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# Back to the future and back again: Reflections on a student unit

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## Abstract

Fieldwork placements are a critical component of social work education. During the 1980s student units were a common model for placements across the statutory social work sector in New Zealand. While these units were replaced in the 1990s and 2000s with a more individualistic approach to social work supervision and placement education, the Site Manager of Child Youth and Family Palmerston North initiated the development of a new unit in 2006. A full-time fieldwork educator was employed to work with social work students on placement. Several benefits of the unit were apparent; however, due to reprioritisation within Child Youth and Family, it was disestablished in 2009. This article traces the establishment and the demise of this student unit and offers comment on the perceived effectiveness of the unit for all of the key stakeholders, that is, the students, Massey University and Child Youth and Family.

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## Introduction

The most important influence on social work students during their study towards a professional qualification is their fieldwork placements (Maidment, 1997; Shardlow and Doel, 1996). The nature of the relationship between the fieldwork educator and the student is pivotal in the fieldwork experience (Maidment, 1997). During the 1980s, social work student units were established in the welfare, health and probation sectors throughout New Zealand. Dedicated fieldwork educators supported, supervised and educated students, and endeavoured to provide excellent learning opportunities (Ellis, 1998). However, by the early 1990s the student units were seen by government as expensive and unnecessary and were disestablished (Beddoe, 1999). Since this time social work programmes have relied on the commitment of individual social workers and agencies to support, supervise and educate students during their placements. In 2006,

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the Site Manager of the Child Youth and Family, Palmerston North (CYF PN) office approached social work staff at Massey University, Palmerston North campus (MU) with a proposal for a new student unit (Unit). This article describes the development of the Unit, the roles of the key people involved, some student perspectives on the Unit, and its disestablishment in 2009.

Accordingly, the paper is divided into four sections. Firstly, a brief outline of the establishment process is presented. Secondly, the pivotal roles of the Child Youth and Family (CYF) Fieldwork Educator and the University Fieldwork Coordinator will be described. Thirdly, the students who were placed in the Unit in 2008 outline their perspectives on the purpose of the Unit and their reasons for deciding to have a placement in this setting. This is followed by reflections on the demise of the Unit in 2009 and comments on the perceived strengths of this type of placement environment.

## **Establishing the Unit**

In June 2006, discussions on a proposed Unit in the Palmerston North office began between CYF PN and MU. The Regional Director and the Site Manager of CYF PN were favourable towards the establishment of a pilot Unit with the aim of assisting in developing staff capacity at the CYF PN site. While the CYF PN office regularly had MU social work students on placement there was anecdotal evidence that many of these students were choosing not to apply for vacancies at the site after their placements had concluded. Informal feedback from supervisors of social work students showed that students added considerable pressure to their already full caseloads and the time for supervision and meeting other University requirements was not always available. Having a Fieldwork Educator responsible for supervising the students, assisting them with their casework, and completing the written requirements, was considered to be beneficial for both the CYF staff and the social work students. The main purposes of the Unit, therefore, were to provide a safe and educative environment in which to provide quality student placements, to provide students the opportunity to become socialised to the agency, and to assist in the long-term aim of recruitment. During 2006, the Site Manager and University staff met on several occasions to develop a terms of reference for the Unit, a memorandum of understanding, and a job description for the Fieldwork Educator position.

On 15 December 2006, the memorandum of understanding between CYF Lower North Island Service Centre and MU was signed. In February 2007, two applicants were interviewed for the Fieldwork Educator position and Rob Teppett, previously a Care and Protection Coordinator, was appointed on a one-year contract. The pilot was run between July and November 2007 with four Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students and one Masters of Social Work (applied) (MSW(a)) student placed in the Unit. These students were all situated in the Palmerston North office. In addition, a BSW student placed in the Dannevirke CYF office was invited to attend all of the training and induction offered by the Fieldwork Educator. Although each student in the Unit was attached to a specific team, the Fieldwork Educator took responsibility for the induction process, formal supervision, the development of the University learning contract and final assessment documentation, and the placement visit with the University staff. The students were also able to access the Fieldwork Educator on an informal basis for guidance and advice.

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At the conclusion of these first placements, the Unit was reviewed by key stakeholders including CYF staff, students and the University. The overwhelming recommendation from all parties was that the Unit, and therefore the Fieldwork Educator position, become permanent. Approved by the Regional Director in late December 2007, Rob Teppett was appointed in March 2008 to the Fieldwork Educator role. This position was 1.0 FTE and fully funded by CYF.

