

Social Work with Children in the Youth Justice System - Messages from Practice

Abstract

This article is about policy and practice within the youth justice system in England and Wales. The article argues that actively engaging and using emotions, both in terms of the practitioner and service user, enables a deeper social work approach to take place and enables the forming of relationships. Such relationships can then be used as the tool themselves to bring about positive changes for children and families who are receiving intervention from youth justice social workers. Social workers working within the youth justice system know through their experience what is most likely to be effective in meeting the aims of the system – that is prevention of offending. To achieve this means real questions need to be asked about the effectiveness of the technical-rational risk focused approach of the current youth justice system in favour of a system which adopts the principles of Munro (2011) and empowers social workers to actively use critically reflective and reflexive practice and supports the use of self to build powerful social work relationships with the vulnerable children they work with.

Key words: Youth justice, social work, reflexive practice, relationships

Social Work with Children in the Youth Justice System - Messages from Practice

Our reasons for writing and submitting this article about policy and practice within the England and Wales youth justice system are twofold. First is to remedy the surprising lack of any discussion regarding the work of social workers within the youth justice system. Second is to emphasise social works role in restricting the harmful consequences of offending behaviour and protecting young people within a climate of neo-liberal ideology, responsabilisation and risk management (Goldson, 2007; Armstrong 2004; Muncie, 2011; Rogowski, 2012).

Contemporary discussions of social welfare have increasingly been concerned with the concept of 'risk' (Webb 2006). 'Risk' has been considered an important factor within the field of criminal justice for decades. How 'risky' a person is both prior to and after offending is a major consideration that the various agencies of criminal justice have to undertake. Risk is one of the factors used by criminal justice agencies, particularly Probation and Youth Offending Teams (YOT), to determine how to sentence, punish and ultimately rehabilitate offenders. Increasingly, risk refers to the governing of crime through techniques known as 'risk management'. No one group has been subjected to a risk-crazed governance (Carlen, 2008) more than young people.

Whither social work within our youth justice system?

Social work is an influential activity concerned with working alongside individuals and families who are experiencing some kind of social difficulty. Social work can be easily explained on one level as a process of assessment and then intervention to support, help, challenge and empower users of social work services to make changes to their own lives in order to improve their situation in some way. However, this positivist vision of assessment and then intervention is an over-simplistic view of social work and fails to acknowledge the deeper psychological factors that should be involved in social work practice. In order to support permanent and long term change in a service user, a social work practitioner has to engage with the complexities of people to gain a real understanding of the service user, their motivations, thoughts and feelings. Working with users of social work services then, is far more than a simplistic approach of managing the risk that they are assessed to present to either themselves or others. Real engagement with the individual service user is no simple matter despite many theories and models available to help develop understanding. The processes that take place between practitioner and service user to allow and support this engagement are multifaceted and arguably 'hidden' from non-social work practitioners because it is difficult to find forms of words to articulate what is actually taking place between a social worker and a service user when such working relationships are forming.

Social work is concerned with (or should be) the internal and intrinsic injuries a person may be experiencing as a result of a life event. Very often with children in the youth justice system this will be some kind of emotional trauma caused by abuse and/or neglect. The criminal and anti-social behaviour by children who become involved in the youth justice system is the manifestation of the emotional trauma they have suffered. Social workers will try to address the reasons for this trauma by 'fixing' the

external factors causing it but will also aim to try to 'fix' the internal emotional trauma of a service user. This work is therefore heavily tied up with emotional health which is not a visible facet of a person, unlike for example a broken leg. Therefore, when social workers deploy techniques to work with service users to promote emotional healing and growth as a way to change their behaviour and attitudes, it is very difficult to explain exactly what is going on in this 'hidden' world.

