



Child protection: an unreflective practice

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***Abstract** This paper highlights the need for social work education to focus on the ideological, cultural and organisational influences that shape practitioner perspectives and determine case careers, particularly in the area of child protection. Using the findings from a case study on the processing of child abuse referrals made to a social work team in Ireland's largest health board region, this paper illustrates the dissonance between the 'official' child protection discourse and the complexities and dilemmas of everyday practice. It also highlights practitioners' apparent lack of awareness of the dynamics that determine the way in which decisions and assessments are reached. The need to encourage and facilitate social workers' use of theory as a means of addressing these complex areas is endorsed, and implications for educational programmes are discussed.*

The social work profession is traditionally underpinned by a set of values and ideologies which imply that practitioners who are authentically 'professional' must be not only competent, but self aware, sensitive, and have a strong sense of ethical and moral correctness. Social work education, therefore, must inculcate a combination of personal skills, knowledge and values, and encourage students to constantly reflect on these core principles of their profession. One of the difficulties for new social work recruits, however, and one of the strongest challenges to their professional integrity, is the degree to which the 'work', particularly in the area of child protection, has become proceduralised. As Howe (1992) points out, the increasing bureaucratisation of social work which has followed the 'emergence' of child abuse has attempted to develop solutions 'within a single conceptual outlook' which seeks to deal with the work in a systematic and uniform manner, thereby making practitioners into 'passive agents'. This development, he argues, has meant that while social workers may be highly proficient, many of their skills are no longer under their exclusive control. Similarly, Stevenson (1997) has pointed out that good judgement is increasingly difficult to achieve in a context of pressures, complications and sensitivities. While social work in Ireland is not yet as managerially dominated as it is in the UK, there are signs that the child protection discourse in particular is becoming fundamentally concerned with risk management (Buckley, 1996; Buckley *et al.*, 1997). Within such a context, this paper highlights three important issues: firstly, the complex nature of child protection work; secondly, the lack of adherence to concepts of social and psychological theory by practitioners; and thirdly, it proposes that the operational framework adopted by Irish Health Boards,¹ who employ most of the country's social workers, increasingly stultifies the values and ideologies upon which their professional training has been founded. In its affirmation of this conjecture, it makes a case for social work education to address this problem by an

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increased emphasis on critical reflection as an essential component of professional practice in child protection, and attempts to identify the specific implications for training.

The arguments on which this paper is based emerge from a qualitative research study conducted by this author in an Irish Health Board region in 1994, the findings of which are analysed through the current literature on child protection. The practice of Health Board social workers was analysed in a case study which examined the processing of all referrals (72) which were reported to one area team, over a 6 month period, and designated to the category of 'child abuse'. Those referrals which became 'cases' and remained in the system (17) were followed up in considerable depth for a further 6 months, making a total of 1 year's fieldwork. Through a qualitative paradigm, and using the methodological tools of in-depth interviewing of practitioners² and observation of team meetings and case conferences,³ the research exposed the range of contextual factors which impacted on the identification, investigation and management of child abuse cases. These included ideological conflicts and contradictions associated with organisational culture, gender, power and interactional dynamics, all of which impacted strongly on practice in individual situations, but had little visibility in the formal blueprint for practice offered in agency procedures. What the research also highlighted was the way in which practitioners, caught within the bureaucratic demands of their agency function, seemed oblivious to the influence of these processes on their interventions at various points in case 'careers'. This paper does not propose to report on the research in a detailed fashion; rather it presents a commentary on those aspects of the findings which have relevance for social work training and education.

