social work graduates wherein the pressure of emotional demands, crisis work, and working with involuntary clients are identified as challenges for many new graduates (Agllias, 2010; Eadie & Lymbery, 2002; Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000).

Although the traits and ability of the individual graduates may affect their suitability for working effectively in a statutory agency, teaching and preparation from the tertiary provider also enables graduates to have appropriate knowledge, skills and understanding of their own values that can inform their social work practice. Having this foundation may assist graduates in maintaining a critical lens so that they remain mindful of the organisational culture and how this impacts upon their practice (Agllias, 2010). The discretion of Massey University to screen, monitor and potentially exclude students who do not meet ‘fit and proper person’ criteria or who are not

ready for social work practice is also important to ensure a high calibre of graduates (see SWRB, 2009a). Honest placement assessments will also better inform graduates as to their suitability for employment in specific organisations such as Child, Youth and Family.

Transitioning from student to employee

There were several reasons why Amy decided to apply for a social work position at Child, Youth and Family:

"I really liked the people who worked here. I noticed that it's really supportive in the office. I enjoy the work. I like having the people contact. I also like doing admin work as well so it's a bit of a balance. I like challenges. Every day is a challenge here ... there's something new happening everyday so you have to learn really fast ... the money is better than in the community. That's definitely a plus."

In addition, Amy highlighted her commitment to social change: "I noticed that [Child, Youth and Family] has a negative stigma attached to it and I like challenging people about that. I think people here do some amazing work protecting children and young people from abuse and I think people need to know that".

Prior to her job interview Amy gathered information and support that could help her be prepared. For example, she spoke with other social workers and university staff about Child, Youth and Family and the interview process, and sought support from people within Child, Youth and Family. Amy believes that her practice experience gave her an excellent overview of the organisational structure and core functions of Child, Youth and Family, which assisted her when writing the job application and preparing for the interview process. As a new employee Amy was appointed to a different team and therefore had to quickly learn how to complete new tasks. She reflected:

"I think for me on placement I was kind of sheltered. My placement within the care

giving team was completely different from the care and protection front-line social work ... [although] once you get in there you just have to do it. You have to act like you know what you're doing because you're holding clients' lives in your hands sometimes. It's a good place to learn."

Leanne also mentioned this adjustment: "They [the students] have an interview, walk into a job and they no longer have that protective shell around them. I think that can be a bit of a shock to the system". Amy's experience is reflected in other research on new graduates where some of the participants "suggested that field education did not give them a true understanding of the busyness and ethical dilemmas they would encounter in practice" (Agllias, 2010, p.357).

Being able to manage a high level of stress and remain flexible was emphasised by Leanne and Amy as necessary attributes for all social workers at Child, Youth and Family. Leanne commented that the "level of stress is about how many tasks you've got to do all at once, so you need to be organised, you need to have self-control but you also need to know you're not invincible". Amy further reflected on her own experience: "You're always behind. You have to get used to it very fast that actually you can't be on top of everything. Because you might have your tasks set out for the day and then you'll have a crisis and so all of those tasks are just pushed aside". Understanding how stress manifests itself and having good self-care strategies, including healthy eating and sleeping patterns, are essential. Seden and McCormick (2011, p.172) comment:

It is important that, given the challenging nature of the work, social workers can make conscious and accountable professional judgements and decisions, and still retain enough capacity to care for themselves, their families and friends and enjoy their leave, weekends and free time.

Teaching these aspects of social work at Massey University focuses on giving insight into self-management, although the implementation of effective strategies may only occur for students

once they experience real-life stress in the workplace. Continuing professional education on stress management and supportive clinical supervision that connects this with the specific working environment may enable graduates to develop a suite of self-care strategies.

