

Is there an emerging need for the role of the Practice Specialist in supporting best practice in the current New South Wales child protection climate?

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Abstract

The complexities in social work practice, particularly child protection, in New South Wales is ever growing. As we deal with rising living costs and the growing nature of psychosocial stressors related to this, families are presenting with more complex needs than ever before. Leaders of frontline practitioners in child protection practice often lack time to focus on the ongoing development of skill sets practitioners require to support growing complex needs of families. The role of the Practice Specialist is a role that is beginning to emerge in various organisations. This role has been pivotal in the overall growth of practitioners and the programs they work in, creating a culture of critique, self-reflection and shared decision making for children and young people. Most Practice Specialist roles focus on supporting practitioners to 'slow down' in the fast-paced and anxiety-driven culture of child protection practice. This slowing down can be seen as a fundamental component of practitioners striving for best practice approaches in child protection and is believed to facilitate more thought-out, collaborative, and less reactionary interventions for children, young people and their families. What do organisations need to know more about on the unique role of the Practice Specialist to establish or invest more in these roles?

Keywords: practice specialist, child protection, professional supervision, professional development, reflective practice, social work, practice leadership

Introduction

Throughout the child protection sector, particularly in non-government organisations (NGOs), more Practice Specialist positions are emerging. The Practice Specialist is a leadership-based role that's purpose is to support ongoing learning and practitioner/leader theory and practice development to ensure the adherence to best practice. What also continues to emerge is the number of complex families that are reported for having children and young people deemed at Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) (Audit Office of NSW, 2024). Between 2022 and 2023, of the 400,000 child protection reports received by the New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), 112,592 children were assessed to be at ROSH, with only 25% having received a safety and risk assessment conducted at home (Audit Office of NSW, 2024). 'Safety and Risk Assessment (SARA) is an SDM[®] assessment framework used in relation to a child protection report concerning care and supervision of a child by a person exercising parental responsibility (for the child). This includes birth parents, guardians, adoptive parents or relative/kin carers with parental responsibility' (Department of Communities and Justice, 2023).

The Family Preservation service system has evolved over the past two decades. Initially, some services were developed and delivered by government as a complement to statutory activities. Between 2002 and 2007, the services were incrementally transitioned as a government case management function to non-government service providers before entering a phase of expansion and innovation in 2008. (New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ, 2024). Family Preservation services have aimed to achieve positive outcomes for children, young people and their families by promoting parenting skills, family functioning, and child development, whilst addressing safety and risk issues and developing the network of support around the family (DCJ, 2024). The NSW Auditor General's Report (2024) notes that at times, Family Preservation services do not achieve the intended outcomes, and that children and young people are re-reported to the child protection helpline for the same issues they were originally referred for (NSW Auditor General, 2024). Given this context, this article aims to explore the role of Practice Specialists supporting practitioners to effectively achieve more planned and purposeful interventions. Have the expectations of child protection practitioners and leaders (direct and upper management) changed or evolved since the inception of Family Preservation?

In some organisations, Practice Specialists have been critical in supporting practitioners to critically reflect on the growing, complex needs of children, young people and families they support. This is done in ways that builds practitioners' confidence and provides validation and reassurance about their work that their frontline leaders may not always have time for. It is important to note that there is not a vast scope of literature on the role of a Practice Specialist, and the current research around the effectiveness and success of the role is weak and is something that will not be covered in this paper. Instead, this paper aims to explore the impact and influence of Practice Specialists on child protection practice, and to unpack whether there is an emerging need for more of these roles to be researched and funded by organisations into the future. The authors of this article have an invested interest in the topic due to their professional backgrounds and being currently employed as Practice Specialists. Having performed the role for collectively over four years, the authors understand the challenges and opportunities involved in expanding and supporting these roles. This experience informs the analysis presented here, providing a unique and informed perspective on the emerging need of the practice specialist role within child protection.

Defining the Practice Specialist Role

A Practice Specialist plays a crucial role in supporting frontline practitioners to address the well-being and safety of children and young people who have come into contact with the child protection system. The role is quite newly formed in most organisations and can provide expertise and case guidance, coaching, training and support, case consultation, development and/or implementation of processes, quality assurance, fostering of collaborative practice and creating a culture of reflective practice. There are several components to reflective practice, including deep, honest and critical thinking on the multiple aspects of our professional practice and approaches with the people and communities that we work with, for it to be scheduled or planned as well as spontaneous, and for it to eventuate in action (Fook, 2007; Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2017).

Providing Expertise and Case Guidance

Practice Specialists are equipped with practice wisdom along with having obtained a university degree in a relevant field such as social work or psychology, and many years practice in the field. Practice Specialists provide guidance on current best practices, policies, and procedures related to child protection. It is critical for Practice Specialists to remain updated with the latest research, legislation, and effective interventions.

