

# Social Work and Child Protection

THURSDAY, MARCH 5, 2009 AT 9:00AM – Olive Stevenson

I have had so many strong feelings and troubled thoughts since the “Baby P” case. ...So many words, so many opinions, so much ugly talk and the familiar search for scapegoats.....The tragic story behind it all is so dreadfully familiar, with echoes of 30 years of Serious Case Reviews. Now we hear that there is serious concern about shortages of social workers for children’s services in the local authority and experienced workers are being urged to return. Today there is news of a significant number of dysfunctional departments, according to Ofsted, whose star charts provide a quick guide to excellence. Returning workers will, we’re told, need “less paper-work, manageable caseloads and more support”. Those are obviously important matters but they are the tip of a very large and deep iceberg.

What has to be addressed, in general and in depth, is the position of social workers within local government and the relationship between local and central government in all this. Local government has not been a hospitable environment for the development of a new profession because it is a classic bureaucracy, with strict hierarchies and an emphasis on accountability rather than responsibility. There’s nothing wrong with accountability but we need both. Social work, as all professions, requires a personal sense of responsibility, with the exercise of discretion and good judgments at its core. Successive governments have sought to improve the functioning of local government children’s services by exerting greater control, through setting targets, susceptible to ready measurement –and by “driving up standards” –note the terminology. Some negative consequences are well known; perverse incentives, a culture of fear and secrecy at all levels and some nasty bullying . This is not to suggest that a flight to the voluntary sector would sort it. Rather we must look to a radical change of approach.

Let's go back to the essentials. Social work in child protection is one of the most difficult and complex tasks in any profession. Such work has profound effects on workers who can experience disgust, fear, intense anxieties, hopelessness, even despair – it's all there.The implications of this have been consistently ignored or underrated in so much of the debate. The “more support” that is called for is not a

shoulder to cry on (though that would sometimes be nice); it a systematic programme to help workers to articulate their feelings about certain cases so that they can better understand what may be getting in the way of making good enough assessments and interventions. “Why am I relieved when she is out when I know its urgent?” “Why do find it so hard to talk to the children?” (That is not a simple matter).

To establish effective systems, there must be a variety of responses; more emphasis in training and development at all levels on the interaction of mind and feelings in the judgements made; improved reflective consultation systems, including peer group arrangements; management attuned to the value of this. This cannot be achieved if central government continues to set a bad example of bullying tactics, linked to insufficient understanding of the issues, as in some Ofsted inspections.

Perhaps I have lived too long. But surely everyone should see now that the structural “solutions” so beloved by management and government , are never sufficient and sometimes downright dangerous in “our kind”of world. When I look back on the post-1974, Maria Colwell, years, I can see how I, and I guess others too, were distracted from our central purpose – to develop a profession fit for purpose, operating in settings which sought to foster rather than control it. Mea Culpa! But there is now a substantial group of like minded people who must get together, not to beat their breasts or idealise the past but to use some insights and wisdom which are not new but need to be recovered and reshaped. For a start there is the Centre for Social Work Practice at the Tavistock Centre.

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