Some reflections on ensuring readiness and successful transitions

Having a strong relationship between the social work organisation and Massey University means that “both bodies have greater opportunities to develop mutual understanding about the experiences of new graduates and mitigate some of the challenges” (Agllias, 2010, p.358). The placement experience is a key factor in future recruitment and thus should be as beneficial for all stakeholders as possible (Douglas, 2011). Maintaining open communication between Massey University and Child, Youth and Family is, we believe, essential for ensuring placements are well organised, appropriate students are selected for placement and any concerns can be effectively addressed through the practice experience. Inviting Child, Youth and Family staff to participate in aspects of Massey University teaching further strengthens the relationships between the two stakeholders and, more importantly, allows students to have opportunities to learn from social workers in the field and gain firsthand knowledge of the practice of Child, Youth and Family social workers. For students and new graduates sometimes the primary source of information about Child, Youth and Family is the media and having social workers present their perspective of the agency allows students to gain another viewpoint as well as become more prepared for placement or future employment (Seden & McCormick, 2011).

Being given the opportunity to have a “taste” of the organisation, for example spending one or two days in a Child, Youth and Family office, could be helpful for all social work students even if they do not have one of their placements in the organisation. From Amy’s perspective:

“I think it’s really important for all social workers to get a taste of [Child, Youth and Family] because most social workers will have some connection with [Child, Youth and Family] and their clients at some point. I have come across some negative stigma about [Child, Youth and Family] from other social workers in the community so that’s why I think it would be valuable for all social workers to have an understanding of the work and processes at [Child, Youth and Family].”

A visit to the Child, Youth and Family site before a student commences their placement may also provide them with a clearer picture of what to expect. Distributing relevant documents, e.g., the ‘Working Together Guide’ (Child, Youth and Family, 2011), to prospective placement students or new graduates could also increase understanding of the role and functions of Child, Youth and Family. Guidelines on how to complete core tasks such as case noting and writing court reports may also be useful for students and new graduates alike. Increasing the current teaching in Massey University and other tertiary providers in, for example, effective case note and report writing may also increase students’ confidence and skills in written communication.

Professional supervision is a key contributing factor to ensuring competent social work practice (O’Donoghue & Tsui, 2012). Generally on placement students receive regular weekly uninterrupted supervision. If this is not occurring then Massey University may intervene and request a review of the supervision arrangements. Regular professional supervision is also a requirement for all registered social workers (SWRB, 2009c). However, given the significant workloads and crisis-driven work, it may be challenging for Child, Youth and Family supervisors and social workers to always keep to supervision schedules or meet the expectations outlined in the Child, Youth and Family supervision policy (Child, Youth and Family, 2012). For new graduates this may be especially detrimental to their practice and also to their integration into the agency (Agllias, 2010). All social workers have an ethical responsibility to participate in supervision (ANZASW, 2008) to

ensure they are held accountable for their actions with clients, receive adequate support and grow in their knowledge of how to be an effective Child, Youth and Family social worker. According to Agllias (2010, p.356) “[t]hose who seemed more able to cope with the demands placed upon them reported effective supervision or at least support and debriefing from colleagues”. Having supervision that focuses not only on case reviews but also supports their professional development as new employees may also be beneficial, especially in the early stages of employment.

Mentoring and coaching also helps to ensure new graduates are receiving adequate support and on-the-job training (Agllias, 2010). A practice development mentor or coach can support new graduates to question and address conflicts and unethical practice and encourage them to take some time out to reflect on their practice (Agllias, 2010). A staggered increase in caseload can also assist with the integration of a recent graduate into their new workplace. As knowledge and confidence develops, the number and complexity of cases could increase. Appropriate support, training and supervision are all essential for ensuring best social work practice (Hay & Teppett, 2011; Seden & McCormick, 2011; Walker, Crawford & Parker, 2008). Mentoring within Child, Youth and Family is an accepted practice that supports the integration of the new graduate into the workplace.

Student placements in New Zealand commonly occur over a 60-day period. In Child, Youth and Family, students are generally placed within one team for this entire time so that they can establish effective relationships with colleagues and clients and also learn the key tasks associated with this team. Amy’s placement in a care giving team was extremely beneficial for her learning and social work practice; however, it did not provide her with extensive opportunities for direct interaction with clients. To address this she was, on occasion, able to work within the duty team. For students to become better equipped to apply for social work positions at Child, Youth and Family, the opportunity to do frontline work is recommended. While the university believes

it is better for students to be attached to one team for their placement so that strong collegial relationships can be established, spending time observing or undertaking tasks in other teams offers insight into other areas of the organisation. This not only advances a student’s own practice but allows them to make more informed choices about future employment preferences and matching skills.