The construction of child abuse

One of the ways in which child protection social workers' frameworks for practice become observable is through the criteria they apply to the process of 'filtering' child abuse allegations from the system. As studies have shown (Dingwall *et al.*, 1995; Thorpe, 1994; Farmer & Owen, 1995; Gibbons *et al.*, 1995), a large proportion of social work time in local authority child care teams is spent either eliminating or validating reported concerns about children in terms of 'child abuse' or not, as the case may be. Following the 'official' child protection discourse, by which I mean the set of policies, procedures, and what Parton (1991, p. 3) would describe as the 'political framework of social organisation' around which responses to child abuse reports are constituted, it might be assumed that this operation is easily achieved. It should, in theory, consist of gathering information on the child and family concerned, making an adjudication according to some objective notion of 'risk' and either planning an intervention, or making a decision to take no further action. In-service, agency-based training has the propensity to reinforce and falsely validate this technical/rational discourse through a concentration on protocol. The assumption upon which this approach rests is that child protection workers can, without demur, agree on a universal understanding of child abuse, and respond accordingly. Yet, as experienced practitioners are aware, the matter of definition goes far beyond check-lists or even 'expert' knowledge. While some concerns about children fit into the template of a 'text-book' child abuse case, many others lack the evidential certainties assumed in official protocols which were designed to address incidents where culpability is clear and risk blatantly obvious. If, however, a reported event or concern does not fit into this normative framework, and a reasonable prospect of resolution is not foreseeable, then a space is created for ideological and pragmatic factors to influence decision making.

Seventy-six per cent of the 'neglect' referrals were filtered out of the system very quickly without any offer of service, yet it is known that neglect can have very adverse effects on

children (Crittenden, 1988; Crouch & Milner, 1993). So why was it so easily disregarded by the social workers in the study? Analysis of the workers' responses suggests that, apart from the few cases where evidence of maltreatment was indisputable, much of the filtering activity which was carried out had less to do with the nature of the reported concern or incident than it had to do with the context in which the concern was identified. For instance, the 'reputation' of the families who were reported was significant in determining the likely disposal of reported concerns. A history of poverty and neglect tended to lessen the possibility that a referral would be 'endorsed' as child abuse where families had been previously known to the social work service, particularly when they were regarded as 'chronic'. Judgements appeared to be influenced by a combination of pessimism about the value of intervention, and ambivalence about the boundaries between poor quality care and 'neglect' in a context of general adversity. Stevenson (1996, p. 13) explains the 'neglect of neglect' in the same terms, but also highlights the links between neglect and poverty, and the way that social workers have become used to certain families 'bumping along the bottom'. Perceiving the parents to be under intolerable strain, practitioners, according to Stevenson, 'are reluctant to make the judgements which lead to the finding of neglect' (p. 16).

Almost as significantly, there was evidence in the study to show that anxiety about the potential impact on a family of an investigation constituted an important element in the pre-screening process, and was an issue to which practitioners accorded a high level of sensitivity. It was most clearly at this juncture that Dingwall *et al.*'s (1995) 'rule of optimism' was visible. Through this device, the practitioners expressed their unease with the imposition of standards, about 'slapping' children, for instance, or 'different social value systems', particularly when the reported incidents appeared to be the least adverse elements in the lives of the families concerned. Dread of 'devastating' a family by their intervention also appeared to orientate workers towards the construction of whatever evidence was available in a positive light, and made them disinclined to search for more information which could potentially discredit that view.

The root of the dilemma appeared to lie in the social workers' sense that the forensic approach which is central to child protection investigations had little to offer situations which were not amenable to either 'warnings' or accessible solutions. They seemed to be very caught up in a linear, one-dimensional approach to the problems which were presented to them. A similar trend is apparent in the literature. Thorpe (1994, p. 196), for example, considering the 'overrepresentation of poor and disadvantaged people' in child abuse statistics, argues that 'child protection' does little to improve the lot of many children who come into its net, and in fact performs poorly in relation to 'neglect' cases. The reason, he explains, is because the 'technology' and 'knowledge base', which is constructed around 'child abuse', does not represent the majority of those who actually come into contact with the system. Gibbons *et al.* (1995) similarly found that 'neglect' referrals were most likely to be filtered out of the system at an early stage. This, they believe, is linked to the focus of assessment which determines if children are 'in need of protection' rather than 'in need'.

The screening devices operated by the workers in the study eliminated over half of the child abuse allegations (44 out of 72) prior to all but cursory investigation. All of the decisions employed a high level of sense-making, which invoked different personal value systems and experiences. In practice, the balance more often than not swung towards non-intervention when the pros and cons were weighed up against each other; the potential for effective change as against the uncertainty, upset and possible aggression which would be met if parents were confronted with an accusation of child maltreatment. The sense-making was also coloured by aspects of Dingwall *et al.*'s (1995) 'cultural relativism', whereby different norms are applied to different social and ethnic groups. For example, despite what is known about the