Social work is important and distinctive because it is steeped in this hidden world of managing and exploring emotions with the aim of helping the service user to feel better, have more understanding and feel empowered to manage their life situation in a positive way. There are many people in local communities all over the UK who have a real and genuine desire to help and support the positive development of others, but this desire alone is not enough to carry out the complexities of social work. Social work practice requires practitioners to operate with a high level of self-awareness and consciousness because it is so intrinsically linked with the hidden world of emotions. Without the ability to work with emotional intelligence (Morrison, 2007), it is questionable whether a real working relationship can be established between a social worker and service user (Ruch, 2005). The evidence of the need for working relationship between service user and social worker to enable effective work to take place and provide a space for the acknowledgement and exploration of emotions is overwhelming (for example Munro, 2011; McLeod, 2010; Barry, 2009; Winter, 2009). There is evidence to demonstrate that children who are looked after by their local authority or are involved in the child protection system achieve better outcomes if they experience a positive relationship with their social worker (McLeod, 2010; Bell, 2002; Dearden, 2004). This draws attention to a potential emerging evidence base about the

importance of relationships resulting in better overall outcomes for children who experience statutory social work (see Wilson *et al* 2011 for a general overview and Welbourne 2012 for a specific focus on this issue).

The challenge for social workers who practice in statutory systems such as the youth justice system is in finding a way to manage the requirements of the statutory systems with their risk management focus without allowing it to 'get in the way' of true relationship based social work practice. If we believe with that social work requires the use of self-awareness and emotional intelligence, it is easy to see why the 'rational-technical' approach (Tilbury, 2004; Horwath, 2007; Dixon, 2013) which promotes filling in forms and ticking boxes does not feel relevant or useful for social workers in the youth justice system who are dedicated to working with children with multiple and profound vulnerabilities. Practising social workers know through their experience that this 'rational-technical' approach does nothing to support engagement and relationship building with children and families which is necessary to provide the space and opportunity to work with hidden feelings and emotions as a way of beginning to support the service user to make changes to their own behaviour. In fact, it could be argued that the managerial and rational-technical approach is the very approach which reduces the chance for high quality social work interactions to take place with statutory systems as practitioners are forced to pay more attention to the procedures than to social work practice (Howe, 2010; Munro, 2011). The challenge for practising and experienced social workers is that organisations are not always ready to accept challenge to the processes and systems they have in place, or to accept that knowledge gained through critical reflection and experience is legitimate enough to

challenge the current focus on procedural (Fook and Askerland, 2007) and risk focused social work.

Process

The youth justice system has created a process driven environment in which practitioners aim to carry out social work. Aiming to carry out 'real' or 'true' social work which is based on relationships, works with emotions and is critically reflective and reflexive is therefore difficult. If we think about the realities of what happens to a young person who has offended, the youth justice system is a living example of a system that is procedural in its treatment of children and as a consequence challenging for social work practitioners. There is a basic sequence of events that take place once a young person is alleged to have offended, first they then are arrested and held in the police station. Here they will be questioned in the presence of a supportive adult and legal representative (hopefully). Once a decision is made by the police about the next step, the young person is likely to be bailed to the next youth court where they will again need the advice of a solicitor to offer advice about plea. If a guilty plea is entered, the young person's case is likely to be adjourned for the preparation of a report by the local YOT. The YOT is the organisation through which social work activities are carried out with children within the youth justice system. The purpose of the report is to advise the magistrates what the most effective sentence to prevent re-offending for that young person will be. For the YOT to prepare such a report, a thorough assessment must be completed. This is assessment requires information gathering from other agencies and professional skills in engaging with the young person and their family to gain an insight into their situation. This information is formulated into an assessment and

recorded on the Core Asset which is 26 pages long. This Asset document also screens the young person's risk of serious harm to others and vulnerability. However the main role of the Core Asset is to assess a young person's risk of re-offending defined by a process of scoring 12 sections covering the young person's life and situation. Young people therefore become defined in terms of their risk of re-offending by their Asset score in a positivist method of predicting re-offending. This assessment is risk led not needs lead. A further assessment is completed if the young person is assessed to present a serious risk of harm to others. From this assessment processes potentially and very often three different types of intervention plan will then be formulated.

