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Troubling trauma-informed policy in social work education:  
Reflections of educators and students in Aotearoa New  
Zealand

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## **Abstract**

Social work education is a contested site in many Western countries where neoliberal governments tend to privilege individual-focused rather than structural, rights-based welfare perspectives and expect curricula to reflect this preference. Over 2014-15 well publicised criticism of social work referred to graduates' lack of knowledge of trauma informed practice and risk assessment. Our qualitative study employed focus groups with social work students (35) and educators (27) to explore their views about the strengths, gaps and limitations of their New Zealand qualifying programmes, with a particular emphasis on the inclusion of content on child protection, trauma and risk assessment. We report that both students and educators were aware of the critical political spotlight on the social work curriculum and the emphasis on 'hot topics' such as trauma. Findings include both critical and pragmatic responses to the critique of social work education, educator resistance to the trauma discourse, and identification of child protection as disproportionately influencing talk about curriculum. Whilst political interference in curriculum is not new, the implications of these findings must be considered as social work educators ponder resistance to the narrow interests of one powerful employer.

**Keywords:** social work education, social work curriculum, trauma

## **Introduction**

Within a broader critique of the profession, social work education is a specific target. In the political discourse swirling around contemporary social work, particularly evident in political responses to child abuse tragedies, it can be observed that a paradox plays out. Social work is characterised as somehow both complex and thus in dire need of regulation and educational prescription, and yet often described in public discourse as being based on common sense (Warner, 2013). The latter, the belief that simple prescription of behaviours would solve complex social problems, is both nonsensical and heavily reliant on a belief in simplistic probability. Promotion of this belief is based largely on hindsight, where *all* data about a child who died can be seen in a manner that no practitioner could actually visualise at any time in the events leading to that fateful event (Kearney, 2013). It is not at all uncommon for politicians themselves to play on the idea that the common sense possessed by ordinary

citizens (not social workers) could prevent such tragedies. In an exploration of the political responses to the death of a child in England, Warner cites a comment by then Leader of the Opposition David Cameron (2008) who positions social workers ‘as blameworthy specifically for following bureaucratic procedures and failing to act on “common sense”’ (Warner , 2013, p. 1645) .Warner writes, ‘invoking common sense reinforces an “us–them” divide because the message is clear: any of “us” would have acted, but “they” did not’ (Warner , 2013, p. 1645. Common sense is also persuasive because it arises in ‘nature’ (Hall and O’Shea, 2013) and is thus neatly positioned against expert knowledge. In a review of English social work education Croisdale-Appleby argued:

... in political and media discourse this suspicion of the social work profession adopting an analytical approach rather than a ‘common sense approach’ has served to minimise understanding and appreciation of the complexity of the problems tackled by social workers and given the impression that there are quick and obvious answers to complex social problems. (Croisdale-Appleby 2014, p. 81)

When what is apparently needed is common sense, suspicion quickly falls on social work education and there is an impetus towards teaching prescriptive approaches, rather than instilling the kind of critical thinking skills within a generic education for complex professional practice. Governmental critiques of social work education are not uncommon in many jurisdictions, especially in relation to child protection. Taylor (2015) reports on a series of political events in England, notably child protection failures, that led to a project to reform social work education based on employers’ views of the competence and capability of newly qualified social workers. The Social Work Task Force, established to review frontline social work in England, and make recommendations for improvements in practice and training, concluded that ‘...there are certain areas of knowledge and skills which are not being covered to the right depth in social work initial training. These include: assessment frameworks; risk analysis; communication skills; managing conflict and hostility; working with other professionals’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009, para. 1.19).

One of the 15 task force recommendations was for ‘an overhaul of the content and delivery of social work degree courses’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009, para. 1.41). Taylor (2015) argues that increased prescription of curricula does not necessarily result in consistency and, indeed, risks unintended consequences. Parton (2006) asserts that the erosion of professional judgement and undermining of professional confidence is a particular risk when the focus is

more on technologies of practice and predictability (the ‘informational’), at the expense of the ‘social’. There is also an inherent danger in imposing particular regimes of knowledge in a manner suggesting simplicity when, in fact, social workers and families and communities with whom they work face huge complexity.