disadvantages and hazards faced by Irish traveller families (O'Higgins, 1993), the findings of this research have shown how a significant diversity of standards was apparent in the responses to reports about them. Although the presence of minority ethnic groups in the study was small (four travelling families and one family from Iraq), there was evidence to indicate, for example, that disciplinary measures as well as living conditions, which would have been considered unacceptable within the settled or indigenous community, were tolerated in relation to particular minorities. In fact, none of these cases were taken on for further intervention once the initial investigation was complete, despite evidence in each instance of inadequate housing, serious material deficits, physical chastisement, over-parentification of children and in at least one case, inadequate emotional stimulation and parental availability. It might be expected that social workers would make some effort to address the very real child protection concerns presented in relation to these groups, while being sensitive to their different cultural norms. In reality, however, little attempt was made by them to grapple with the dilemmas presented by cultural or social differences, nor did they display what Stevenson (1998) would term 'curiosity' about the implications of diverse patterns of child rearing. Their method of resolving the issue was more often than not achieved by distancing themselves, either discounting the concern or devolving the responsibility for dealing with it to some other agency, such as the police. Although the importance of anti-discriminatory practice in social work education is officially recognised in Ireland (NSWQB, 1996, p. 11), the findings outlined here indicate that the degree to which it interacts with and is diluted by cultural relativism needs to be more clearly spelt out in educational programmes.

The study findings just outlined highlight several important and related issues, which have implications for social work training. One which has already been discussed is the narrowness of the assessment framework, which largely ignores factors not conforming to the 'organisational' version of child abuse. Another is the degree of ideological confusion which workers apparently experienced, which caused them to become, as Stevenson (1998) puts it, 'sidelined' into unresolved dilemmas about culture and privacy. Clearly, social work education must acknowledge, in the context of theoretical reflections in these areas, that childhood adversities transcend cultural, ideological and what may appear to be organisational boundaries.

The third issue raised by these findings is the absence of direct or constructive focus on the child or children at the centre of concern. Despite the requirement in Irish Child Abuse Guidelines to 'see the child and note and assess appearance and behaviour' (Department of Health, 1987, p. 11), the child or children who were the subjects of concern were seen in relation to only 17 of the 72 referrals, suggesting that whatever the nature of the other enquiries carried out, their focus was certainly not on the 'appearance and behaviour' of the children. In six of the investigations where the children were present, the social workers told me that they had seen them only because they happened to be there at the parental interview, but they had not specifically set out to see them, nor did they spend much time evaluating either their physical condition, or their views on the child protection concern which led to the interview. The implications for training here are relatively clear—the need for child centredness in practice. Such a perspective should incorporate a sound theoretical framework for assessment of the effect of current adversities on children's physical, psychological and social development, including the quality of their former and current attachments, strengths and weaknesses in their current environment, their own perception of the situation and any areas of resilience which may be positively developed through intervention. Most of these elements are already present in the social work training currently being undertaken by practitioners,

but what is often absent is an awareness of how easily they can be relegated to a secondary position in a highly proceduralised context.

The gendered nature of child protection practice

The study upon which this paper is based has also drawn attention to another important feature of the child protection discourse, one which has begun to attract a lot of attention over the past decade, through its association with the feminist interest in child abuse and family violence, and that is its gender-blindness. In this research, lone parent families, almost all headed by mothers, dominated the statistics. More than half of the cases which were subject to case conferences and allocated for further work were comprised of female lone parent families. Research in Ireland (McCashin, 1996) indicates that lone parents as a category have lower incomes by the standards of Irish society at large. In the same vein, Thorpe (1994), in his Australian study, has analysed the type of difficulties which affect women caring for children on their own and the professional responses which tend to focus almost exclusively on how they fulfil their parental roles, rather than on their personal and social problems. Yet, there was little evidence in the Irish study of any special consideration by social workers of lone motherhood, and its associated stresses. At the same time, the focus of child protection attention and adjudication was unapologetically on mothers, replicating other research findings (Thorpe, 1994; Farmer & Owen, 1995) even when fathers were known to be responsible for the alleged concern or harm, reflecting two important issues. One is that mothers are, even when they have male partners, clearly allocated the responsibility for the care and protection of their children. The second issue also has serious practice implications, and concerns the way that the system deals with men's violence. When responses were considered through this perspective, there appeared a clear pattern of practitioner avoidance and mitigation of men where aggression might be anticipated. For example, 14 of the 'investigated' families were headed by two parents. Yet in eight instances the investigative interview was carried out with the mother, and fathers were not included in any part of the enquiry even though they were the alleged abusers in four of these situations. These findings affirm Milner's (1993, 1996) theory regarding child protection workers' avoidance and mitigation of violent men, but also highlight the taken-for-granted notion that child care is the mother's job, supporting theories in the literature about the gendered division of labour in households (Farmer & Owen, 1995; Milner, 1993; Parton, 1990). The tendency for such gendered practice to conceal itself in the way that responsibility and culpability is framed within the child protection discourse has been noted in the literature (Gordon, 1989; Milner, 1993). These research findings have demonstrated the way in which it is compounded by practitioners who act both within societal and cultural expectations, but also out of self-protection, in an occupational framework which has not come to grips with unsafe aspects of the job.