This is a rigorous process for a young person to be subjected to and because it is so procedural, there are inherent dangers that it could become an habitual activity for some youth justice social workers resulting in a lack of critical reflection and analysis of a young person's risks and vulnerabilities. Once the assessment is done, the court report will be written ready for the sentencing hearing. The young person then returns to court and is sentenced. Once the young person is sentenced, the assessment process is usually re-done because National Standards for Youth Justice (YJB, 2010) require assessments to be reviewed if there is any change in the young person's circumstances. IT systems in the youth justice system interpret the sentencing outcome as a change for the young person and therefore triggering the re-assessment process.

It is important to pause here to reflect on this process. For a child between the ages of 10-17, this is a confusing and potentially disengaging process. Despite efforts of youth courts and YOT practitioners to be more receptive to the needs of children to promote their engagement in the court process, the fact is courts are a very adult orientated environment and children have little understanding of what is going on despite the very best efforts of those involved. For example, the language used within the process is not designed to enable children to follow their own sentencing process. Sentence names such as Detention and Training Order and Youth Rehabilitation Order are not familiar terms to children. It is perhaps useful to consider this adult orientated process as a barrier to in-depth social work as once the child is sentenced to supervision by the YOT, the social work practitioner has to undo some of the damage done by the disengaging and marginalisation experienced by children going through this formal process before any meaningful direct work can begin.

Task of social workers in the YJS/Asset/Intervention Plan

The task of social workers working within this system is twofold. Of course, social workers have to work within the legal rules that form the framework of the youth justice system but within this find a way to avoid the procedures becoming a permanent barrier to engagement. As well as the youth justice system up to the point of sentence being procedural, the youth justice beyond the point of sentence could also be seen this way with youth justice social workers being required to plan the intervention with the child they are supervising and their family through the use of standardised forms work within time scales. Adherence to these timescales is closely monitored by youth justice managers thus reflecting the managerialist culture that exists in social work

(Ruch, 2012). So, again the child is put through a process although at least at this stage, there is an opportunity for the social worker to begin to use social work skills and approaches to minimise the impact of such a process driven system.

Tasks of social work practitioners working within the youth justice system can be split into four – assessment, intervention, referrals and advocacy. We are continually led to understand that assessment is the corner stone to all effective work with young people who offend (Baker, 2008; Baker et al, 2011) and whilst the writers would not seek to argue against this view, care needs to be taken when considering the link between really understanding a young person and the ability to translate this into a written format. It is a concern that if we continue to believe that the most perfectly written assessment will equate to an excellent experience and outcome for a young person working with a social worker in the youth justice system, we will encourage social workers to spend their already limited time on writing assessments rather than actually carrying out direct social work with children. Added to this, if organisations adopt the stance that well written assessments are the same as good interventions, then managers will also be forced to spend time reviewing assessments rather than supporting the development of direct work skills and critically reflective practice. As Munro (2011) points out, inspection regimes have a huge influence on what organisations spend their time developing as ‘good practice’.

Social workers are required to demonstrate intervention skills throughout their social work career in line with the Professional Capabilities Framework (TCSW, 2012). However, there are questions about what constitutes intervention and how social

workers can record interactions with service users in a way that meets organisation requirements. Intervention skills and activities will be returned to later as it is through interactions with service users that enable change to take place. Good social work intervention should not be tied up with the writing of Intervention Plans – similarly to assessments, a well written plan will not equate to well delivered social work. As Munro (2011) discusses, the current approach in social work has focused practitioners on processes rather than direct work with children meaning practitioners have been given a message that the quality of written assessments and intervention plans are what is important, not the actual social work with children with complex needs.