Coaching, Training and Support

Practice Specialists can be responsible for the development of training or coaching programs for frontline practitioners and their leaders working in child protection. An important component of this is also supporting staff translate theoretical concepts into practice. The aim is to ensure that frontline practitioners are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to address safety and risk issues for children and young people and to then support ongoing, long-term sustainable behaviour change for families.

Case Consultation

Practice Specialists can provide advice and consultation on complex or challenging matters. This can involve reviewing case files, providing recommendations, and helping to develop strategies for intervention and support. Effective consultation involves providing a space for frontline practitioners to ‘slow down’ and reflect on the current challenges for the family. It is often considered effective to utilise a ‘coaching’ approach in this space and focusing on Appreciative Inquiry and Solution Focused Questioning. For example, an appreciative inquiry-based question looks like “Everyone has days when they are ‘off’ or ‘not at their best’. I might ask you about that in a bit, but could I first ask you a little bit about when you are ‘on’, when you are ‘at your best’ as a parent? (Madsen 2014). Although this example is focused on what a practitioner may be able to ask a family they are working with, the practice specialist is able to use similar modes of questioning to appreciate what work the practitioner has done and what is working well. These approaches enable “people in organisations to become more aware of their own strengths and abilities in ways that increase their effectiveness in all parts of their life and to create robust support for change in the client’s social system (Sloan & Canine, 2007, p.1).

Contribution to the Development and/or Implementation of Processes

Practice Specialists can contribute to the development, refinement, and the local/micro-level implementation of processes within organisations to ensure best practice is considered. This ensures that practices are up-to-date and aligned with current research and legislation.

Quality Assurance

Practice Specialists play a role in monitoring and provide feedback on the effectiveness of child protection practices and interventions. This includes conducting audits, reviewing case outcomes, and ensuring that services meet established standards and practice frameworks.

Fostering Collaborative Practice

Practice Specialists work closely with practitioners in supporting collaborative practice with other professionals and organisations involved in child protection such as frontline practitioners, their leaders, and other community and government stakeholders such as NSW Police, Education and Health. This often involves supporting the practitioner to coordinating efforts between agencies, advocating for the needs of children and young people, and fostering inter agency collaboration to ensure better outcomes for children, young people, and their families by ensuring that their voices are heard, and their needs are prioritised. This includes ensuring frontline practitioners facilitate meaningful participation or engagement within interventions.

Creating a Culture of Reflective Practice

The Practice Specialist role is a leadership role in which one of its primary functions is keeping reflective practice at the forefront for practitioners and their leaders. Reflective practice requires key skills in analysis, critical thinking, communication and self-awareness (Fook, 2007; Thompson & Thompson, 2023). This can be done through developing relationships and psychological safety, creating a safe space to invite vulnerability, which in turn creates bravery, courage, and growth (Brown, 2013).

Practice Specialists' core responsibility is to ensure that the way in which practitioners work is evidence-based, effective and continuously improving to ensuring the safety and well-being of not only the children and young people but the practitioners themselves.

What drives the need for practice specialists?

As frontline practitioners' workloads increase, there is an ongoing need for a role to be driving best practice to achieve good outcomes (more children and young people living at home with their families/kin, more safety and opportunities to thrive) for children, young people and their families on the ground. It can be unrealistic to expect leaders to hold risk as well as the organisational expectations, including funding and program requirements, whilst being able to support staff to 'slow down', develop their overall skills and foster reflective practice in order for practitioners to become more competent and confident. To be able to facilitate this, Practice Specialists can play a crucial role in supporting leaders to do this work. Current rhetoric describe child protection practitioners as workers that experience a lot of pressure, in which they feel "tempted to get 'stuck in' so that they can feel a sense of

progress”; however, arguments also exist that this is ineffective, as ‘it is unlikely that an unplanned and routine response will ‘hit the spot’ every time, if ever’ (Thompson & Thompson, 2023, p. 133). Practice Specialists perform a critical role in maintaining a level of neutrality when facilitating a reflective space for practitioners to move away from more reactionary approaches to practice.

Social work practitioners need to feel valued in their role especially in child protection work. Due to the high exposure to vicarious trauma and subsequent increased rates of burnout, social workers require a safe workplace to be able to learn, grow and embrace vulnerability in their practice. We view these concepts as pivotal in reducing the lasting effects of burnout and maintaining staff retention. Social workers often find themselves overworked, overwhelmed, and emotionally fatigued, which have shown to lead to professional burnout (Ratcliff, 2024; Watkins, Mohr & Kelly, 2011; Lewis, 2021). Positive coping styles, personal development, good quality primary and ongoing training, constructive organisational cultures, supportive social and supervisory support are things that contribute to practitioners developing resilience in child protection work (Fernandez & Delfabbro, 2021; McFadden, Campbell and Taylor, 2015). This connects to our experience of working with people who state that not being supported in their role along with the high demands of managing caseload and administrative duties are the core reasons for their decision making around leaving the role. This is where a ‘coaching’ approach by the Practice Specialist can help – by supporting and nurturing goal-focused, self-directed learning and drawing on prior experience to rapidly develop real-world solutions to issues (Ives, 2008).

