A Word Salad :
Enterprise based competencies in child protection

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This paper reviews the Skills Enhancement Project for social welfare workers in child protection. It argues that both the description and conceptualisation of competencies is flawed. These enterprise competencies use a language that suggests expertise and control in human relationships that is antithetical to good practice. The push for incorporation of these competencies into the higher education curriculum is also problematic because of their messages about worker client relationships; the failure to consider the moral and ethical basis of practice and the assumption that professional expertise is developed solely through a technical approach.

In recent years, industry and government have been demanding a skilled work force responsive to the needs of industry. There have been enormous changes to education, training, industrial and employment policy. One common theme is the need to specify and develop workers skills and competencies. In illustration, the Finn and Mayer Reports both addressed core competencies required at the post compulsory school level (Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee 1991; Mayer 1992).

The National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition has promoted development of competency standards for professions and a number of professions have begun working on their professional competencies (Gonczi, Hager, Oliver 1990). These include nursing, social work and social welfare, and psychology. Competencies are the focal point of the new system of Vocational Education and Training, (VET) NTB 1992. VET has a number of goals including the specification of national competency standards; course development that includes competencies as part of the curriculum; greater articulation between levels of vocational training; accreditation of training courses including those provided by the private sector; and the recognition of prior learning. Industry Training Councils are also documenting and comparing competencies of workers

in particular industry sectors so that national competency standards can be developed for that industry. Competencies are also being developed internationally to facilitate the reform of education and training systems and the flow of people across national borders through the recognition of their skills. Similarly, many large government departments are engaged in development of enterprise competencies.

Arguments for and against competency standards.

It is not possible to critique enterprise competencies without first providing a summary of the arguments for and against competency based standards. The development of competencies stems from social and economic imperatives. Australia needs to compete with other industrialised countries to ensure that economic growth is maintained. To achieve this, it needs to raise educational standards to develop a skilled work force. The competency movement provides an illustration of the links between education and the economic competitiveness of Australia.

The protagonists argue that the public are demanding greater accountability in the education and training system and want better educational outcomes. Students, professionals and workers all have a right to know the exact skills and competencies they should, and do, possess. This knowledge assists in the learning and assessment process and thus the effectiveness of education.

Competency standards also signal to the public what people must be able to do to successfully practise as workers and professionals, (Gonczi et al 1990). Competencies are supported because of: the expected improvements in labour market efficiency; young people being better prepared for initial employment; and the existance of more flexible pathways between education, employment and training systems. A number of people, (Jessop 1991, Gonczi 1992) argue that competency standards endorse equity principles by providing a system to help those people with special skills to receive formal recognition.

Jamrozik (1992) has argued against competency development on the grounds that it endorses principles of technical rationality and subjugates the welfare related professionals to bureaucratic sterility. There are major concerns about the narrow emphasis on technical skills, the atomisation of practice, and the modular approach to learning that results. Concerns are expressed that schools and universities will emphasise vocational education, certification, as well as competency based training, at the expense of broad educational goals and the socialisation function of education, (Bunda and Sanders 1979). In the women's professions, competencies, however defined, have the potential to obscure the working knowledge and practice wisdom associated with the job. Gonczi (1992), in a summary of arguments mounted against competency based standards, asserted

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that, with few exceptions, most of the critiques are concerned with technical questions and not with goals or assumptions of competency based standards. The author's position on competencies is captured by the following statement:

> Like them or not, great leap forward or slow stagger backwards, they have been thrust upon us and there appears little probability of their going away irrespective of the flavour of government. Neither social workers nor the nation have been consulted on their introduction but they are here. Given this situation we would be stupid to do otherwise than use them as an opportunity: an opportunity to better delineate our role, the utility of that role and our unique effectiveness in that role. Failure to use this opportunity may well be professional suicide. If, in this current of managerial rationality and economic darwinism, we cannot demonstrate these things we may have no where to go but to sink into irrelevance.   (Freeland 1992, p 300.)

The argument.

This paper considers enterprise competencies for child protection workers based on the specification of competencies outlined by Community Services Victoria, Skills Enhancement Project, CSV (undated). These competencies are significant because they provide the only Australian illustration of competencies in the area of child protection.

It is argued that both description and conceptualisation of these competencies are problematic. Competencies for child protection workers are being developed in government enterprises where efficiency and productivity are the organisational norms. The competencies described by CSV represent a paradigm of technical practice which ignores the moral, political and ethical aspects of practice. Possible consequences of this approach to child protection are poor quality practice and incompetent practitioners.