Referrals to other agencies are common within the youth justice system with its case management approach to working with children. Whilst it cannot be denied that multi agency collaborative working can be very positive (Burnett and Appleton, 2004) when coordinated and sequenced appropriately, care must be taken in relation to involving so many practitioners that this hinders the forming of the key relationship with the case manager (Munro, 2011). Relationships in youth justice and other areas of social work are the cornerstone to effective and successful work with service users so effort must be put into the development of these relationships. However, in reality the system creates challenges with this as organisations adopt an approach that intervention sequencing is dictated to by Asset scores rather than the understanding that a relationship must first be formed between the practitioner and child. It could perhaps be argued that this practice is driven by fear in organisations who gain a sense of false protection by a simplistic approach of following a procedure rather than allowing a social worker to use their professional judgement (Munro, 2011) about where the work needs to start with the particular service user. So, for example, if a child is assessed

to have substance use issues which are assessed to be a significant contributing factor towards a risk of re-offending (note – not welfare need), there is an expectation that a referral to a specialist substance use agency will be made regardless of whether the case manager assesses the young person is ready for that area of work to be undertaken. This process driven way of working can be explained by the anxiety held by organisations of a child coming to harm, in this case through substance use, and the belief that criticism will be cast on the organisation for not addressing this need in the young person. This risk adverse practice is steeped in the belief that individuals are straight forward and predictable can be managed using a positivist cause and effect approach (Ruch, 2005).

Advocacy is not a term often used in youth justice circles although there is some anecdotal evidence that advocacy as an activity is taking place all the time by practitioners within the youth justice system. Advocacy serves two purposes in social work in the youth justice system. Firstly, there is no doubt that being involved in the youth justice system has a negative labelling impact on young people (Goldson, 2000) and that youth justice social workers must have skills in presenting a young person's situation so that they do not encounter any further oppression and discrimination that they are likely to have already experienced. Secondly, advocacy is a legitimate social work activity (Maclean and Harrison, 2011) which will enable young people to partake in society, which has the subsequent effect of a young person feeling a sense of worth and engagement in their local community which in turn reduces both their vulnerability and the risk of re-offending. Further to this, a practitioner advocating on behalf of a child is likely to be experienced positively by the child and this will further build the working relationship that the child has with the practitioner. Bringing advocacy into the forefront of social worker's minds through critical reflective and reflexive thinking will

support its development and usefulness in the youth justice system. However, launching and promoting advocacy as a formal youth justice activity in the current system has some risks attached to it. Given the state of the current systematic approach to youth justice social work, care needs to be taken that promoting advocacy does not result in a 'tick-box' approach to advocating for a young person, rather advocacy practice needs to be supported and developed in a way that allows social workers the freedom to use this approach when they judge that it is necessary.

Feelings/emotions and link to relationships

It has been argued that social work is an important business tied up with emotions and feelings but that youth justice social work takes place in a system which is more focused on risk and process than engaging with social work as a practice. Given this, a useful question to ask is how might a child experience involvement in the youth justice system? Drawing on the writers experience, children at the post sentence stage experience a number of different responses and feelings – relief, confusion, fright and hope to name but a few. These can be distressing and/or overwhelming emotional responses. The importance of practitioners being aware and focusing on these feelings rather than being concerned with getting to the next stage in the process driven system is imperative as this awareness provides the opportunity for acknowledgement of emotions and the beginnings of the formation of the social work relationship. However, it is not enough for a practitioner to be only aware of the emotional state of the child they are working with. It could be argued that it is not possible for a social work practitioner in the youth justice system to be able to 'tune in' with how a young person is feeling if they are not aware of their own emotions and