Another consideration around what may drive the need for Practice Specialists into the future is the current redesign of family preservation services by DCJ in the non-government sector. The discussion paper indicates that the various ineligibility criterion can potentially be a barrier to families being able to access the most appropriate supports. This could mean that family preservation services might be seeing a vastly different scope of referrals in the future, which highlights the need for further supports to frontline staff and their leaders in supporting this work as it continues to evolve. The discussion paper also suggests that there may be some anecdotal evidence around initial engagement with family preservation services to be poor. Poor engagement can be due to lack of transparency with families regarding concerns and referral reasons, ineffective engagement practices, such as lack of persistence and not understanding a family’s motivation or readiness for change (DCJ 2024). The first point may reflect that practitioners could be lacking confidence or experience in being able to have

difficult conversations with families, which is a practice area we have also identified within our work. This also links to the second point around the confidence to be persistent, planned and creative in the ways that practitioners engage families. The last point links to a theory we currently use within our consultation space with practitioners around reflecting where the family is at within the ‘Stages of Change’, which supports practitioners to reflect and reconsider their approach based on the family’s current readiness for change.

Research and Testimonials

Research on the need of the Practice Specialist role in the child protection sector is currently sparse. This article aims to pique the interests of organisations to consider what they might need to know more about to invest in these roles. We endeavour to conduct more of our own quantitative and qualitative research on the Practice Specialist role, which may include qualitative interviews with people who have either had or not had Practice Specialists and reviewing any emerging organisational data. It is important to explore whether the role has had an impact on staff retention, staff competence and confidence, more consistent compliance with data outcomes and positive impacts for children, young people and their families. In lieu of research based on the effectiveness of the practice specialist role, we have included some testimonials below from some practitioners and leaders within the Family Preservation space. These were gathered by the authors of this article via email which included the question -

“What are the impacts the practice specialist role has had on your practice in 2024?”

“The practice specialists’ extensive knowledge and experience has provided me with insight and best practice to help me improve my decision making and problem-solving skills. I have found the training and workshops they have given to us as caseworkers have been very helpful in areas such as assessment and planning, as well as the one-on-one consults being amazing with helping boost my confidence in “where to next” or “what now””. - Family Preservation Caseworker

“As a new social worker, moments of imposter syndrome come and go. When I feel so stuck in where to go for a family, or need support in validating my feelings, I go to our practice specialist. Our practice specialist supports me to figure out the answers on my own, that she knows I know (but I convince myself I don’t) rather than doing the work for me. She kills two birds with one stone – supports me to figure out my next

steps, but also empowers me to recognise, I do know what I am doing, and it builds my confidence back up. Having access to a practice specialist has allowed me to not be forced or even pushed out of my comfort zone. Rather, guided out of my comfort zone. I feel having a practice specialist is positively impacting my practice, because it's helping me to feel supported and validated, build my confidence, critically reflect, ask questions and be curious, and learn every day, helping the imposter syndrome fade away. Realistically, it's not to say I will never have moments of imposter syndrome again, but knowing I have a practice specialist in my corner helps alleviate the pressure and anticipation of those moments, that little bit easier. I'm grateful for the practice specialist, and I think it's a crucial role for practitioners to have access to when in need." - Family Preservation Caseworker

"Having a practice specialist has helped me immensely in my own practice, specifically with more complex cases and families. I find it helpful and very informative to discuss my problems with a practice specialist and explore alternative ways of intervention. I find I often reflect on my own biases during practice specialist consults and leave with a new approach to use. Practice specialists help me slow down my own thinking to approach complex cases with a clear view and open mind. This has built my confidence significantly and increased my skills as a caseworker." - Family Preservation Caseworker

"The role of a practice specialist adds growth in the social work industry as it allows workers to have a space for a specialised focus on their practice to ensure better outcomes are made for families. Having availability to talk with a practice specialist has been incredibly beneficial for my practice and how I case manage and deliver services to families with complex needs and issues." - Family Preservation Caseworker

"Has been so helpful in so many areas of practice -

Closing review reflections

DV consults especially complex families

Very helpful around practice when caseworkers are feeling very overwhelmed and can be supported of where to start with families

DV workshops and most recently case planning (have had so much positive feedback about how helpful the session 2 was around writing worry statements and goals).

Very helpful in writing up process for intake.

Complex panel – supportive of this process as caseworkers can find this daunting

Caseworkers feel very confident to approach Practice Specialist and ask for support around practice with families.