Although the CSV model has incorporated a process of client consultation, the components on the Skills Enhancement Project Questionnaires appear to contradict the findings of this consumer research. Assumptions about human nature in the categorisation of CSV competencies and the language used to describe some competencies, both suggest an expertise in

human relationships and control over clients that are antithetical to good practice and compromise the liberty and freedom of individuals.

Incorporation of enterprise competencies into curricula and implementation of competency based assessment are two questions currently being addressed by TAFE and higher education. The education of child protection workers using competencies similar to those provided by CSV is of major concern. Competency based education will, at best, result in a technical practitioner who is unable to respond creatively or intuitively to the complexities or subtleties of practice. The worst outcome may be practitioners who believe they have the technical power, and endorsement of the state, to coerce, control and manage the lives of clients – in other words to become social engineers.

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The bureaucratic context

Enterprise competencies have been introduced at a time when government departments and large agencies have been influenced by managerialism, which involves doing much more with much less, that is: financial efficiency; performance appraisal; total quality management; and enterprise bargaining. All this is complicated by redundancy packages for experienced and practice wise workers, an act akin to sacking all judges and medical specialists on the basis of experience. In some states, declassification of many child protection jobs has occurred, opening them up for competition from a range of occupations. Thus professional expertise and specialised knowledge is discounted. There are real concerns that, in the quest for financial restraint and increased efficiency, practice quality and service quality have been compromised.

Managerialism and bureaucratisation of practice are not unknown in the child protection field. Child abuse became a public issue in the 1970s when inquiries were conducted into the deaths of children and the failure of practice. As these inquiries were conducted by lawyers and bureaucrats, it is not surprising that their recommendations for improvements imposed a legal and administrative orientation rather than a practitioner's orientation. This phenomena is clearly illustrated in most child protection manuals, where it is designed to protect managers not workers or clients.

Howe (1992) has argued that British inquiries shifted the emphasis of practice from rehabilitation of poorly functioning families to the protection of children from dangerous families. The consequence of this change of emphasis is a standardised and sanitised version of child protection, one which is routinised, rational and task oriented. Child protection workers became the investigators and gatherers of evidence, whilst the managers, participants at case conferences and other specialists became the analysts and interpreters of information. It is within this historic context that workers have been asked to specify their specific enterprise competencies. Competent practice is being defined by the novice practitioners and new graduates, not the experts who have taken their redundancy packages nor the practitioners who are now managers; and it is being judged against compliance with the standard procedures, not on any real understanding of quality practice. Enterprise standards so developed, reflect an immature, legalistic and administrative construction of practice.

The Skills Enhancement project in protective services

CSV, through a consensus approach, is developing enterprise competencies for all direct practice workers. This affects 4700 direct practice workers, countless clients and has a flow on effect to the non-government sector through funding arrangements (Paterson 1992). The competencies have been developed through a process of 'finding' best practitioners and best

practices, and interviewing a selection of clients about what constitutes best practice. This enterprise and consensus method of developing competencies is in contrast with pencil and paper building of competencies by educational experts and with the combined worker, industrial, and educational orientation of the professions. The enterprise approach is based on actual practice whilst some other methods of competency development present an ideal view of practice.

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The CSV project has identified over 600 categories of knowledge, skills and personal attributes required of child protection workers. The major categories include:

· Relationship management;
· Case management;
· Protective services (intake and assessment of child abuse);
· Core knowledge requirements;
· Basic skills;
· Organisational skills;
· Values and personal attributes.

Although this glossary will go through further revision before consideration by the National Training Board, the presentation of these lists raises questions about the loose meaning ascribed to the 600 items. CSV have referred to major categories as competencies and sub-divided this list into skills and knowledge. These terms have specific meanings in the development of professional competencies and in the meanings given to skills by the National Training Board, (NTB 1992, Gonczi 1990). As an illustration: *how to advocate* is specified as knowledge

whilst *advocate for clients* is a skill. What then, is the difference between knowledge and skill? Their categorisation raises fundamental questions about common understanding of the meaning of such words as skills, knowledge, values and techniques.

There are major concerns about the conceptualisation of items. Some components of the lists specifically refer to critical dimensions of child protection practice itself, whilst many only consider personal characteristics and personality profiles of workers in the job. The inclusion of personal characteristics is of major concern if workers are to be assessed against those standards and educated to reach those standards.

The lists generated represent a hotch-potch of techniques and gratuitous cliches of variable relevance to the occupational sub culture, counselling platitudes from the ego psychology orientation of the 1950s and 1960s, the micro counselling skills of Egan, and systemic family therapy of the 1980s. Mediation and group work are all included, seasoned with a little empowerment from the radical tradition for good measure. It combines techniques, doctrine, motherhood statements about practice and check lists of attributes for well behaved and compliant practitioners.

