

# Using Research Findings to Change Agency Culture and Practice

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## Abstract

*This article focuses on findings from a qualitative study examining the induction and supervision of a range of staff engaged in family and child care work in two Children's Services in the north of England. The consistent view of respondents was that they preferred to be approached by line managers in ways that were person centred. Links are made between this approach and the underpinning values of a learning organisation. The way in which authorities respond to induction and supervision may have implications for wider strategies aimed at improving recruitment and retention.*

## Keywords

Organisational culture, human resources, social work, induction, supervision, children and families, qualitative research, research implementation.

## Introduction

The impact of research is not always predictable. The messages that are heard and acted on by an agency that has been the focus of research are those which are already likely to have resonance with the predominant thinking and culture that exists within it at the time. This paper draws on a small research project that was based in two Children's Services in the north of England (Children's Services A and B) that had developed from a pilot project on induction in Children's Services A. The focus was on aspects of agency practice cultures in family and child care work, given local and national recruitment and retention challenges of front line staff in this area (Social Care and Health Workforce (SCHWG) 2004). Perceptions on induction, supervision and related issues from staff at three different levels within the organisation were the focus of the research. The research methodology is described together with those aspects of the findings that one of the agencies

chose to incorporate into agency practice and culture. These included promoting a person centred approach to delivering induction and supervision. The article is set within the policy context and literature on induction and supervision and that of recruitment and retention within social work and social care.

## Background

Younger people in the United Kingdom (UK) appear reluctant to become social workers and a third of the social work workforce is aged over 50 (Audit Commission, 2002). The reasons are likely to be complicated, but it is widely known that social work has a poor image (Local Government National Training Organisation (LGNTO), 2001, Department of Health (DH), 2001, Genkeer *et al.*, 2002) that is reinforced by public expectations that they should perform more effectively (Audit Commission, 2002). The national trend is of increasing vacancy rates in social work (Eborall 2005) with staff being

enticed out of local authority work by alternatives that are perceived to be less pressured. The situation is likely to be compounded by the major restructuring that has taken place in England as children and adult services split into separate divisions in line with the government's vision (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2003; Her Majesty's Government, 2006). Staff in the personal social services have higher sickness levels compared with those in other areas of local government and the private sector (Employers Organisation, 2000) and by region, northern UK authorities have higher absence rates (Employers Organisation, 2003). Recent research in two social services departments in the north west of England (Coffey *et al.*, 2004) reported that staff working with children and families had the highest level of absenteeism and the lowest level in terms of sense of well being, compared with similar staff working in other settings. The effects of staff shortages to cover the workload were seen as the most difficult aspects of the work. The situation was more severe than the researchers had expected compared with, for example, findings from earlier workforce studies (for example, McLean 1999). Similar points were made by Barnes and Chand (2000) when considering the realities of practice in child protection work. In recent guidance on work with children and families, the government also recognised that the capacity of a competent workforce to deliver an effective framework 'relates to having sufficient staff in place' (DH, 2004, S6.23 p85). A complementary view from a human resource management perspective is that it is the quality of the support culture within an organisation that plays a significant part in the extent to which staff choose to stay or leave (Eborall & Garmeson 2001). Aspects of the support culture and the 'lived experience of

work' (Roche & Rankin 2004, p15) were aspects of the research that are drawn on in this paper.

Skills for Care (formerly the Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services - England) is of the view that good induction increases staff motivation and commitment to work (Topss 2001). Messages from research are less certain. A large study by Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) of newly qualified social workers and probation officers in England and Wales found extensive variability in the provision and quality of induction and so the authors' conclusions on what constituted a 'good' induction package were made in the context that they felt that the potential benefits of induction had yet to be fully exploited in social work. Similarly, an international literature search on induction of social workers (Maher *et al.*, 2003) found little quantitative evidence of the influence of induction on retention and standard setting. Research from the field of education on the impact of statutory induction on newly qualified teachers has been more positive and quantifiable, both within the UK (Totterdall *et al.*, 2002) and internationally, according to a review of the research (Totterdall *et al.*, 2004).