A further concern is that ‘social work has become largely synonymous—at least in public discourse—with a residual child welfare mandate which has, in turn, been centred on a child protection brief’, as welfare states have retreated from supportive social services (Hyslop, 2017, p. 1802). Child protection is volatile and impacted by a climate of reduced trust in professionals (O’Neill, 2002) and the search for moral certainty in a complex and unpredictable world (Beck, 1992; Warner, 2013; Webb, 2006). Consequently, social work has faced trenchant critique following child protection tragedies with little attention paid to the social conditions in which much maltreatment occurs. As the impact of welfare austerity bites hard, demand for child protection has risen, and state resources have been rationed. Hyslop notes that ‘embroiled in public anxiety, it has become increasingly unrealistic for social work to satisfy the demands of the child protection task’ (2017, p. 1802). Social work in children’s services at least, ‘intensified a shift towards risk aversion and ... increasingly complex systems comprising audit and confidence measures’ (Featherstone *et al.*, 2016, p. 11).

The impact of these political dynamics in the discourse of social work is endemic in the Anglophone world, where social work under pressure from governments to prepare its graduates for narrowly defined practice. It is at this juncture that this pressure threatens New Zealand social work education’s longstanding commitment to a generic human rights based curriculum.

### ***Social work education in New Zealand***

Social work education in New Zealand faces similar political dynamics to those described above and has attracted its own share of criticism in recent years. A former Minister of Social Development criticised the readiness to practise of social workers in a speech at the 10-year anniversary of the Social Workers Registration Act. No evidence was ever provided for this sharp critique which seemed entirely based on anecdote

... there are questions that need to be asked about the capability of people that are coming out from [schools of social work]. And that is not a reflection of course on any of them as individuals because more often than not they shine above the training

that they have been given through those institutions. But four years is a huge government investment and more importantly a huge personal and family investment for those who have gone to train. ... I worry about how that study is going and how equipped they come out ready to face the realities of social work. How much time is spent dealing with how you get through the door of a family or a child's home that you have to be at but they completely do not want you there? How much time is spent on the actual capability and skills that are needed to be truly effective in the job? (Bennett, 11 November, 2014, transcribed speech)

This criticism was echoed by the Commissioner for Children in 2015 when he questioned social work graduates' knowledge of family violence and their preparedness for work in child welfare services: 'Currently,' he told listeners, 'you can graduate from a university with a bachelor degree in social work in New Zealand and know very little about child protection or domestic violence or the impact of abuse and neglect on a children's development ... That's not ok.' (Commissioner for Children, 2 April, 2015). Again, no evidence was provided for these assertions.

At the same time, faced with criticism of child protection social work, the government established a review of the Child, Youth and Family service. Included in its terms of reference was the task to review 'the professional knowledge, skills and expertise required by Child, Youth and Family...and implications of this for providers of training, development and contracted services' (Ministry of Social Development, 2015a). The final report of the expert panel however, made few mentions of 'professional knowledge, skills and expertise' or of providers of education. The interim report had stated that: 'There is currently fragmentation at a national level in social worker qualification and training, which is reflected in a lack of consistent practice within CYF' (Ministry of Social Development, 2015a, p. 13). However, neither 'fragmentation' nor 'lack of consistent practice' are defined, nor is evidence of these problems provided. What is significant though, is the call for 'new knowledge, competencies and skill requirements for social workers associated with the move towards multi-disciplinary, trauma-informed and evidence-based practice that builds children's sense of belonging and identity and recognises criminogenic factors and drivers of offending behaviour' (Ministry of Social Development, 2015b, p. 29). Again, no evidence is offered as to why this new knowledge is required nor is there any information about what is, in fact, offered in current qualifying programmes, or the current role of the regulator in recognising these programmes.