### **Cementing the role and processes**

Depending on the numbers and interests of students in the social work programmes, placements are not always occurring year round. Therefore, there was an agreement that the brief of the Fieldwork Educator would be extended after the pilot year to include other sites within the Lower North Island region if the Palmerston North Unit did not have the full quota of five students. This, however, included only MU social work students placed in field offices and not CYF residential centres. In 2008, the Unit had five BSW students and five MSW(a) students in the Palmerston North, Levin, Wellington, Porirua and Hutt Valley offices. In the first semester the Fieldwork Educator travelled to the Wellington region to supervise MSW(a) students and fulfil the other University requirements. In the second semester the BSW students based at the Palmerston North office were in the Unit. In July 2008 the Unit was structurally realigned from the Palmerston North site to the Manawatu Service Centre, with the Fieldwork Educator's role and responsibilities being redefined. In May 2009 when CYF Service Centres across the country were disestablished, the Unit also came under review and was subsequently closed.

Students wishing to have a placement in the Unit underwent an interview process which included submitting a Curriculum Vitae and a covering letter and undertaking an interview and referee checks. The interview panel included the Fieldwork Educator, the Fieldwork Coordinator from MU, the kaumatua of the CYF PN site and a Practice Leader. The interview questions were adapted from the CYF generic social worker interview framework and structured around CYF core competencies, relationship building, resilience, cultural sensitivity and conceptual thinking. A clean full Police Check was also required of each student. The Unit nurtured a culture of transparency and expected student social workers to not misrepresent themselves, acknowledging to clients and colleagues that they were students on placement completing a practicum as part of their academic qualification. While a student was not an employee during their time in the Unit, they were still required to sign the Code of Conduct which placed the same expectations on them in terms of ethical/professional behaviour and standards. As part of the recruiting process, students who were interested in having a placement within the Unit were expected to indicate an interest (at that point) in pursuing paid work with CYF at the conclusion of their placement. Over the two years that the Unit was operating 15 BSW and MSW(a) students completed placements, and 11 of these students secured employment contracts with a CYF office after their placements ended. In April 2011, of the 11 students, seven were employed in social work positions within CYF throughout New Zealand, while the remaining four had elected to find work elsewhere or continue with other academic study.

Once a student was offered a placement, they were matched with a social worker to enable them to access a caseload. A student social worker was recognised as a co-worker, and had access to CYF's computer system which allowed them to actively participate in care and protection casework. This work can be complex and demanding, requiring so-

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cial workers to be critical and analytical thinkers capable of accurately 'thin slicing' large amounts of information, constructing effective safety plans, as well as consummate communicators who can engage clients who have little or no volition for change (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2008). The original vision for the Unit was to help reignite the 'passion' in statutory social work practitioners, which was inextricably connected with the then Chief Social Worker's drive for the re-professionalisation of statutory social work. At that time, CYF had recently embraced strength-based practice which, arguably, requires social workers to possess this passion in order to work with clients to achieve positive change rather than simply bureaucratic functionaries providing socially sanctioned welfare services (O'Donoghue, 2008).

## **Defining the roles**

The Fieldwork Educator's work schedule described his key responsibilities as: liaison with Massey University; facilitating student placements in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding; interviewing/selecting appropriate students for placement; ensuring that students receive professional supervision; monitoring the quality and safety of casework students are connected with; and completing the University assessment documentation. One significant advantage of a full-time Fieldwork Educator was that operational staff were able to assist students with their casework without any responsibility for the clinical supervision and assessment documentation, which had been identified as a disincentive to them taking on a student. Students coming onto placement within the Unit also received considerable assistance from the Fieldwork Educator in defining their placement learning goals and supervisory contracts which ensured the 60-day placement retained a strong educative focus. The Fieldwork Educator also assisted and monitored staff that were on a qualification plan, identified with operational staff appropriate learning opportunities for students, and provided back-up operational assistance during times of non-student contact. In addition, he provided a mentoring role for newly qualified graduates who had transitioned through the Unit into employment at CYF. This included supporting these staff through their CYF induction and, as all graduates were provisionally registered, assisting them to prepare for their competency assessment pursuant to the social work registration process.