Child, Youth and Family provides new employees with a comprehensive 15-week induction programme, which includes applied on-site learning and attendance at off-site workshops with other new practitioners. The timing of the induction varies depending on training spaces and staff availability. Undertaking the induction as well as an office orientation soon after commencing employment is helpful for new graduates to feel better equipped to manage their new role and to work more effectively with clients (Davis, Gordon & Walker, 2011). A practice development mentor could also facilitate the new graduate’s learning about their work, provide ad-hoc practice consultations and answer questions if the supervisor is unavailable. According to Leanne, having additional meetings outside of formal professional supervision can be advantageous for students on placement:

“It would be great for that first two or three weeks to catch up twice a week about what’s working, what’s not working and ... where you can unpack some of that work. And that would help when you are doing induction, the supervisor and employee are also aware of what areas you need more specific learning for.”

Leanne discussed the importance of both students and new employees being able to meet deadlines. She highlighted that Child, Youth and Family has become increasingly professional and responsive in regards to meeting the key performance indicators and that students and new Child, Youth and Family staff need to be aware and receptive to the importance of completing tasks in a timely manner. She wondered if the flexibility sometimes given to students in the tertiary sector around extensions for assignments was setting up

expectations from some students that this would also be the practice at Child, Youth and Family. Reviewing and ensuring rigorous practice around assignment extensions at Massey University may be one way of addressing this issue. Students could also be taught more about organisational practice, professional behaviour and expectations in the social service sector. Spending more time teaching students time management strategies and how to work effectively under pressure may also assist them to better meet the multiple demands on them when on placement or in employment.

Although not the primary focus of this article it is important to acknowledge that many students employed in tertiary social work programmes are concurrently employed as social workers within the social service sector. The Social Workers Registration Board Practicum Policy enables these students to potentially do one of their supervised placements within their place of work. If these placements are approved by the tertiary provider then these students/employees must undertake “a component or project that provides a significantly different social work experience to their normal employment opportunities” (SWRB, 2009b, p.2). The students/employees may therefore be required to move into a different team or at least be involved in new tasks during the placement period. Although this provides new learning opportunities for the student/employee to enhance their own professional learning and development, it also raises questions as to how these people experience the transitioning process back into their previous position at the conclusion of their placement. Further research examining the experience of being a student within the workplace, readiness for practice in a new role, and the transitional experiences of these students would be of considerable value.

Final comments

Students’ readiness for placement and then the transition from student to new graduate is complex. Factors including academic and personal attributes, the tertiary training, the preparation from the placement agency and the structure, function and operation of the new workplace all affect the transition.

Two key conclusions can be drawn from our conversation concerning enhancing readiness for practice through placements. The first is that an introduction to the organisational structure of Child, Youth and Family prior to the placement commencing, training that is specific to the Child, Youth and Family context, an office induction and ongoing mentoring, and regular clinical supervision would be beneficial for students and for the organisation. Students who are well supported during the practice experience are more likely to want to apply for positions in the agency at the point of graduation (Agllias, 2010; Davis, Gordon & Walker, 2011).

The second conclusion is that there are benefits to new graduates having induction soon after commencing employment, practice development mentoring or coaching, and regular supervision as well as relevant continuing professional education. These factors are all considered to be important for supporting transition and effective work with children and their families. Reasonable caseloads also help new graduates to better manage their own stress, ease into the work environment and potentially retain a balanced lifestyle.

The transitional experience of new graduates requires further examination so as to better understand this point in their development as social workers. Such research can then inform the teaching of tertiary providers, prepare students for this transitional stage and assist agencies such as Child, Youth and Family to understand how best to support new graduates as they begin their social work careers. ■

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Amy Hardyment began her employment as a Care and Protection Social Worker at Child, Youth and Family in October 2011. This followed a three month placement as part of the requirements for the fourth year of the Bachelor of Social Work at Massey University. Amy thoroughly enjoys working with children, young people and their families and always wanted to begin her social work career at Child, Youth and Family due to the wealth of opportunity, experience and knowledge it offers.

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