In the context of a larger readiness-to-practise study we were interested in perceptions of the constructs of trauma and risk, both of which have been critically explored in the literature (Bath, 2017; Marlowe and Adamson, 2011; Webb, 2006). As researchers we conceptualise these constructs within a critical policy perspective and note that trauma is a ‘troublesome term’ having ‘accrued powerful discursive understandings’ (Marlowe and Adamson, 2011, p. 623). The terms we use to classify and navigate our world can have far-reaching consequences. From time to time a new theory, technology or practice emerges that appears to policy makers, politicians and managers to be worthy of attention, and perhaps to hold the key to solving some of the world’s more intractable or wicked problems. Whenever a new policy or practice idea emerges, invariably, older approaches and perspectives are pushed aside as policy actors position themselves on the side of the new and clamour for resources, courses and other initiatives to embrace the innovation. The rise of ‘trauma-informed’ in child and family services appears to be just such an innovation, but it is not without practice contestation (Bath, 2017) as we will explore further in the discussion of our findings.

### ***Regulation of social work in New Zealand***

In 2003 the New Zealand government passed the Social Workers Registration Act which among other mandates required the board (the SWRB) to ‘recognise’ social work programmes for registration purposes. This aspect of regulation was greeted with caution, educators fearing that, in the search for certainty and quick fixes desired by neoliberal governments, employers might increasingly seek to employ graduates willing to ‘simply follow guidelines and apply their assigned piecemeal part of “evidence based” practice’ (van Heugten, 2011, p. 175). It is against this complex political backdrop that social work education in New Zealand became subject to greater scrutiny following a period of reasonable autonomy in curriculum design. Van Heugten asked:

...is SWRB recognition of programmes of education the ‘Trojan horse’ (Webb, 1996, p. 181), via which an emphasis on competency, skills, essentialist ideology, and knowledge for practice in agencies will squeeze critical social science and social scientists out of the social work academy? (van Heugten, 2011, p. 175).

And indeed, more recently the New Zealand regulator has shown more of an appetite for detailed requirements, for example, changing requirements for the qualifications of lecturers and requiring changes to individual universities’ regulations (Beddoe, 2018).

## **The enhancing readiness to practise project**

It is within the climate described above that the authors sought to explore stakeholder perspectives on readiness to practise in New Zealand. Social work education has been under-researched in New Zealand and little was known about perceptions of readiness to practise. Whilst it had been asserted that there is a gap between graduate capabilities and knowledge, and workforce requirements, no research had offered any evidence on which to base necessary changes. It was thus opportune to begin a programme of research to clarify the capabilities of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) and social workers at experienced, advanced and expert levels of practice. This article reports on a qualitative element of phase one of a multi-method, three-year project (website removed for review) which has explored the readiness to practise of New Zealand social workers via development of a taxonomy and curriculum map, surveys and interviews with newly qualified social workers and supervisors/managers, and focus groups with final-year students and social work educators (see also Beddoe *et al.* 2018). For further discussion about the first two components, see Ballantyne *et al.* 2016a, b, c.

The project addresses the following broad research questions:

- What is the content of the current New Zealand social work curriculum?
- How well prepared are NQSWs to enter professional social work practice and how is their learning being supported and enhanced in the workplace?
- What are the professional capabilities, including cultural capabilities, we should expect of NQSWs and of social workers working at experienced, advanced and expert levels of practice?

Focus groups with educators and students formed part of the data collection for phase one of the study. Our research was considerably motivated by the desire to interrogate the critical claims made about social work education, and to explore the perspectives of educators and students on emphases, gaps, and initiatives in specific curriculum areas, in particular deficits in the teaching of trauma and risk assessment. The findings in this article are based on this part of the larger study.

## **Method**

Focus groups conducted with educators and final-year students afforded the researchers a window into the experiences of both senior students as they contemplated their forthcoming practise, and their social work educators. Discussions with these two groups enabled a diversity of participant views to be accessed from 8 of the 14 programmes in the study selected to ensure a varied sample of location and institutional type. It was the aim of this part of the study to access a rich, wide-ranging appreciation of student and educator perceptions about the *delivered curriculum* and its contribution to perceptions of readiness to practise. The focus groups were designed to explore gaps and limitations in social work education programmes, and the two groups' awareness of the contemporary critique of social work education and deficits in curricula.