Lord Laming (2003) raised the profile of induction in his report into the death of Victoria Climbié. He was critical of the way that front line staff had been introduced into the organisation (para 5.30) and recommended (no. 31) that processes were in place for practitioners to receive local guidance and knowledge and that such practice was kept up-to-date.

The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC 2006), one of the five bodies forming the federated UK Sector Skills Council for Social Care, has worked closely as part of the sector

workforce development plan, including bodies such as the General Social Care Council (GSCC) to construct Common Induction Standards for Children's Services (CIS-CS). These standards have been mapped against a range of standards and levels that can be used to support the principles of *Every Child Matters* (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2003) in order to encourage common induction processes and partnership between agencies involved in children's services. Whilst these standards were not available when the fieldwork for the research in focus took place, templates and codes of practice from other health and social care agencies were drawn on (see for example, National Health Service University, 2004; the Irish Republic's National Social Work Board, (NSWQB, 2004a; 2004b). These were used as exemplars from which to compare and contrast local guidance and practice in the two Children's Services. Similarly, guidance from the GSCC provided a steer in its Codes of Practice (2002). These require that employers of all social care workers provide induction for staff, as part of their training and development needs, so that they 'do their jobs effectively' (section 3.1).

The GSCC Codes of Practice (2002) also spell out the duties of employers with reference to supervision. These were used as a standard, together with information from the literature, to help construct the research questions and inform the findings. For example, Froggett describes supervision as a relationship-based activity:

*that typically takes the form of a dialogue in which emotional, cognitive and ethical issues arising from the triadic relationship of client, practitioner and agency can be addressed.*

Froggett, 2000, p340

Within children and family work the emphasis on supervision has grown in

importance as official inquiries and research findings from inquiries point to the dangers when practitioners are not in receipt of effective supervision (London Borough of Brent, 1985; London Borough of Lambeth, 1987; Butler-Sloss, 1988; Department of Health (DH), 1995; Reder *et al.*, 1993; Turner, 2000; Stanley and Manthorpe 2004). The government indicated in a ten-point list (DH, 2000, section 6.27) the approach that should be covered in supervision of frontline practitioners working with children in need. The quality of expertise, experience, knowledge and professional confidence of the supervisor was also emphasised and their learning needs were seen as of equal importance to those of the practitioner (section 6.28).

Lord Laming (2003) also emphasised the importance of the supervisory culture within social work agencies. He was critical of the standard and substance of supervision within Haringey Social Services, recommending that:

*Directors of Social Services must ensure that the work of staff working directly with children is regularly supervised. This must include the supervisor reading, reviewing and signing the case file at regular intervals.*

(Laming, 2003, Sect 45, p375).

These standards, codes of conduct and good practice guidance, together with local guidance on supervision from the two children's services in the research frame, informed the content and approach to the study

### **Study aim and methods**

The aim of the study was to build a profile of agency and practice cultures from the perceptions and insights of key staff within statutory family and child care practice. Building on a pilot study in Children's Services A, the project was extended in scope and a second agency

in the North of England (Children's Services B) agreed to take part. The latter was selected since it had a different performance, or star, rating, a more distinctive urban profile, and diverse ethnic mix (National Statistics online 2005) compared with Children's Services A. The scope and method of the study followed discussions and agreements reached with key staff in the two Children's Services. Although this was non-commissioned research, the researcher held it important that the agenda was a collaborative venture that built onto and helped develop existing practices.

In each authority, the last ten appointed social workers who had completed a period of induction were interviewed using a semi-structured format between August 2004 and October 2005. Fourteen supervisors (six from Children's Services A and eight from B), who were also their line managers, were interviewed using a similar format. This was followed by telephone interviews with six line supervisors, known as service managers (four from Children's Services A and two from B). This method of recruiting 40 respondents over a comparatively short time span gave a sense of immediacy to the research.

Social work practitioners were asked to describe a range of views that included their perceptions of induction and supervision, particularly those aspects that worked well and less well; their views on the main pressure points at work and their future career aspirations. Questions put to supervisors included the type of induction they received; past and current experiences of supervision; factors that helped or restricted their supervisory skills; and the type of supervision and work scrutiny they gave to supervisees and received from line managers. Similar questions to those of

the supervisors were put to the service managers. Brief professional biographies were taken of all respondents.