Coordinators also being supported around practice and brain trust if needing advice or support with families”. - Family preservation Leader

Challenges and Considerations

There are a variety of challenges and considerations to developing and establishing the Practice Specialist role. One of the challenges currently is around the balance of shifting between the various levels of social work (micro, meso and macro) to be effective in the role. It is fundamental for Practice Specialists to have direct and close connections with frontline practitioners and their leaders to enable the implementation and coaching of evidence-based practice. Being connected to and actively participating at the meso- and macro-level spaces within social work is crucial in developing a deeper, nuanced understanding of how the organisational structures operate. This in turn will impact the Practice Specialist's ability to focus on micro-level work. It is crucial that Practice Specialists stay connected to and contribute to any current policy, procedure, and legislative changes at the macro level, which will support the role in being able to fulfil its quality assurance and adherence to best practice for practitioners on the ground.

Practice Specialists can impact and support the gap that occurs between macro- and micro-level decision-making processes, by ensuring purposeful consultation with those that potential changes can impact most. This can give them a voice in this process as well as supporting implementation of changes to the frontline practitioners in a more seamless way leveraging off early adopters. Rogers (1983) describes 'early adopters' as leaders or role models within a team who can support 'laggards' within a group who may be seen as more 'traditional... and often the last people in a social system to adopt an innovation' (Rogers 1983, p. 249-250).

Practice Specialists are often challenged by frontline practitioners who have become problem-focused and reactive in their approach to the challenges they experience with the children, young people, and families they are working with, and they can become stuck in the crisis-driven lives of the families. Turnell (in press, p. 16) argues that 'rather than an

appreciative focus, practice talk among child protection practitioners habitually defaults to problem-focused discussion of the most worrying cases', which challenges Practice Specialists to not slip into this space with the person but hold a space of appreciation for the work that has been completed already. This can include eliciting the family's strengths and protective factors, whilst acknowledging the practitioners attempts to support the family, frustrations, and successes.

We have experienced this to be difficult when some practitioners and leaders at times can resist creating the space to critically reflect on and plan their interventions. 'Busy schedules call for setting priorities, but for many people taking time out to think about what they are doing and how and why they are doing it is seen as a luxury – rather than an integral part of the job of being a professional practitioner or manager' (Thompson & Thompson, 2023, p. 131). The other side of this challenge is that at times, practitioners will make the time to 'slow down' and discuss a family they are working with but then can be resistant to feedback and recommendations in consultation, one-on-one or group spaces.

A consideration that is important to mention is the need for the role to remain without a caseload and direct reports. The significant value of the role is that it can always bring a neutral perspective as it does not get caught in the busyness of casework or managing people. It also affords the role the time it needs to focus and evenly distribute the work within micro, meso and macro components that are central to the role's effectiveness. Another consideration is how the role fits into existing business structures. A Practice Specialist is established as a leadership role without any decision-making responsibility, as this can be seen as confusing for frontline practitioners and can cause mixed messaging about the hierarchical structures. However, it is important for the role to sit within a leadership team, as this supports the role to be in line with the leadership approach and is another way create consistency of practice.

With the proposed changes by DCJ in the Family Preservation space, we are seeing more families present with multiple, increasing complexities (e.g. domestic and family violence, mental health, drug use, socioeconomic circumstances, religious and cultural understandings of mental health challenges, barriers to housing, education and welfare support, etc.) complexities. This, along with the aforementioned challenges and changes in the child protection system has led to the "trending" of establishing Practice Specialist roles in some organisations, which have in turn piqued the interest of and investments from other organisations.

Conclusion

In summary, the role of a Practice Specialist is pivotal in ensuring the effectiveness and quality of child protection practice. Through practice expertise and support, Practice Specialists can play an important role in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice, facilitating support, consistency and motivation to practitioners and their leaders. The multifaceted responsibilities—including the development of best practices, training, coaching, and continuous improvement—demonstrate their integral role in meeting standards of practice in the ever-growing complex nature of child protection in NSW.

As the industry evolves and expectations shift, the role of the Practice Specialist becomes increasingly crucial. The ability to support and guide practitioners around new challenges and to drive practice uplift, highlights the need for continued investment in the role. Continuing to invest in the Practice Specialist role by organisations can aim to provide targeted guidance and support, ensuring that organisations remain competitive and responsive to changing environments.

Ultimately, the contributions of Practice Specialists complement the entirety of an organisation's traditional functions, including allowing leaders to fulfil the operational components of their roles crucial to funding and reporting requirements. The role shapes best practice, influences policy, procedures and their implementation, as well as contribute overall to practice improvements, and the wellbeing and development of the workforce. Recognising and investing in the role of the Practice Specialist is essential to sustaining high standards and achieving better outcomes in health, education, development and connection to family/kin and culture for children, young people and their families.

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