The Linda Haskell Memorial Master Class; 2008

Challenges to Practice and Knowledge in Child Welfare
Work: From the 'social' to the 'informational'?

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Figure 1 The Child Protection and Child Welfare Models

Child Protection Model	Child Welfare Model
Best interests of the child are narrowly focussed on protection	Best interests of the child are broadly defined to include the welfare of the family
Law-led rather than discretion led	Discretion-based
Assessment based on standardised tools	Assessment based on interaction between family and social workers
Aims at objectivity	Acknowledges different perspectives
Centred on difficulties and problems	Considers difficulties and resources
Treats difficulties as signals of risk	Seeks to understand difficulties in order to find ways to provide support
Restricts professionals' discretionary powers	Enhances professional strength
Less readiness to intervene	More readiness to intervene
Individual rather than community oriented	Community oriented
Remedial rather than preventive	Preventive rather than remedial
(Source: Fargion (Haskell Master Class, 2007)	

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How could the state sustain the healthy development of family members who were vulnerable and dependent, particularly children, while promoting the family as the natural sphere for caring for those individuals and without intervening in *all* families?

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One of child welfare social work's enduring characteristics is its *contested* and *ambiguous* nature.

Most crucially, this *ambiguity* arises from its commitment to children and families and their needs on the one hand and its allegiances to its statutory responsibilities on the other

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It has tried to produce a picture of the individual which is both *subjective* and *social* and where the use of the *professional relationship* provides the key mechanism for helping individuals back into the mainstream of society

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The analysis of past failings suggested success in child abuse work would come by:

1. Knowing what *information* to collect about parents in order to determine whether or not they might be a danger to their children;

2. Systematically collecting that *information* by thoroughly investigating cases;

3. Processing and analysing that *information* to decide whether or not children were safe in the care of their parents;

4. Closely monitoring and reassessing cases in which children were thought to be at risk.

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Coherent causal accounts which attempted to provide a picture of the *subject* in their *social context* were of declining importance, for the key purpose of the social worker was to gather information in order to classify clients for the purpose of judging the nature and level of risk and for allocating scarce resources.

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The situation is full of paradox, for while most agree that certainty in most areas of social work is not possible, the political and organizational climate demands it.

Social workers have been found wanting and are no longer trusted

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The result is that many of the changes introduced act to sidestep the paradox and substitute *confidence in systems* for *trust in individual professionals* and fails to recognize the importance of professional judgement and moral competence.

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In England the period since 2001 has seen the rapid introduction of electronic records in all areas of social care, including for child welfare:

- The Integrated Children's System (ICS)
- The electronic Common Assessment Framework (eCAF)
- ContactPoint – previously the Information Sharing Index

All of which are supposed to be fully operational by 2010

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What are the possible impacts of the increasingly central role of ICT and databases on the nature and form of knowledge of social work?

Is the nature of practice being transformed by these changes and, if so, in what ways?

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Increasingly it seems that what is referred to as *knowledge* is primarily concerned with the way we gather, share, store, manipulate and use *information*.

However, *knowledge* and *information* are very different phenomena.

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- **Knowledge** is mental, not yet objectified and very much associated with ideas and requires a degree of commitment and understanding;

- **Information** is much more disembodied, de-contextualised and objectified;

- **Knowledge** usually involves a knower;

- **Information** is usually treated as an independent and self-sufficient entity which is much more transportable and useable in different ways.

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Information becomes a self-contained substance which can be shared, quantified, accumulated, compared and stored on a data base.

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The embodied subject is in danger of disappearing so that we are left with a variety of surface information which provides little basis for in depth explanation or understanding.

We are witnessing the creation of the virtual *data double.*

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If clients are taking on the guise of *information patterns* the implication is that social workers are increasingly becoming *information processors.*

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Not only does the use of computerised information systems mean that the traditional boundaries between the 'public' and the 'private' – the key space in which social work has operated – becomes blurred, but social work becomes even more implicated in wide-ranging, complex and unstable systems of surveillance.

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However, the situation is full of paradox, for how is it that information systems which are set up to enhance highly rationalized forms of decision making and service delivery:

'result in the *ir*rationality of information overloads, misinformation, disinformation and out-of-control information. At stake is a *dis*-informed information society' (Lash, 2002 p.2, original emphasis)

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But ICT also clearly offers the opportunity to change communication in ways which have direct and very positive possibilities for child welfare.

Many people – particularly children and young people – find using the internet useful and helpful in a whole variety of ways, particularly its potential for interactivity, egalitarianism and 'fun'.

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There are a growing number of telephone and interactive web sites offering help and advice to children, young people and adults.

What seems particularly attractive is the possibility for much greater confidentiality – something which is highly valued by children and young people.