The gendered paradigm operated by the child protection system was clearly illustrated in this study in relation to intra-familial child sexual abuse, in those cases where the perpetrator was the mother's partner or cohabitee. Hooper (1992) argues that responses to 'non-abusing' mothers frequently failed to acknowledge what she terms the unique 'discovery' process which they were most likely experiencing, and the difficulty they had in coming to terms with the fact that their children had been abused by a trusted and, often, a loved partner. There was evidence in the research to show that in such cases, social workers not only failed to satisfactorily explore or show sensitivity to the needs of women in that difficult situation, but instead allocated them the onerous responsibility of keeping their children safe from further abuse. Ironically, the study has also offered an example of where an approach which

consistently defines women as 'victims' can be similarly misguided. There was evidence in at least one case of the social workers' failure to acknowledge a separated father's serious and apparently genuine complaints about his wife's care of the children, endorsing the notion that mothers are not only traditionally considered responsible for their children's care, but are also considered the most 'appropriate' carers. Social workers were, apparently, operating within a template based on what Featherstone (1997, pp. 428–429) would term 'fixed notions' concerning men, women and children, which lacked any consideration of diversity and power. The gendered practices described here are explicable on a number of levels, but it was concerning to see how readily and unquestioningly the traditional perspective was adopted by practitioners. Social work education needs to concentrate on raising awareness amongst students—the majority of whom are women (Christie, 1998), of the effect of gender on several dimensions of the work, including the framing of policies, the nature of organisations, the choice of interventions. Importantly, it must highlight the potential for workers to mirror their own gendered socialisation experiences in relation to both male and female clients.

The dynamic nature of child protection work

Increasingly, official procedures and guidelines urge greater co-operation between agencies, the most recent example in Ireland being the implementation of a protocol on the communication of child care concerns between police and the health boards (Department of Health, 1995). Such guidance is based on what I have previously termed technical/rational assumptions of unproblematic conduct, yet, as Hallett and Birchall (1992) have pointed out, simply mandating co-operation cannot guarantee its success. There were many examples in this study of the way that dynamics which operated between, for example, different agencies and different professionals, could be highly significant in terms of their impact on the processing of cases. This became particularly evident in the tense relationships which existed, for example, between the child guidance services and the Health Boards with regard to the responsibility to 'investigate'. Whilst the child psychiatric services regarded it as the Health Board's 'statutory' role, the Health Board social workers believed that the agency who had most contact with the children concerned, not necessarily themselves, would be best placed to follow up any allegations in relation to them, thus avoiding the inevitable fragmentation that could occur if another organisation became involved. Additionally, the Health Board workers resented the implication that 'co-ordination' meant them taking responsibility for the 'nasty' bits to facilitate the treatment agencies doing the 'nice' work.

Certain locations, such as case conferences, were frequently dominated by unacknowledged tensions which bore little relevance to the welfare or protection of the children concerned. These findings replicate the identification in the literature of negative dynamics, such as the 'hidden agendas' and stereotyping observed by Hallett and Stevenson (1980). As Reder *et al.* (1993, p. 67) point out, case conferences are vulnerable to the same group processes as any other meeting, 'attendances and absences, chairing, alliances, hierarchy and projection' all influencing the final decision. There was evidence in this study to uphold their theory, including examples of 'dormant professional rivalries' and 'exaggerated hierarchies', and several instances where it was clear that pre-set attitudes and beliefs were carried into the meetings by participants.