Focus groups with students explored perceptions of main 'messages' in curriculum, debates in the social work and welfare sectors, programme inclusion of content on risk assessment and trauma, learning in child protection and mental health, and overall readiness to practise social work. Focus groups with educators explored philosophy of teaching, curriculum emphasis, key teaching 'messages', the critique of social work education, coverage of trauma and risk assessment, child protection and mental health and perceptions of their graduates' readiness to practise. A full discussion of the broad findings can be accessed in (Beddoe *et al.*, 2018).

### ***Ethics***

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee for the study. Confidentiality featured strongly in the ethical considerations for the design of the focus group interview recruitment procedures. The researchers approached the head of school or delegate for each of the fourteen participating schools of social work to seek permission to have an email sent out to third- and fourth-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students and final-year qualifying master's students. Potential participants could then communicate directly with a research assistant to signal their interest without their identity being revealed to their programme staff. Each focus group was conducted by a researcher who was not associated with the participants' programme. To maximize anonymity, the interviewer de-identified the transcripts before the files were made available to all researchers. The audio-recorded focus groups were 60–90 minutes in duration.

### ***Participants***

Twenty-seven social work educators and 35 students participated over the period November 2016–February 2017 in 14 groups (seven in each category, with number of participants varying from two to seven). The educators were mainly aged between 40 and 60 and were predominantly Pākehā (white European), with four identifying as Pasifika and two as Māori. Educators ranged from being new academics with one- or two-years' experience, to those with thirty. Whilst the BSW was the main degree taught, nine of the twenty-seven educators also taught on qualifying master's programmes. Participant quotes are labelled by an alphanumeric code. Educator and student codes are not aligned. The neutral pronoun 'they' is used.

### ***Limitations***

This is a small study and the students were predominantly enrolled in BSW degrees, with only two in qualifying master's degrees, possibly due to these students still working on final dissertations or projects at the time of data collection. A larger sample of these students might have allowed for comparisons between the programme types but this was not a focus of the study.

### ***Analysis***

Terry et al., (2017, p.5) note that analysis of qualitative data begins with development of themes which are often 'at least partly determined before full analysis is undertaken', guided by existing theoretical and empirical knowledge and the topics generated by the interview questions. In this study analysis began with an examination of responses to the main questions asked in each group. One researcher coded all the transcripts using NVivo 11™ to develop node reports on these core questions. These were more finely coded by two other team members and the thematic tables produced were checked by all for agreement across the themes. Having determined the significant themes, some concepts were explored in finer detail, including text searches for key repeating terms.

## **Findings**

Student and educator perspectives were found to differ in two distinct ways. Firstly, educators were more emphatic that content *is* taught in the areas of concern highlighted in the critique of social work education. There was general agreement amongst educators that topics

such as risk, trauma, mental health and family violence are generally well taught across the curriculum. There was considerable variation in the placement of such content, with some discussion of diffusion throughout the programme via case studies or problem-based learning, versus required specific content and electives that enable students to choose a field of practice. Students, by contrast, were often quite vague about the inclusion of content. There were several instances of students reminding their fellow participants about courses at first or second year, which they had forgotten.

Three main topics are explored here: responses to the critique of social work education; the emphasis on trauma and risk assessment as areas of contestation; and child protection as a disproportionate government attention. Educators' analyses were generally politically framed; one educator described the pressure to follow a particular line as being forced into 'a neoliberal trap'. Students generally reflected an understanding that their education was generic but were concerned about knowledge for specific fields of practice.

### *Responses to the critique of social work education*

Two main approaches to the critique were apparent in the analysis of the educator data. First, many participants challenged the perception that trauma and risk assessment were not included in the social work curriculum. Educators argued that these aspects were taught not in a narrow way, but rather integrated through both theory and practice courses. This particular defence was visible in the discussion of trauma as shown below. Educator G2, argued that the way a trauma agenda is being used in New Zealand was 'a limiting framework':

So, we know all this research overseas that tells us really clearly about what the mediating factors can be and it's not only from a trauma perspective. So, trauma is the framework that is being used in this country but to me that is a limiting framework. So, in terms of what we teach in our curriculum, in the child protection course, what I'm saying is 'let's critically unpack vulnerability, adversity and risk—let's look at solutions—let's look at other ways of seeing trauma'.

