

David Hanna

Child welfare system: a perfect storm?

The child welfare system: a canary in society's coal mine?

A 'child welfare' system is the canary in the mine of society. All the failings and stresses of our nation end up being concentrated and reflected in this system. The compound effects of punitive policies, colonising practice, underinvestment, poor housing, poverty, hyper-consumerism and relational deserts have all fuelled trauma in stress-saturated households. This trauma and abuse is passed down through generations and the family pecking order, with the child becoming the final 'dumping ground'. A child welfare system has to respond to the accumulated systemic failure. To say that the work is tough is an understatement of epic proportions.

I have worked for over 15 years as part of the Wesley Community Action team to support and sustain a stable and vibrant service that works with the 'hard' end of tamariki and their whānau in this system (the top 3% in relation to complexity and need). Wesley also works, outside of government contracts, alongside marginalised communities, many of whom are 'products' of the state welfare and justice systems and who understandably fear it.

Restructuring: the answer to complex issues?

This experience shapes my view of the current state of our child welfare system. Like the families and whānau we work with, we see the Wellington-centric linear policy solutions as another Groundhog Day. Restructuring is almost always the preferred change lever for ministers wanting to leave a legacy. Consultants are engaged, experts are gathered and people

are processed through 'co-design' Post-it forums. This results in a 'new' agency, new logo, new leadership, new approach, all with a stated desire to be very different from the old. But are they?

This very expensive process could unintentionally be fuelling a perfect storm for an already stressed system. In addition to the issues mentioned above around poverty, colonisation and the resulting toxic stress, a major restructuring can amplify this storm, as we have seen with:

- an exodus of dedicated and skilled staff who had hung on in very challenging situations (this knowledge is not quickly or easily replaced);
 - lack of historical understanding of the factors that led to the situation;
 - lack of learning from past initiatives: for example, a royal commission set up after a new system;
 - over-reliance on external consultants who lacked understanding of the issues and a long-term commitment to change;
 - an expert panel which lacked in-depth understanding of sound social work practice and which adopted dangerous assumptions (e.g., in removing babies and children as a long-term solution);
 - the disestablishment of the NGO (non-governmental organisation) and iwi advisory forum;
 - imposition of a managerial regime that lacked knowledge of New Zealand cultural context and social work practice; and
 - an under-resourced NGO sector through years of chronic underfunding.
- Enter the new Labour-led government, which inherited a key department midway

through a major change process. They wanted to 'do better' for children. This worthy aim led to more changes to the system: in particular, a revision of the child wellbeing and welfare legislation and creation of a child and youth wellbeing entity. While these initiatives do have the potential to lift the game, they also risk bringing more confusion into an already overcomplicated and struggling system. As a simple example, removing the word 'vulnerable' from the Ministry of Children's name raises confusion about which children Oranga Tamariki serves.

It is a common view of people experienced in working in child welfare that much of this new system is not new at all. We are witnessing the same old mistakes being made by a central state agency that is largely flying blind in many areas. This is happening at a time when the compounding effect of negative social statistics is moving whole communities dangerously close to tipping points. Given how we have endured years of underfunding, seeing much of the precious new investment being wasted by a Wellington-centric system is highly frustrating. To handle this pressured situation, the highly managed corporate culture expands. This happens despite the rhetoric of partnership and at the expense of growing trusting and robust collective relationships across the sector. These relationships are the foundation of effective practice.

Solutions: is it all about relationships?

Ironically, the key to improving our system – from an NGO perspective – isn't new either. We are all actors in the one system and, as such, interdependent. The NGO sector has valuable insights and wants to contribute to improvements, challenging the assumption that we are mere 'providers of services' to the government agency.

David Hanna (fourth-generation tangata tiriti) has worked as a national youth director, a policy manager in central government and a consultant for the World Bank, and is now director of Wesley Community Action. He led the development of the New Zealand Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy and Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa, championing community-led development in communities across New Zealand.

A key starting point is understanding how we adjust to working with complexity. To quote from a recent report on working with complexity:

We are not lone rangers, and we shouldn't seek to be. Our strength lies in positive collaboration, in honesty, openness and generosity in sharing what does and doesn't work – and in hearing, acknowledging and responding to others' views on this, too. (Davidson Knight et al., 2017)

In short, this means relationships are the lifeblood of the system. There are four principal domains where healthy relationships are essential to sustain a vibrant system. Valuing the intervention logic between these domains in critical. Primary are the relationships within the whānau (encompassing connections between tamariki, whānau, hapū/extended family), and next is the relationship with the key 'professional' worker (state or NGO/iwi), then the network of relationships at a community/regional level. Encompassing these is the national framework of legislation, policies and resources. The intervention logic of each dimension is to enhance wellbeing within the prior domain.

First and foremost, I have learnt over the years that whānau-led is more effective than and very different from whānau-centred. Any change, to be sustainable, has to be owned by the person/group seeking change. Given the power imbalance in the relationship between a paid social worker and whānau, unless the relationship is whānau-led, then the power remains with the professional. Successful solutions are seldom imposed.

The next dimension of relationships is a community and local one. This involves mana whenua, neighbourhood actors, businesses, sports clubs, community organisations – the range of agencies that have something to offer whānau under stress. The Child Rich Communities initiative supported by Barnardos, Plunket,¹ UNICEF and Inspiring Communities is highlighting the value of recognising and mobilising these community assets to support positive outcomes for children under stress.

Holding all these relationships is the national domain. This entails monitoring, researching, resourcing and generally supporting a healthy flow of relevant information across the whole system and helping maintain healthy relationships

between all key players. Equally important is linking with other national policy fields such as housing, income support and the like that have an impact on family stress.

Weaving through all these levels, we need to give life to te Tiriti o Waitangi. The whole system needs to appreciate that the indigenous culture of Aotearoa holds profound insight and strengths for how we sustain positive relationships between peoples and our natural world. Instead of being viewed simply as something to be adhered to, te Tiriti is a potent, unique strength of our communities and child welfare system in Aotearoa. A Tiriti o Waitangi informed-approach would cease mining and remove the need for canaries to act as beacons of risk.

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pG5pUkePNLg&t=4s>

Reference

Davidson Knight, A., T. Lowe, M. Brossard and J. Wilson (2017) *A Whole New World: funding and commissioning in complexity*, Newcastle: Centre for Knowledge, Innovation, Technology and Enterprise, Newcastle University Business School and Digital Civics

Claire Achmad

Realising treaty-based protection in Aotearoa's child welfare system

In 2020 in Aotearoa New Zealand it is clear that a significant opportunity exists to strengthen our child welfare system. Embracing this opportunity is imperative. Not only are the numbers of children in state care at an all-time high,

but official statistics show that Māori tamariki are disproportionately more likely to enter state care, and to experience abuse in state care. We must strengthen the system in ways that prioritise the needs and rights of children and tamariki. Moreover,

this must be done in ways that strengthen the system to be holistic in its engagement with families and whānau. After all, it is children and their families and whānau who are the people that the system exists to serve.

The child welfare system is there to protect the welfare of children and tamariki and to prevent harm in the short term. We must never lose sight of the fact, however, that the system can and should enable

Dr Claire Achmad is a children's rights expert, having worked in legal and policy roles in New Zealand and internationally across government, intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations. She is currently General Manager Advocacy at Barnardos, a member of the Children's Convention Monitoring Group, and a steering committee member of Children's Rights Alliance Aotearoa New Zealand. The views expressed in this reflection piece are the author's own.