As case careers in this study moved forward, there was further evidence of Hallett's (1995) assertion that commitment to co-operation diminishes once the investigative stages of child protection work have passed. In several instances, separate undertakings which had been agreed between Health Board practitioners, schools and the police were not carried out by different parties. In one outstanding example, conflict between a Health Board social worker

and a psychologist over the 'correct' approach to a case of child sexual abuse led to the psychologist 'opting out' of the situation, leaving a family with no therapeutic service. Reder *et al.*'s (1993) observation that the behaviour of professionals can come to mirror the splitting, chaos and other unhealthy dynamics in families was reflected in certain cases. Indeed, when viewed in terms of an interacting system, the professional network bore a strong resemblance to a dysfunctional family, with elements of competitiveness, scapegoating, insensitivity and rigidity.

Sadly, there was little sense that the impact of these interactional processes was either acknowledged or understood by the social workers. In the main, conflict was interpreted in terms of failure of responsibility, 'dumping' and professional arrogance; there was little real attempt to gain insight into the underlying occupational and psychological elements which gave rise to poor relationships, and no effort made to address them.

Social work education should facilitate practitioners to challenge the assumption that co-ordinated work can automatically follow the sort of protocols laid down by policy makers. It needs to pay attention to the nature and origin of the interactional processes taking place between different elements of the system, and the genesis of psychological barriers to communication. Significantly, it needs to offer an understanding of the sort of ritualised and defensive responses adopted by workers to cope with the uncertainties and anxieties inherent in the work, which can ultimately have a negative impact on practice (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997; Munro, 1996; Menzies, 1961).

The shifting balance of power

There is ample evidence in the literature (Buckley *et al.*, 1997; Corby *et al.*, 1996; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995; Cleaver & Freeman, 1995) of the sort of oppression which can be experienced by parents who are caught up in the child protection system, and similar patterns were observable in this study. However, the research made visible another, very relevant, phenomenon and that was the degree to which intervention could also be effectively 'controlled' by parents. There were examples of the way that families could 'close off' social work contact at points where it is perceived to be too threatening, a dynamic which Reder *et al.* (1993) previously identified in child abuse cases. It also became obvious, as case careers moved forward, that relationships between practitioners and parents were frequently *negotiated*, rather than imposed, implying the utilisation of control on each side. In most of the cases, a kind of bargaining process appeared to evolve, where the balance between control by the social workers and co-operation of the families was mediated by the relationships they shared. Both the management of the work and the different outcomes of each case seemed to depend to a large degree on the way in which these elements interacted.

The research showed that despite their perceived powerlessness, parents could still be extremely effective in both controlling the level and quality of intervention, and ultimately in terminating contact all together, irrespective of the 'progress' made, or the existing situation with regard to the protection and welfare of the children. In certain instances, particularly those where the concerns had been about child neglect, there was evidence that parents were actually managing the level of social work involvement by their own availability to the workers. For example, patterns of clients' failure to answer the door, to attend appointments, or to avail of services, appeared to undermine the resolve and enthusiasm of practitioners, and to precede closure. A number of cases were about to be closed at the end of the study period, but when they were examined, it became clear that in several instances the impetus for termination had been determined not by the way the child abuse concerns had abated, but the reluctance of the clients to work with the Health Board and the withdrawal of their

co-operation. As Howe (1992, p. 506) argues, in the context of proceduralised and bureaucratised agency responses to child abuse, 'not all the actors in the situation have so readily accepted their role and what is expected of them'. The 'discretion' of parents, who according to Howe remain the 'jokers' in the pack, 'continues to challenge the solutions and may even challenge the question' (p. 506).

Yet, rather than capitalising on the capacities of clients to shape their own destinies to this extent, workers tended to exclude them from consultative processes, such as case conferences, and failed to make use of the parents' very obvious strengths in what could have potentially been joint approaches to enhancing the welfare and protection of the children concerned.

As this study has shown, paying lip service to parental participation provides nothing more than an illusory notion of their involvement. Training in this area needs to fully acknowledge the nature of relationships between clients and workers, and the potential to positively utilise the significant and differential levels of power held by each party. Cleaver and Freeman's (1995) model of 'operational perspectives', whereby the most effective working liaisons are formed by a convergence of agreement about both the nature of the child care concern and the most effective actions to be taken to address it, could usefully be incorporated into such a programme.