how the early stages of the relationship forming is impacting on them. This acceptance that simply being with a young person with a view to trying to comprehend their experience enables empathy and understanding to develop. Being able to empathise is one of the most important skills that youth justice practitioners need to have (Prior and Mason, 2010). So, in the early post sentence stage of working with a young person, the social worker must ask themselves how are they feeling about this situation? Sometimes, in practice, it may be hard to be honest about how it can feel as a practitioner to be faced with working with a child whose life situation is dire. But that's what social work is, the crux of the practice of social work is about getting alongside and 'close' to those who are really in need, working hard to imagine how that child's situation impacts on both their feelings, thoughts and their behaviour. This can be an emotionally uncomfortable place for social workers to be. The easier position is to note the problems the child is having and try to 'mend' them in a task focused way as our bureaucratic social systems appear to support (Fook and Askerland, 2007; Ferguson, 2014). But, if we really want to facilitate change in those in need, social workers within the youth justice system must be supported to reflect with the young person and understand them holistically taking into account unique emotions, feelings, uncertainties and risks. This enables children to be understood as complex beings and dismisses the superficial levels of engagement that a process and risk focused system encourages in favour of a deeper relationship focused approach that will truly engage with the uniqueness of each child and consider their criminal behaviour as a manifestation of their life experiences (Ruch, 2005).

There is evidence to indicate that social work practice as a whole has become more concerned with meeting targets which are deemed to then manage risk than forming

the foundations of a relationship that will actually support and facilitate change and growth in a child and their family (Munro, 2011) but it is important to remember it is the structural and organisational aspects of the youth justice system that is the potential barrier to relationship forming (Winter, 2009). Youth justice success is measured by outcomes such whether the young person re-offended, rather than the process that the child will have experienced whilst working with a youth justice practitioner. The reasons why children engage in criminal behaviour are complex and there is no 'quick fix' to preventing re-offending. However in the managerialist culture of the youth justice system, there is no clear way of measuring the holistic positive development of a child which will take place through the social work relationship so the system reduces measurements of success to the question of whether the young person has re-offended.

Relationships in social work

Within the practice arena, defining and articulating what a good social work relationship looks like is difficult. It may be easier to ask those involved what a social work relationship *feels* like but it is questionable whether organisations are comfortable with the acknowledgement and understanding that feelings and emotions are legitimate social work concepts to pay very close attention to (Taylor *et al*, 2008). The writers would advocate for the real engagement with feelings of both the practitioner and service user – and to do so with genuine consciousness and involvement of the child in transparent and open conversations. It is working at this deep level of honesty which enables a working relationship to grow and also provides the social worker an opportunity to model a way of exploring emotions and managing emotions that a child

within the youth justice system is unlikely to have been exposed to before. There are a number of activities that anyone can do to form a working relationship with someone – basic things such as being on time for appointments, communicating what you mean, working hard for the person in question, listening, taking someone seriously and generally supporting problem solving. Whilst all of these have a place in forming a relationship, we believe there are steps that can be taken to form a deeper working relationship and it is the ability of social workers to do this that makes social work important. But this requires engagement at the feelings level.

It is useful to consider the work of Carl Rogers (1957) here. Rogers talked about using the relationship itself as a tool to facilitate change in his clients. Rogers was a psychotherapist but his principles are still relevant to social work today. He worked on the premise that if the relationship between the practitioner and client was based on congruence, unconditional warmth and positive regard and empathy the relationship which formed on these foundations would create the metaphorical space for change to take place within. These three principles are simple enough to understand and work towards as a social worker – many social workers will be using such approaches unconsciously all the time in their practice. These principles fit with requirements of social work practice and encourage the honesty, positivity and understanding needed between a practitioner and a user of social work services. However, for relationships to be formed on this basis, social workers must be comfortable with the process of using self in social work practice.

Actively using self in the forming of social work relationships requires a high level of self-awareness and skill in reflexivity. This is because operating at a high level of self-awareness will naturally lead one to recognise and work with emotions and feelings, those difficult and messy elements of working with the human person. As stated above, social work is not a 'surface level' activity, to really support and empower someone to take control of their life when it is in chaos is not just about following processes and referring to other agencies, it is about engaging with and helping the person internally heal as well as 'fixing' all the external problems in their lives. This is difficult work but the need to be able to work with both one's own emotions and others is essential if true and honest engagement is to take place (Morrison, 2007). For example, a young person experiencing housing problems is a fairly common occurrence within the youth justice system. There are several steps that can be taken to 'fix' the external problem of a young person having nowhere to live. Theoretically, the housing situation will be assessed and the young person's Intervention Plan will be reviewed and re-written to state what actions are going to be taken as a result of their housing problem. Depending on the age and circumstance of that young person, this will mean referrals into other agencies and hopefully, accommodation found for the young person. So, in terms of outcomes in a procedural system such as the youth justice system, targets are met and a box can be neatly ticked. However what about how that young person experienced this process? Outcomes are not the only important aspect of social work. There is possible ongoing emotional trauma linked to why the child came to have housing problems such as family rejection or loss/bereavement. The experience of 'fighting' for the young person to be placed somewhere safe is also emotionally draining for the social worker carrying out this activity so the work and learning experience does not stop once the young person has