Learning about issues from the perspective of those who encounter the experience has a good fit with the methodology of qualitative research. Semi-structured interviewing enables the interviewer to seek clarification, and sometimes discover new leads on issues as they arise. Face-to-face interviews also provide opportunities to explore underlying feelings and non-verbal cues (Robson, 2002). A disadvantage is that interviewer bias is difficult to rule out. Whilst it may be less easy to establish rapport in phone interviews, they may be more effective in controlling bias (Sudman, 1979, cited in Robson 2002). A further disadvantage in small-scale studies is that researchers need to be aware that distorted or fabricated answers may have a greater impact on the results than in larger scale studies where their responses would be subsumed within a larger dataset (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995).

The challenge of interviewer bias, and also the importance of the interviewer/researcher being honest about his/her perspective are relevant to all studies. My background is in statutory practice and management and currently I teach social work in a UK university. My interest is to learn about how practitioners are likely to thrive in challenging statutory settings and I explained this to respondents. For this project, I conducted all the interviews to aid consistency of data collection.

At the point when this study was being developed (June-August 2004) the Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care (DH, 2004) had not been fully implemented within the two local authorities and the work was

taken through a university faculty ethics committee where the author was then based. All respondents received a letter in advance of the interview that described the project and the subject areas that would be covered. They were also asked to sign a consent form to take part in the interview in which confidentiality and anonymity were clarified. Before the research report was published (Bradley, 2006), respondents received a copy of the draft report and their comments were sought regarding accuracy, fairness and anonymity.

## Results

### *Profile of the respondents*

The practitioners had an average age of 36. Seventeen of the 20 were women, all were qualified social workers, and the majority (15) had received their awards between 2003 and 2005. In terms of ethnicity, 18 were white and two were Black; both worked for Children's Services B, reflecting a Black and minority ethnic group profile locally that was higher than the regional and national average (National Statistics Online 2005). At the time of their induction, 13 were working predominantly in child protection work (11 in longer term child and families teams and two in assessment and intervention); the remaining seven worked in adoption and fostering ( $n=4$ ); looked after children ( $n=2$ ) and intervention and support ( $n=1$ ).

With a mean age of 47, the four women working in adoption and fostering were the oldest and drew on the longest professional experience, predominantly in statutory childcare practice. The three men, all of whom worked in child protection, had a mean age of 42 years whilst, in contrast, the ten women also working in this area had a mean age of 32. Across the sample as a whole, 13 (8 in A and five in B) had been appointed

directly from qualifying training. Among these, 10 had completed their final placement with their authority and with one exception, all went directly into child protection work. This profile belies the fact that many were drawing on extensive unqualified social work, social care and other relevant experience prior to qualification. Nonetheless, unsurprisingly, the youngest drew on the least experience. The three youngest workers in this study were aged between 22 and 24. Of these, two were appointed as child protection workers.

Of the 14 supervisors, 12 were women, all were white, and had an average age of 47. Thirteen had gained their supervisory experience with their current authority and the average time spent in this role was five years. The two supervisors who were men were based in adoption and fostering teams, one in each authority and both had an above average length of supervisory experience.

Five of the service managers were female, all were white, and their average age was 49. On average, they drew on 12 years of supervisory experience gained predominantly within their authority for those based in Children's Services A.

Given the small number of men participating in this study, all respondents are referred to below in the female gender to help maintain anonymity. Where responses from staff from the two authorities are similar, the breakdown between them is not given.

### *Induction and beginning practice*

On appointment, few social workers recalled receiving an experience of induction that followed guidance and procedures. Even with some prompting answers were vague, particularly about whether an induction pack had been

received and what form it took. Nonetheless, most ( $n=13$ ) were positive about their experience of induction and beginning practice. Practitioners said that it was helpful when colleagues and managers were warm, friendly and open towards them and that the quality of the welcome was important. As one worker commented:

*I was very pleased, very impressed with the welcome...I was greeted by the service manager.*

Conversely a poor welcome was just as, if not more, memorable and this was mentioned by three of the seven who held negative views about this phase. As one commented:

*I wasn't expected, my supervisor was away that week, there was a misunderstanding about the start date...it really shocked me.*

A common theme amongst the seven reporting negative experiences was the lack of care taken of their needs. Assumptions were made that induction was barely necessary for three of the workers who had been on final placement with their authority and three experienced workers who had changed jobs.