Conclusion

Parton (1991, 1996) and Howe (1992, 1996) describe the growth of the managerial component in child protection, where the skilled and in-depth elements of the work have given way to a practice governed by procedures and 'audit'. As Parton (1996) contends, such approaches fail to acknowledge the central and pervasive concerns related to uncertainty and ambiguity. Commitment to policy and managerial development in Ireland has tended to be less reflexive and more inert than, for example, in the United Kingdom, yet, the organisational framework of child protection is developing rapidly, heavily influenced by public and political opinion. This has been evidenced in what Howitt (1992) would describe as 'bureaucratic principles' underpinning recent child abuse inquiry reports (McGuinness, 1993; Western Health Board, 1996; North Western Health Board, 1998) and the implementation of local and national guidelines in their wake.

Concurrent with the narrowing of the child protection discourse, there have been serious criticisms of the way that social work education in the UK has deferred more to the demands of employers than to the academy, and in the process has permitted a 'de-intellectualising', an erosion of theory and an inculcation of 'loyalty' and regulation (Jones, 1996). In Ireland, the standards for accreditation laid down by the National Social Work Qualifications Board require the study of areas such as social class, power, gender, deviance, discrimination and social exclusion as well as psychology (NSWQB, 1996, p. 11). However, no research has been undertaken to examine their inclusion or impact on individual courses and the act of translating concepts into relevant and workable models still appears to present difficulty for practitioners.

There are different views in the literature regarding the degree to which theory is incorporated into social work practice in child protection. Stevenson (1997) observes a degree of 'anti-intellectualism' amongst practitioners, which she explains in terms of their reluctance to make explicit the place which knowledge or theory should have in professional activity out of fear of seeming 'elitist' in relation to clients. Featherstone (1997, p. 168) attributes the responsibility for what she terms the 'retreat from theory' to the diminution of opportunities for public sector social workers to explore the complexity of relationships they

encounter. While the social workers in this study did ponder about their practices, they rarely 'theorised' in an informed or explicit manner; rather they exhibited a degree of ideological confusion which generally appeared to lead them away from the children whose safety and welfare it was their job to protect. This has serious implications: whilst acknowledging the difficult environment in which they operate, failure of practitioners to acknowledge or address ideological conflicts and cultural biases, or the inevitable consequences of hostile inter-professional dynamics, will inevitably result in poor and ultimately dangerous practice.

These research findings raise several questions in relation to the type of training and education required to anticipate and address the problems highlighted. Indeed, to some degree, they reflect the already identified contradiction between social work 'training' and social work education (Jones, 1996; Howe, 1995, 1996), the main emphasis of the former being on the acquisition of routine competencies, while the latter demands critical reflection, imagination and creativity. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to suggest that practitioner skills and competencies should be jettisoned by schools of social work, nor does it intend to denigrate the usefulness of guidelines and procedures. As Munro (1996) illustrates, many tragic and avoidable mistakes in social work practice have been the result of a failure to follow the basic steps in the investigative and interventive processes, and nobody will deny the need for systematic and comprehensive planning and review. Rather, this paper asserts the need for social work education to empower workers to make sense of their work in a fashion which, as Howe (1995, p. 14) puts it, requires them to 'ponder the reason why of things'. The applicability of social and psychological theories to the political and value-laden context of daily work must be emphasised and illustrated in a realistic and accessible fashion. Crucially, social work education at qualifying and post-qualifying levels must also acknowledge the obstacles faced by practitioners in the public and statutory bodies, and by its stress on critical reflection, encourage professionals to challenge the bureaucratic dominance that can potentially occlude their judgements. The ultimate aim should be a preservation of the skills, values and knowledge that traditionally underpin the social work profession, and an enabling of practitioners to operationalise them in an informed, confident and optimistic manner.

Notes

¹ In Ireland, statutory social workers are employed by local authorities known as Health Boards.

² One hundred and seventy two interviews were conducted with social workers on the team at the initial referral stage, after case conferences and at various points in the careers of cases which remained in the system.

³ Twenty-six 'intake' meetings and 14 case conferences were observed and recorded.

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