somewhere to live. In this kind of scenario, social workers must act with conscious awareness of what is going on for both the young person but also for themselves at an emotional level. In doing so the working relationship can develop but also be used to work through and make sense together of the emotional impact of addressing such a fundamental need for a child such as housing. A critically reflective practitioner will encounter questions about how, in today's society, is it possible that we still have children with nowhere safe to live, questions which themselves have the potential to cause distress and feelings of anger about the very society in which social work takes place. Working truly alongside a service user enables a social worker and child to explore the feelings, emotional responses and thoughts that develop as a result of working together to solve a problem. This further cements the working relationship and supports the development of skills in the young person to help make sense of complex emotional responses which are potentially contributing factors to the criminal and challenging behaviours that have lead the child to be involved with the formal youth justice system.

The aim of the youth justice system is to prevent re-offending and it is argued it is only by engaging with children and young people at this deep level that this can be achieved. Young people have to have the opportunity to understand how their life experiences may be impacting on their behaviours to have a chance of changing their own behaviour. This deep level social work practice is difficult and challenging because it can feel unchartered and risky and often has not had either the understanding or support of social work agencies and organisations. Added to this, because it does not fit neatly into the systems and processes of the youth justice system, whilst social workers know through their understanding, experience and tacit

knowledge that this is the correct work to avoid the 'sticking plaster' approach, organisations don't always know how to name it and where it should sit. The expectation that social workers in the youth justice system work in line with the so called principles of effective practice which do not acknowledge the need for social work relationships, raises the uncomfortable question about whether for some there is a role of social work in the youth justice system at all.

Delivering the plan of work

As discussed above, every young person whom is supervised by a practitioner in the youth justice system will have a plan of work which they are aiming to complete with their allocated practitioner who will also be their case manager. This plan will be drawn from the assessment process and should aim to address the risk factors assessed to be linked to the likelihood of that young person re-offending. Whilst working with a child on this plan, practitioners in the youth justice system are asked to work within principles of 'effective practice' which are risk classification, dosage, programme integrity, intervention modality, community base, responsivity and addressing criminogenic need (YJB, 2008). Whilst it is fair to say that these principles are based on research findings, it is also important to remain aware of limitations when considering what research evidence would lead practitioners to believe what will be effective with children and families (Munro, 2011). The children who are serving sentences in the youth justice system, whether community or custodial are, in the large part, damaged and vulnerable as a result of their life experience. This is not stated to excuse their criminal behaviour – some children do terrible things to other people. But unless we actually engage with the reasons why this behaviour takes place and

understand the context of the behaviour, we stand little chance of changing it. The life experience of these children is often chaotic. In practice this means children not having a stable address, not having an adult who provides a caring or parental role, not attending school and not having access to what most of us would consider the basic of human needs such as clean clothes and food. As a result, children have not had the opportunity to develop as children and have a confused sense of identity, no self-worth (despite how they might present), lack of empathy and emotional health difficulties. Added to these, a feature of many of the young people in the youth justice system is some form of neurodisability (Hughes et al, 2012) meaning that many children have limited abilities to make sense of what they are experiencing. It could be argued that the principles of effective practice simply do not fully take the realities of the children involved in the youth justice system into consideration. For example, the principle of programme modality informs that a cognitive behavioural approach is taken to working within the youth justice system. However as mentioned, the reality is that many of the children simply do not have the skills to think adequately to be able to reflect or consider their behaviour and its consequences for them and for others. Further, programme modality requires that a programme of work is agreed and delivered from beginning to end to end with a child. The chances of this happening are limited when working with children in such chaos – whilst practitioners may not want to practice in a reactive way, this is often an approach needed so that children's presenting needs can be met. It requires social workers in the youth justice system to be critically reflective and flexible to adapt to what the child in question needs. Following the plan of work agreed at the beginning of the working relationship would be entirely inappropriate and ineffective if there are other more pressing and presenting needs.