The Fieldwork Coordinator at the University was the first point of contact for the Fieldwork Educator. In this role the Coordinator also participated in the initial interviewing of students and considered which students might be suitable for a placement in the Unit. In both 2007 and 2008 more than the quota of five students wanted placements in the Unit. The students were made aware of the competitiveness of being placed in the Unit and were supported by the Fieldwork Coordinator in writing their Curriculum Vitae and covering letters. The Fieldwork Coordinator sat on the interview panel and had input into this decision-making process. Throughout the placement the Fieldwork Coordinator maintained email and, at times, phone contact with the students and was the University staff member who visited mid-way through the placement. Additional support and meetings were also attended if any concerns or difficulties were raised by the Fieldwork Educator or the student. At the conclusion of the placement the Fieldwork Coordinator marked the student's written work and assessment documentation and assigned the final grade for the University paper. The Fieldwork Coordinator had regular contact with the Fieldwork Educator throughout the duration of the placements and liaised over matters such as review processes and the updating of the Memorandum of Understanding.

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## Student perspectives

Five BSW students who were in the Unit during 2008 were invited at the conclusion of their placements to comment on their understanding and experience of the Unit. All of these students successfully completed their 60-day placements, with three continuing on to become employees in the Palmerston North office. One of the five students did not apply for a position and the other student was not successful in her application. The students acknowledged that the purpose of the Unit was to ensure an educative introduction to CYF and experience the practical and 'real' experience of being a social worker. Furthermore, the students also perceived the Unit as providing learning and education around practice and as a means to check student suitability for future recruitment. The students indicated that the Unit enabled a clearer distinction between being a student and a practitioner and that it offered a level of protection and safety that might not have occurred if they were placed directly in a team. Being part of a Unit was also seen as less isolating as other students and the Fieldwork Coordinator were more readily available for discussions, support and both peer and formal supervision. In general, the Unit was considered an environment for safe questioning, challenging and learning.

The students signalled a range of reasons as to why they wanted to have their placement in the CYF Unit. In the main, students were interested in having a placement at CYF so they could have a first-hand experience of client work in this context. One student had previously had dealings with CYF while working in another agency and, therefore, wanted to better understand the work, policy and legislation of CYF from an insider's perspective. Gaining experience inside a statutory organisation that is bound by legislation was a critical factor for all of the students, as well as the possibility of employment at the conclusion of the placement. The students also indicated that having their placement inside a Student Unit made them feel more certain and comfortable about applying for a placement as it was expected to be more supportive than being placed only within a single team.

## Graduate perspectives

Three years on from their experience of the Unit, five of the graduates still working in CYF were invited to offer their comments on their previous experience of the Unit. All of these graduates offered very positive retrospective comments about their experience of the Unit. The Student Unit was viewed as offering an educative focus for the placement enabling comprehensive integration of theory and practice. This helped students to consolidate how they wished to practise in CYF, and the exclusive fieldwork supervision and routine peer supervision meant the complexity of statutory social work and CYF processes could be broken down and integrated with their respective theoretical and skill base. The Unit was considered a safe place to explore practice, and not having the responsibility of a caseload enabled students to experience different practice styles and be reflective in developing their own practice modality. The very comprehensive induction was seen to be of significant value in orientating the students to the work of the agency and also the expectations of being in the Unit. This orientation process, which included introducing students to community agencies that CYF works with, was also seen as very helpful in building relationships with social workers from community agencies, which made it so much easier to manage their own casework as social workers. Without a dedicated fieldwork educator to organise and facilitate this induction it is unlikely it would have eventuated, which would have inhibited

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the ongoing work of the students. The graduates also noted that it was helpful during the placement to have the structure of the Unit and the appointed Fieldwork Educator to ensure the ongoing and successful completion of the University fieldwork assessment material. Anecdotal evidence given to these graduates suggests that students who have done subsequent placements in CYF, but outside of the structure of the Unit, have struggled to keep up with this work and have sometimes had difficulty in ensuring their individual fieldwork educators have completed the University requirements in a timely manner.

### **The demise of the student unit**

In 2009 the Unit was disestablished. On the face of it, the demise of the Unit was collateral damage arising from CYF restructuring which led to Service Centres throughout New Zealand being disestablished. If the Unit had remained under the auspices of the Manawatu site, it would not have been 'affected' and therefore it is foreseeable that it may well have survived. Minimal consultation on the imminent closure of the Unit occurred with University staff as the Unit appeared to be seen as primarily a fixture of the CYF, rather than the University, architecture. Both CYF and University staff put forward a case for the retention of the Unit, acknowledging in particular, the strong level of recruitment that was considered a direct consequence of the Unit and the excellent supervision and learning opportunities that had been provided by the Fieldwork Educator. These views, however, were not upheld and the Unit was closed.