Similar assumptions were made about the induction needs of supervisors and service managers. On appointment, none of the 14 supervisors had received a formal induction and most accepted this, but some ( $n=5$ ) were more resigned. As one reflected:

*It's the case that you make the transition from practitioner to team manager and you get on with the job.*

Experiences of induction by the six service managers were nominal, but five of them thought that this was satisfactory. One supervisor and one service manager described an induction that, although not formal, involved

aspects that worked well for them: one valued the warm welcome from her line manager, and both appreciated the fact that they were given the scope to develop their own induction according to their personal and professional needs.

Tailoring beginnings to individual needs and setting up systems of welcome that are timely, warm and pitched at the right level, were messages that were well received by Children's Services A when the findings of the study were reported back. A recommendation was made by the Head of Children's Services that all staff in her section should be welcomed in person by their line manager and that within the first weeks of arrival they should also be introduced to senior staff in central office. It was agreed that these initiatives, within an approach that is person centred, should be embedded in local guidance on induction.

#### *Supervision, review and scrutiny.*

When describing aspects of supervision that worked well, seven social workers mentioned the positive supportive relationship that helped them in day-to-day professional life and development. A genuine positive regard conveyed by supervisor to supervisee was at the heart of good supervision for four workers: as one practitioner described:

*I definitely feel supported and listened to; she listens to me emotionally and asks me how I feel.*

When questioned about aspects of supervision that were not working well, 13 social workers were critical of the emphasis in case supervision. As one commented:

*[There's] no time for reflection on 'the why' - it's more a case of ticking boxes to make sure everything is done.*

Others wanted more rigor, depth and criticism of their work. When asked

what had been omitted in supervision that should have been included, the view of the majority ( $n=9$ ) was that the emphasis on the more procedural, management driven agenda tended to exclude the broader more reflective aspects. As one worker lamented when talking about her supervisor's perceptions of the 'weight' of her caseload):

*I'm not certain she hears how I really feel.*

When supervisors were asked about what they thought were the components of good supervision, the management of cases and accountability were distinctive themes. Nonetheless, eight of the 14 supervisors also reinforced the value of a person centred approach, since this enabled them to understand more about practitioners' learning styles and motivation. As one commented:

*It's about you as a person being real - listening well, not belittling, recognising that it must be a problem to them if they're raising it. It's about being emotionally available...*

When describing less effective supervision, eleven respondents described approaches that were the antithesis of this approach, as the following quotation illustrates:

*...managers who have the 'go away' approach - managers who constantly cancel meetings, who are rigid, inflexible, ticking boxes.*

Time was given as the main factor that restricted their development as supervisors ( $n=7$ ) but also, and perhaps these are linked, the lack of administrative back up and priority given to the task by the department, were cited. As one supervisor commented:

*In my view not enough priority is given to it [supervision] ...It's subject to*

*continuous rearrangement, there's a high level of interruption, no uninterrupted space to do it in. When working on the front line you need the current files with you and you need admin backup and involvement in helping to set up the process.*

Half the group of supervisors were not reviewing their staff through the formal annual process and many were not systematically reviewed themselves. Further, when asked whether they felt that their supervisory work was supported, enabled and scrutinised by their line managers, most said that they felt supported ( $n=13$ ) and enabled ( $n=7$ ) but only four said that their work was scrutinised on a regular basis, using methods not just based on verbal feedback. The operational culture in both authorities appeared to be on a 'need to know' basis and on the assumption that supervisors knew when and how they should alert service managers to current issues. Some supervisors felt vulnerable as one reflected:

*I feel I've just been left to get on with it.*

Service managers said that competing work demands and priorities were the reason why their approach to supervision was flexible and pragmatic and why they were not always systematic in implementing the annual developmental review of staff. When asked how they knew that employees whom they supervised were effective supervisors four of the six agreed that scrutiny was on a 'need to know basis' and said that they knew when things were going wrong through open communication with their staff.