A focus on sound social work skills rather than the principles of effective practice would be a much more effective approach to working with children who face such serious challenges in their lives. There are numerous theories and models of social work practice that can be drawn on to inform work which can help social workers understand and plan direct work. Use of social work theories and models in the youth justice system would also have the added benefit of giving social workers a language to use to articulate what they are doing and why they are doing it. As referred to earlier, one of the challenges of social work is that it is hidden and intangible. Social work practitioners can practice with confidence if they have forms of words provided by social work theory to validate the work they are doing. This includes the justification of energies being focused on actively building relationships through use of self which in itself is developed through critically reflective and reflexive practice. If practitioners are given the space and permission to form working relationships and engage with children at this deeper psychological level, interactions between social worker and child will be more meaningful creating both a better experience for the child and a better outcome for the child. As Thompson (2013) has recently stated one way of supporting the notoriously difficult link between theory and practice to be formed is for social workers to reflect on social work interactions *after* they have taken place to use theories and models to explain what happened.

Returning to the point that was made originally, social work is a complex, intangible and largely hidden activity that can be difficult to explain. In the youth justice system, there is an expectation that structured direct work will take place with young people

who have offended and it is through such work that social workers have a opportunity to develop working relationships through use of self and reflective practice as long as the overall system enables this. Completing lifelines, story-boards and consequence work can be used as frameworks to engage with children on deeper psychological levels that is perhaps not initially apparent when planning the delivery of what at first look could seem like superficial and surface level work. Similarly, work around victim empathy and the possible involvement of victims in work with young people who offend when completed at the right time for the child can be extremely powerful in supporting a young person's personal emotional healing and growth. But, social workers must be allowed to use this direct work as a framework for relationship forming – direct work sessions are not the end result in themselves. Organisations must support social workers in naming what they are doing so social workers have a way of recording and explaining their work. Recently, the Solihul Approach (Douglas and Ginty, 2001) has become very popular with its use of terms such as “containment” (Milford et al, 2006), a term used to describe the process of allowing a distressed person to ‘offload’ their feelings to a practitioner to allow process of making sense of them takes place. This is very welcome as it gives a name to what many youth justice social workers have been doing for years and have always found difficult to justify and validate. Social workers have to be empowered to use such language within practice to enable them to do what they know works, that is use of self to build working relationships. This will remain a challenge in the current climate of efficiency savings in the youth justice system as when social work organisations are feeling under pressure they resort to process driven practice (Howe, 2010) in the misguided belief that this will result in high quality social work.

Conclusion

Social work is a messy, unpredictable, complex and intangible activity. This is because it is tied up with human emotions and emotions are very difficult to explain, quantify, objectify or fit into neat boxes. Actively engaging and using the emotions involved, both in terms of the practitioner and service user, enables a deeper social work approach to take place and enables the forming of relationships. Such relationships can then be used as the tool themselves to bring about positive changes for children and families who are receiving intervention from youth justice social workers. Social workers working within the youth justice system know through their experience what is most likely to be effective in meeting the aims of the system – that is prevention of offending. To achieve this means real questions need to be asked about the effectiveness of the technical-rational risk focused approach of the current youth justice system in favour of a system which adopts the principles of Munro (2011) and empowers social workers to actively use critically reflective and reflexive practice and supports the use of self to build powerful social work relationships with the vulnerable children they work with.

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