Educator F3 observed that the minister's focus seemed to be on the trauma of abused children and felt this was too narrow:

I'm not downplaying that, but I think also trauma is a whole lot bigger than that as well. We're talking about refugees and refugee trauma and, you know, students that have come from places like Rwanda and have been through hell. (F3)

This approach suggests an integrated and critical approach—infusing concepts such as trauma throughout the curriculum, not just child protection — whilst the second approach identified some agreement that a pragmatic response was needed:

I don't know that we have done a lot of teaching on risk assessment or trauma... We do cover them, but they don't form the majority of what we do by any means. (Educator B1)

At very least this required providing evidence to counter the critique

Trauma ... is an important area, it is an area that people like, and the minister is driving, so I think fair enough we have to respond to that. I'm not sure that I would want to have a course [called] trauma, but I think ... if we were able to give evidence where it is covered [that is] is probably where we want to go. (Educator F2)

Two educator groups, D and C, challenged the critique from an ideological standpoint, demonstrating resistance to a perceived political attempt to control curriculum: 'if the government forces a narrowing of our teaching, then it is a road to nowhere really' (Educator D1). Concern was expressed that social work education might be forced to retreat from social work values. Response to the critique suggests that educators did not separate comments on social work education from the broad social political stance of the government:

Fundamentally, in my opinion, that they are trying to force us down a track of teaching in a way that will model their political paradigms... forcing us into a sort of neoliberal trap, and naturally of course, I think that is short-sighted and will just lead to the erosion of our critical thinking profession. (Educator D1)

Educators' Focus group D was highly critical of what they saw as employer influence, as this sequence reveals:

Educator D1: What do you think they might want to prescribe [D2], what is it you think the government might want to say social work courses ought to teach?

Educator D2: That they ought to teach social work practice according to the [statutory agency] practice tools, and ethos.

I: So you think there is a particular employer agenda?

D2: Very much so, prescribed models and tools for practice and models; rather than saying here's a situation—what factors do you think are impacting? What theories can you apply? What action should be taken?

D2: So, how many times have we heard from ministers saying we should be teaching in a much more formulaic manner, so that practitioners come out ready to go and ready to do what the government wants them to do, that is the sense that I get.

Participant Educator D4 identified the criticism as a risk to social work education, commenting further on the above discussion:

I think my feeling is that as [D1] said before, the critics don't really understand the complexities involved in the social work profession...and I think all they want is to make social work a trade, basically and they don't really want critical practitioners because that is probably not going to be good for them.

So, I think...my criticism about the critique is, there are some efforts to make social work very uniform, and standardised, and the government...don't really want to have much diversity in terms of education and practice. So, I think that that is dangerous.

Educators' focus group C participants, however, interpreted the critique as evidence of a successful education, in that graduates were not conforming to the political agenda.

Educator C2: ...it depends who is criticising. I mean honestly if Minister Paula Bennett or Minister Anne Tolley are criticising, I am happy because I don't want my students to be cut to fit into their dreadful 'vulnerable' mould.

So, if they are criticising I am delighted...because they want our students to be ...practitioners who will execute their ideas...which are not in line with social work principles.

Educator C1: If they are criticised for challenging institutional racism, [or] for not buying into neoliberal bullshit I am proud of them.

Students who were aware of the critique held similar views about the attention paid to on risk assessment and trauma but, in general, were focused on how this knowledge might be applied in practice:

I would argue that there's no one else going through a university degree who would have more knowledge [of trauma and risk assessment] than someone who's doing this programme. But in terms of what knowledge and skills you think you need most to become effective...a lot of people can learn to use these tools and not really come out with the skills that you need to become an effective social worker. (Student A2)

By way of contrast, some students from two programmes saw social work as 'all about risk' and were concerned they lacked assessment tools and checklists for practice. In Group K when asked 'to what extent has your programme focused on areas of risk assessment?' The response was:

Student K2: Zero.