When discussing these findings, senior managers in Children's Services A reinforced the point that that good supervision should be at the heart of the business, and that an approach that recognised the expressed needs of the

practitioners should be reinforced in current practice and conveyed within agency training of supervisors. An instruction was to be sent to all childcare staff that supervisory sessions should be given priority and not cancelled, since this conveyed the wrong message. It was also the view that the 'open door' policy between workers and managers had led to informal supervisory processes evolving alongside formal structures. Rather than changing a culture that was working, this form of supervision should be recognised, providing that points raised and decisions taken were recorded on the case file. This practice is to be reinforced through line management and brought forward in the training of supervisors. In terms of scrutiny of work the message from senior staff was that work needed to be scrutinised more regularly, transparently and explicitly at all levels and that the tools to implement a 'critical pathways' approach required the discipline of regular use, if they were to become more 'bedded in'. Responses from Children's Services A concerning the annual developmental review were that that this process was not an option, that its merits and importance needed to be discussed throughout the organisation and that it should be seen to work for individual staff, their development and career planning.

Reflecting on the broader messages from the research, there was a recognition that the culture that has developed, in terms of induction and supervision, is of the authority's making. Children's Services A considered it had a 'captive audience' from line managers who are of long standing, and as a consequence it may have become too inward looking. The merits of running training programmes for supervisors that are challenging, dynamic and developmental were accepted. At the same time it was recognised that there may be other

complimentary ways of working. For example, a more individual and personalised model for learning and development may help build staff capacity more effectively. The reflection from several people in the feedback group was that those who are motivated to work within a personalised model of development may be more committed to an organisation that values and promotes learning throughout the life/work course. Whilst the supervisory relationship may be at its heart, mentorship, either within or outside the system of line management would lend itself to this model. It was noted that such a model that is tailored to individual need links well an approach that is person centred.

#### *Recruitment and retention challenges*

Supervisors and service managers had been asked to comment on ways in which their authority could promote a sustainable recruitment and retention workforce policy. Supervisors from Children's Services A were of the view that initiatives that would convey the right messages, particularly to beginning staff, included appointing additional staff to help relieve work pressure and also giving praise and recognition for the work they do. Service managers similarly felt that valuing staff was an important element, as one manager put it:

*Agencies need to recognise the wealth of knowledge that is in their staff and foster and acknowledge this resource.*

These points were taken up in the feedback session. It was agreed that a message should be conveyed to all line managers to the effect that staff should be praised not only when work was done well, but also in recognition of doing work that was particularly challenging. However, whilst it was accepted that staff absences compound work pressure, 'back fill' posts that are supernumerary

were viewed as unsatisfactory for the designated worker. Rather a more proactive approach to staff appointments was preferred, the implementation of which would be subject to central human resources (HR) agreement.

A series of other initiatives were favourably discussed concerning recruitment and retention. These drew on the broader implications of the findings and some had implications for the working practices of the authority as a whole that are subject to central agreement. For example, the research had highlighted the gender profile within the section and nationally, and the gendered responses from staff in response to questions concerning, for example, work pressure. A more proactive approach was thought desirable that enabled workers who are full time carers to opt for part time work, that may also be helpful to workers who had not returned from taking maternity leave. Other strategies included that of enabling staff to move around the agency, perhaps for a 2-3 year term to gain a breadth of experience. This proposal would take effect at the time of appointment before more entrenched positions took hold. This was in light of recent initiatives that had met with limited success that encouraged experienced practitioners to engage in front line work on a time-limited basis. Such a policy may result in a more flexible workforce committed to the broader remit of the agency and the local authority. Closer monitoring of sickness absence in order to log emerging patterns and inform preventative actions and also age related policies that provide incentives for people to work longer, in light of the recent rise in the age of retirement, were also discussed positively.

