
Social work in the UK is currently in the midst of a major period of reform. Following the death of the young child Peter Connelly in London in 2009, the twin drivers of Professor Eileen Munro’s Review of Child Protection and the programme of the Social Work Reform Board have led to a series of changes for the profession that have been broadly promoted and supported by Government. These changes involve the regulation and training of the workforce but at a more fundamental level have sought to create a profound shift in the culture in which children’s social work services are delivered. The aim of the reforms is to create a less technocratic, risk averse system in which a more authoritative model of social work practice is promoted. In such a culture social workers should be given both permission and the opportunity to exercise their professional discretion and judgment to a much greater degree on a day to day basis.

In relation to those using social work services the overall aim of the reforms is to create a far more child-focused system. Eileen Munro’s critique of the current system is that the imperative for social workers has been procedural compliance rather than focusing on building relationships with and understanding the needs of children and their families. ‘Doing things right’ drives practice rather than ‘doing the right thing’. All too often, Munro argues, the ‘voices’ of children are neither heard nor understood. Relationship social work practice therefore should translate in child care social work into a priority being placed on social workers being given the time, skills and resources to undertake direct work with children and to develop a deeper understanding of the process and outcomes of such work.

The direction of the reforms has been widely welcomed by social workers but the progress toward achieving the changes the programme of reform has been perceived as frustratingly slow. Partly this can be put down to the very difficult budgetary environment in which the reforms are being delivered. However, Karen Winter argues that creating a more child-centred system requires more than greater resources and in particular social workers being given more time. Important as these organisational factors are, Winter argues that there are also individual factors in that social workers often lack the skills, knowledge and confidence to undertake such work.

In this ambitious and engaging book, Winter argues that if we are to improve practice we need to have a better understanding of the relationship between organisational and individual barriers to social workers building better and fundamentally more helpful relationships with the children with whom they work.
Winter begins her analysis of the nature of these barriers and how they can be overcome by reviewing all of the major child death inquiries that have been undertaken in the UK since 1945. Her conclusions challenge the view that the struggle to create a more child-focused system is the result of us simply living in a more bureaucratic age. On the contrary a common feature of all the inquiries carried from the Monkton inquiry into the death of Dennis O’Neill in 1945 until that into Peter Connelly in 2009 was that practitioner failed to ‘see or hear’ the child or as Munro puts it, understand the ‘lived experience of the child’. All too often social workers have not only visited infrequently or inconsistently but on visits they have been pre-occupied with only the needs and perspectives of the adults in the household.

In terms of understanding the nature and therefore the way to address the barriers Winter, who has a background in both research and practice through her work as a children’s Guardian, argues that we need to understand the dynamic between individual and organisational factors. Addressing organisational issues will not lead to positive change if workers do not have the knowledge and skills to undertake direct work. On the other hand the benefits of investing in training the workforce will be limited if they do not have the time and resources to do the work.

In order to understand and address this dynamic Winter argues that there needs to be a shift in both the values and conceptual frameworks that underpin child care social work in the UK. She argues that we need to move to a more developed children rights based system that is based on an explicit adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. While there is reference to the UNCRC throughout recent policy initiatives in all parts of the UK, the translation of these into improved child-centred focused practice will only be very partial unless attention is also given to social workers’ skills, knowledge and values. In particular she identified the need for social workers to have a greater knowledge of child development but within an ecological framework. At present, Winter argues, that social workers’ knowledge is not only insufficiently detailed but often based on overly rigid ‘milestones’ that can underestimate the capacity of children.

In order to address current deficits in the skill base of social workers and in order to challenge their values in relation to facilitating the participation of children in the work they undertake, Winter argues that they need, besides training, both high quality supervision and the time to develop relationships. Winter cites the example of pre-verbal children who can still participate if social workers are able to undertake skilled and informed observations of them. In the later chapters of the book Winter focuses more directly on practice looking at the process of direct work and some practical techniques that can be employed. A series of fascinating case studies are used which convey