Student K 6: Zero.

Student K5: I think that is a very important subject that we haven't covered which is going to hit us all hard.

Student K 6: I was very lucky getting to placement. I was working with teenagers in colleges. There was a lot of self-harm, incredible amount of self-harm. If I had been in a job in that situation without being paired with a social worker [a] very experienced young woman who had dealt with youth work for years.... She showed me great assessment tools just simple little things on a whiteboard, you know, you could do with young people and we've done none of that.

Student L1 was concerned that there was a lack of trauma content in their programme, basing concerns on knowledge gained through previous education, and personal experience:

...from the trauma point of view, I think there can be more. I am hesitant because I am saying this because [trauma] is my area that I specialised in before doing my degree and through fostering kids. Obviously, trauma is a big part of it. So, I don't think there is enough [content on] traumatised children in particular considering many will probably work with children. (Student L1)

Student group I similarly felt that risk assessment training was vital, linking this to professional accountability, and as such there could never be too much attention paid to risk and trauma:

I'd say that risk assessment is essential to social work and...I can't see how social workers get enough risk assessment training and trauma. If that's what we want [to be professional] we have to be accountable. The decisions that we make can affect people for generations, you know. (Student I3)

### *Risk and trauma as contested constructs*

Educators generally saw risk and trauma as core constructs that would be woven throughout curriculum rather than as separate stand-alone courses. Educator J1 commented 'in terms of risk assessment I suppose immediately I just think of forms. What are the forms to fill in? I don't do that in my class'. Rather than a focus on tools, risk and trauma were interpreted in case scenarios integrated with theories and decision-making skills. Conversations in class were more encompassing of different ways of applying critical thinking and, often including concepts from a Māori world view:

I suppose I see risk assessment as being able to identify where the vulnerable areas are and where safety is compromised because of that...also in terms of indigenous models [of] wellbeing. What does wellbeing mean, you know, looking through those eyes the

body and the spirit...what would ill health look like from a wairua [spiritual] perspective? (Educator J1)

Educators were often concerned that education would be led down a reductionist path, teaching narrow frameworks that were organisationally driven rather than grounded in professional knowledge and skills. Educator G2 argued, 'So trauma is the framework that is being used in this country but to me that is a limiting framework' and in child protection for example, the approach would start with unpacking meanings of terms such as trauma, risk aversion:

...let's critically unpack [concepts of ] vulnerability, and risk—let's look at solutions—let's look at other ways of seeing trauma and then let's bring people in from the field, so I'll have people come in from the police, the integrated service response team, the children's team, so that people get a sense of what's happening right now. (Educator G2)

Students in Group A were a little more cynical than those quoted earlier: having tools about risk and trauma were important, but these were seen as adjuncts to having sorted out how to manage one's own worldview, a view crystallised in this comment:

...you know, you can spout risk assessment, you can spout trauma till the cows come home but if you haven't got that basic understanding of how your world view affects the way you see things and the way you practise then actually you're incompetent... you can be a performing seal but you know, the *way* you practise is fundamental. (Student A1)

### *Child protection as a focus*

Educators held mixed views about the prominence of child protection social work in the critique of social work education, demonstrating a mix of pragmatism and resistance.

Resistance to specialisation was a fairly firm stance:

...it is still a generic qualification, you know, our students don't actually come out being specialists, they are still beginning practitioners and, whatever field they are going into they will still need more development within those fields of practice. (Educator I1)

Educator A5 was clear that students' expectations were often tied to an expectation that child protection was what they would be entering:

My sense is that our students default to thinking that social work is working for [statutory child protection agency]. So it is constantly part of our classes because that is what they think they are here to do.

Educator D3 felt there is pressure to teach as much as possible around child protection: ‘I guess that is partly the government, and the fact that a lot of our students end up in child protection placements and yeah...it’s quite a major part of the work here.’ Whilst this was accepted as probably appropriate, given the main employment for the programme was the child protection service, D3 noted, ‘but it does feel sometimes like there is no room [for anything else] and therefore we are missing out on other fields of practice...’.