### **Discussion: transforming knowledge within a learning organisation**

Transformative learning takes place when parties are willing to think reflectively and are open to rethinking and reframing assumptions about what is happening in their work cultures (Mezirow, 2000). Within such a framework, the recipients hold the key to deciding which aspects of the research have a resonance at local level, are likely to take hold, have an impact and be a force for change. By stimulating new local practices and concerns, the knowledge becomes transformed (Payne, 2001). The selective changes proposed by key staff in Children's Services A in response to the findings from this small study, may not seem that profound or transformative. On closer reflection however, these apparently small changes may lead to more significant cultural changes and fit well with the tenets of a learning organisation (Davies and Nutley, 2000), good employment practice (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004) and the government's modernising agenda (DH, 1998).

A key finding that had a local resonance was that of the preference of staff to be supervised and managed in ways that are person centred. This approach that is currently associated with the government's vision for the delivery of social care services to users and families (DH, 2001; 2003; 2005; Sanderson, 2000; Hasnain *et al.*, 2003), has been at the heart of social work practice, past and present. Developed in the work of Rogers (1951, 1961), Truax and Carkuff (1967) and Egan (1998), it encapsulates western humanistic values (Payne 2005) that are based on a set of conditions, without which enabling, trusting relationships are unlikely to flourish. These conditions such as upholding the

dignity of and respect for an individual, apply to all forms of effective practice however radical and critical (Dominelli, 1988; 2002). Within the worker-supervisor relationship, establishing a trusting relationship in which the worker feels respected and valued is more likely to create the conditions that will encourage reflective learning (Banks 2002) and enable a skilled supervisor to introduce new ways of working that overcome barriers and risks within practice (Randall *et al.*, 2000; Froggett 2000; Ferguson 2005). Similarly, when such conditions apply, a practitioner is more likely to be willing to share personal/professional weaknesses and learn from past mistakes.

Learning from past mistakes and seeing opportunities that arise from errors are indicators of underpinning cultural values that support learning capacity within a learning organisation (Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998, cited in Davies and Nutley, 2000). Other indicators that may be linked with a person centred approach include valuing and believing in people by encouraging their personal and professional development; learning from those who are closest to the process and valuing their knowledge; emphasising open communication through informal channels; celebrating success; and fostering trust amongst colleagues. These indicators also fit well with the qualitative, bottom up approach taken by the researcher that was actively encouraged by Children's Services A. The open and reflective responses taken by senior personnel to the findings as described, are also an integral part of a learning organisation that seeks to learn about how to improve the conditions that enable a person or organisation to learn, and conversely when and how failure to learn occurs (Davies & Nutley 2000).

Learning that questions more fundamental assumptions within an organisation and leads to changes, for example, in policies and structures is referred to by Argyris and Schön (1978, cited in Davies and Nutley, 2000) as 'double loop learning' since it begins to question the accepted ways of doing things and the feedback loops that are normally used. So, for example, if Children's Services A moves to a position of rethinking terms of service for newly appointed workers or creating more flexible working arrangements for mainly female full time staff who have caring responsibilities, this could be viewed as a higher level change that may enhance the personal/professional capabilities of the workforce within a learning organisation. The gendered dimension of the social care workforce is well documented. Camilleri and Jones' study (2001) indicated that women generally are more likely to carry higher responsibilities for formal and informal care. In terms of recruitment and retention, Eborall (2005) cites family pressures having an impact on the experiences of workers in children's services that result in higher vacancy rates compared with those in adult services. Roche and Rankin's workforce study (2004) recommended that organisations wishing to retain female staff needed to be thoughtful about ways in which they are supported in formal work. Their findings suggest focussing on the 'lived experience of work' (p15), on the pressures and work overload that may make work/life balance untenable. They recommend an annual workforce survey to monitor staff morale and motivation. A person centred approach whereby personnel, perhaps outwith line management, actively listen to the experiences of staff and, with permission and in confidence, log emerging trends and pressures as part of a critical audit, is also likely to be helpful to building this knowledge.

Addressing complex issues concerning recruitment and retention is unlikely to be a linear process. Children's Services A is likely to take an incremental approach based on what works and what is politically feasible. There may be tensions from developing learning organisations based on flexibility, openness and high levels of trust within a predominantly 'top down' judgemental national performance framework (Davies and Nutley 2000). Such tensions however may be creative.

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