While the Unit required significant funding, especially given the appointment of a dedicated Fieldwork Educator, several key benefits are evident. The Unit provided a safe and supportive learning environment for final placement students who intended to seek employment with CYF. Ready access to a Fieldwork Educator ensured students had multiple informal and formal opportunities to question, debate and learn, thus achieving a depth of integration of theory and practice that may not have otherwise been possible. Supervision, both peer and formal, was regular, protected and ensured. This is, unfortunately, not always the case in other traditional CYF placements. Students were well-inducted prior to beginning casework and, overall, found the Unit was able to provide them with a strong platform from which to begin their subsequent employment with CYF. The high levels of recruitment are also testament to the effectiveness of the Unit in supporting the students, not only with the University requirements, but also with their initial development as beginning social work practitioners.

Although there are currently no student units operating in CYF, the recent emphasis within CYF and the social work profession more generally, toward employing staff who are registrable according to the criteria of the Social Workers' Registration Board, is significant. The Unit enabled the professional growth and development of students who were in their final year of study and who were interested in becoming employees of CYF. Due to the structure of the Unit these students received critical learning and opportunities that would have been unlikely if they had been placed only within a team. Consequently, the students were well-prepared to move from a student to an employee role.

The Unit, therefore, was beneficial for all parties involved: social workers could support students but not be tied with the additional requirements of formal supervision and written documentation; the University was reassured the students were being well-supported,

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supervised and educated on practice/theory components; the students received excellent support and nurturing in a safe environment; and CYF was able to monitor and evaluate prospective employees.

Traditional placement arrangements at CYF, wherein a student is placed with a team and the Supervisor of this team becomes the Fieldwork Educator, have not been sufficiently researched and this remains an area for future examination. Anecdotal observations suggest that due to the heavy, often crisis-driven, caseloads of CYF teams, students are sometimes not as well supported or supervised as would be ideal. Whilst Fieldwork Educators in these situations generally work hard to provide excellent learning opportunities for students, the Unit provides an exemplary model of how this can be assured. Therefore, we suggest that the conventional approach to placements in CYF may not be as effective as the student unit model as students tend to be more immersed in only one team, have less available time for critical reflection with other students and a dedicated Fieldwork Educator, and the University and student requirements and expectations often become burdensome on individual supervisors.

Within the past two years CYF have begun discussions with tertiary providers on developing an internship model for placements. Internships essentially equate to students taking on an unpaid employee role. In turn it is intended students are prepared to enter paid employment within CYF at the conclusion of the internship. Whilst this is a model worthy of consideration questions remain for us as to how students may be best supported within this environment and whether the educational focus and quality of placement can be ensured.

## **Conclusion**

Altogether, nine BSW and six MSW(a) students were placed in the PN CYF Student Unit. Overall, the purposes of the Unit were successfully achieved as students received quality placements, socialisation to the agency occurred throughout the placement period and recruitment levels were high. Comments from CYF staff during a review process in 2007 also indicated that they viewed the experience of placement positively due to the recruitment of the students, the high-quality induction the students received, and from having a dedicated Fieldwork Educator. The relationship between the CYF PN office and MU was strengthened with the Fieldwork Educator also contributing to some classroom teaching and the MU staff being at the CYF office more regularly. Having a devoted Fieldwork Educator responsible for the students was beneficial for CYF staff, the University and the students. CYF staff still worked with students and often benefited from the additional 'pair of hands', but were not required to complete written work from the University or formally supervise the students. The University had one person to liaise with rather than several CYF staff members, which made the lines of accountability for both the University and the students more transparent. While students worked within specific teams, their primary supervisory and educative relationship during the placement was with the Fieldwork Educator. The students greatly benefited from the increased emphasis on education and theory to practise integration during their supervision sessions and always had the Fieldwork Educator available to assist and support them as he was not tied up with casework or other responsibilities while the students were on placement.

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As Linda Angus, then Regional Director of CYF commented, there are 'multiple benefits for us, including helping to fill social work vacancies, raising the profile of our work amongst social work students and reminding staff about the value of professional development and good supervision' (Panui, 2008). The Unit was clearly an asset to students, CYF and MU alike, and we are hopeful that this is an initiative that may be resurrected in the future, be nurtured, and given long-term sustenance.

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