Mental health was an area where there might be neglect related to a domination of the needs of the child protection sector. Several students felt that some areas were insufficiently addressed because of the focus on child protection and family violence, for example:

Unfortunately for me I think that the balance of scales has been like that [indicates with hands a scale with one hand much higher than the other] and it needs to become a bit more [balanced] in terms of learning about refugees, mental health. (Student K1)

A more holistic way of addressing risk and trauma might focus on loss and grief: ‘that winds its way through all of social work and I guess the understanding of trauma is also an understanding of responses to actions of loss and grief’ (Educator H3). But again, there was a feeling of pressure to deliver curriculum that would develop practice-ready graduates, with less emphasis on specific agency-oriented training when employed and some anxiety that trauma and risk tools should be made more visible in curricula. The District Health Boards (DHBs) want graduates ‘to be *this* DHB ready and that is what they mean—they have got to be able to do mental status assessments, they want them understanding diagnosis, side effects...[but] what about the social construction of mental health and all that?’ (Educator C1).

## **Discussion**

These findings illustrate the impact of the critical climate discussed in the introduction. Whilst risk is still a pervasive theme in social work; trauma is a new hot topic and a focus picked up by students, some of whom experienced anxiety about whether they have received sufficient content on these topics. Educators were more circumspect than students, locating the focus on trauma in the domination of a risk-averse child protection imperative in the public eye and the political discourse about social work in general. Our participants’

reticence may have reflected the timing of the focus groups—it was the end of our academic year and most spoke of their exhaustion — as whilst they were critical, they did not advance strategies of resistance, just that we should resist. The resulting analysis is ours, based on our interpretation of educator and student concerns and our critical reading of the policy processes sitting behind this period of social work education in New Zealand.

Educators were generally keen to resist the prescription of content, especially the application of checklists believed by policy makers to reduce harm. Risk assessment for example, was described by educators as far more complex than training social workers to use tools. Stanley’s research, conducted in New Zealand, highlighted the dangers inherent in reliance on simplified tools and checklists:

Social workers tended to treat risk assessments as objective reality rather than as social constructs, and this presumed reality was used as the starting point for work with families. The reification of risk meant that its assessment became a fixed reality in the lives of parents and caregivers. (Stanley, 2013, p. 79)

And whilst what Featherstone *et al.* dubbed ‘the toxic embrace of risk aversion, audit and responsabilisation’ (2016, p. 12) has been challenged in social work, the profession’s contribution is still often framed as risk work, with qualifying education meant to support and emphasise risk management, rather than encouraging students to be critical thinkers. Many educators in our focus groups resisted this framing and also favoured infusion of concepts such as risk and trauma within broad approaches to practice.

Trauma was perceived by some as the new buzzword in policy, thus identifying it as a troublesome concept at the expense of structural explanations and approaches. In support of this argument it is noted that in the final report of the review of the statutory children’s service there are 92 mentions of trauma and only five of poverty (Ministry of Social Development (2015*b*)). The emphasis of future focus is laid out as:

It is worth noting that many of the difficulties displayed by vulnerable children can be viewed as attempts to cope with overwhelming, traumatic events. These children must receive highest quality therapeutic intervention so they can begin to recover from these experiences. There are well established, effective treatment and intervention options available to promote recovery from trauma, and it is now time to systemically introduce such trauma-informed approaches. (Ministry of Social Development, 2015*b*)

The educators' critique and the students' anxiety about whether they knew enough confirm earlier questioning of the prominence of trauma in the literature. In a sympathetic, but critical, analysis of the meteoric rise of trauma in human services discourse, Bath (2017) locates trauma-informed practice within the historical journey of social work favouring particular approaches and these ebbing and flowing over time. The perceptions of trauma as possibly a fashion or 'a flavour of the month' phenomenon in social work is explored by Bath:

I recently came across a 2007 survey of theoretical approaches used by professional staff from a large child and family welfare agency. Solution-Focussed Therapy was in the list as was Attachment Theory, Reality Therapy, Narrative Therapy, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Strength-Based approaches, Choice Theory and a few others—but no mention of trauma. Today, there are numerous conferences with trauma as their theme, trauma inspired institutes, books, journal articles, regular tours by the stars of the burgeoning research and clinical literature, and everyone seeks to be 'trauma-informed'. (Bath, 2017, p. 2)

Bath (2017) highlights several issues with the current preoccupation with trauma, aligned with the perceptions of many of our participants. Firstly, trauma-focussed services do not address the needs of all children and young people, and practitioners must have knowledge of a range of approaches to meet the different needs of children and young people with a range of developmental issues. Secondly, in spite of its popularity, trauma is an ambiguous term defined differently by different authors. Without a consensus on an operational definition of trauma we risk talking at cross-purposes. Thirdly, not all adversities are traumas, and there is a tendency by some authors to use trauma to unhelpfully conflate a range of different phenomena from acute abuse to chronic neglect and to normal grief and loss responses to life, events as noted above by one participant. Fourthly, an overemphasis on trauma carries with it the risk of labelling and stigmatising so-called traumatised children. This latter point has long been recognised in refugee studies and perhaps more easily identified by researchers listening to adult refugee accounts of the ways in which Western aid agencies use the term trauma to define them (Lamott, 2005). Finally, Bath (2017) also notes that, whilst there is sound evidence for the deleterious impact of trauma, evidence for efficacy of trauma-informed interventions is not nearly so developed, asserting that 'clinical practice relating to the remediation of the impacts of trauma is currently informed by research findings that vary

greatly in their quality and rigour and by clinical propositions that range from soundly evidence-based to speculative' (Bath, 2017, p. 7).

What emerges from our analysis is a perspective that challenges the current narrow emphasis on trauma, particularly in the educators' analysis of the critique. The trouble with trauma is not that it is an unimportant aspect of social work with children and families, but that it has become the predominant lens through which to view the problems of children and families and a core organising principle for the delivery of many services including, in New Zealand, the statutory agency for child protection. Our educator participants note that trauma is an important aspect of social work, but it is just one aspect of the manifold, complex, multi-dimensional problems of people in situations. An overemphasis on one idea or framework, risks diminishing and distorting the repertoire of practitioners, and furthermore, needs discussion with users of services. Whilst students expressed rather mixed views, those who felt there had been insufficient emphasis still understood the imperative as to some extent politically activated.

Whilst evidence can be weighed and contested in the academic domain in which it is produced, when it enters the political sphere a different set of rules apply. Despite some attempts to re-characterise it as such, the policy-making process is not a technical, rational process but is deeply political and at every stage is inescapably influenced by a wide range of competing actors, interest groups, power dynamics and widely divergent values (Newman, 2017). That the notion 'trauma informed' has seeped into the social work education sector is apparent in our findings. None of this means that evidence is unimportant for the policy-making process, just that it becomes something other than evidence in the policy-making context and can become used, or misused, for particular political ends.

## **Conclusions**

Resistance to the incursion of narrow political interests is recommended in the light of these findings. If social work is to proceed to improve and build stakeholder confidence then it is important to resist external efforts to add to unwieldy curriculum influenced by short-term political anxieties and a view of education that is informational rather than social (Parton, 2006). Taylor (2015) and Parton (2006) have argued that the view of knowledge as informational with outcomes that privilege (imagined) predictability rather than that one

which builds trust and discretion, exacerbates the risk of undermining professional confidence. Given the persuasive argument that ‘...rhetoric can imply that choices are entirely technical but nothing could be further from reality in democratic policy making’ (Stoker and Evans, 2016, p. 21), it behoves us as social work academics to retain in our curriculum room for multiple explanations of social problems, service user perspectives and collaborative approaches. ‘Fixing’ social problems requires shining an enduring critical lens on the relationships between knowledge, politics and policy. The focus on ‘trauma-informed’ practice in the prevailing critique of social work education and our participants’ responses, both pragmatic and critical suggests that we should not acquiesce to policy fashions.

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