The lists are not in any logical order and statements within lists are often contradictory. There is an assumption that one can simultaneously confront clients, deal with aggression, defuse threatening situations and maintain a calm presence with a knowledge of restraint techniques, crisis intervention, and legal aspects of duty of care. In the superman tradition, lycra body suits, capes and telephone boxes may form part of the equipment.

Goldstein reviewing the practice theory of social work, referred to a tendency of social work to borrow words from the social sciences without consideration of the phenomena they express or the implications of actions. He spoke of the magic of words saying:

The variegated mix of fragments of techniques, models, schools, fads, and theories that were appropriated in a wholesale fashion, readily turned the language of the profession into a word

salad – a collection of elegant metaphors unrelated both to the human event they described and to the demands of practice.
(Goldstein, 1990, p36)

In summary, the Skills Enhancement Project does not convey any real understanding of the complexity of practice, of practice dilemmas nor of the moral and political nature of practice. The list is a technological fix which represents the institutionalisation of a particular epistemology of practice. The list not only assumes that there is but one right approach but also specifies the right, and only thing to do in stereotyped situations. It represents what to think not how to think.

Opinions of clients

The extent of consumer involvement in specifying and constructing competencies in human services is a contested issue. Some peak organisations argue that functional job analysis to differentiate competencies is the business of workers alone. Others argue that whilst clients have specific opinions about services received, their opinions about the competencies of workers are of limited utility. Irrespective of these arguments, both common sense and natural justice would require that more than lip service be paid to client advice actively sought. To do otherwise is to tread the line between tokenism and paternalism.

David Howe, from the University of East Anglia, has now completed two substantial consumer studies, (Howe 1990, 1992). He argues, (Howe 1991), that clients speak a common language and have very simple messages for workers. Clients want control over the way their experience is perceived and defined, they want a humanistic person centred approach, and want relationships that are explicit, open and egalitarian. In other words, they oppose a technological construction of practice.

The snippets of consumer opinion published by CSV confirm the themes of previous consumer studies. Sainsbury (1987) warns that opinions of clients should not be subject to overt interpretation by researchers, who can distort client statements to support almost any positions desired by the

researcher. The problematic aspects of CSV consumer data relate to the researcher's apparent transmogrification of client opinion into actual skills and competencies and the expertise and control of clients implied in the description of the competencies. There are several examples from CSV:

Client: *This can be a really dreary place; humour helps.*
Laughing eases the boredom.
The ones with a sense of humour are the easiest to get along with.
Not getting grumpy is important.
(CSV, 1991, p.1)

This is translated in the Competencies document as:
Worker must demonstrate a sense of humour. (CSV, undated, p.65)

Here is another example.

Client: *They must be able to listen to parents and children. One of the biggest frustrations for parents is not being listened to by professionals.* (CSV, 1992)

This is translated into the competency framework as:
Effective listening. (CSV, undated, p.14)

In providing these snippets, neither the researchers questions nor the contextual framework for understanding clients experience are provided. What is the client actually saying when she says that the workers are not listening to her? It could be any of the following:

Workers do not respect me.

Workers are selective in what they hear.

Workers do not understand me.

Workers come to see me with a fixed agency agenda, that is to simply investigate if my child is at risk. Once they find the answer, they do not want to hear that I too was abused as a child, that I have a series of unsatisfactory relationships with men, that I am addicted to alcohol and so on.

The question remains, would staff with highly developed listening skills be able to meet these expressed needs?

The specified competencies frequently suggest expertise and control in the area of human relationships – just what clients do not want. The words

used to describe the actual competencies suggest control, domination, purposeful management of others, and an expression of the covert power of the state in the affairs of individuals. For example, one competency is **relationship management**. In addition to this major competency we find that goals are set, plans established, agreement to plans achieved (from parties other than the client), behaviour managed, motivational techniques used, families strengthened, progress achieved by clients recorded, conflict managed and clients empowered. It assumes that clients can be moulded, behaviour changed and perfected through the intentional action of workers. The safety of children is a justification of this approach. Simply expressed, the ends justify the means.

The CSV competencies institutionalise the expertise of workers and their control over clients; they confirm the state, not the client as master in human affairs; allow workers to determine what client situations actually mean and should mean; permit and encourage workers to ignore the narrative and meaning of events as expressed by clients; permit human detachment; and raise fundamental questions about the freedoms and liberties of individuals.

Education for child protection.

Debates about control over the lives of clients in the area of child protection are not new. This article contains some derogatory comments about the assumptions of child protection practice. This is not a criticism of workers, and not made without some understanding of the dilemmas of the job. The author's concerns are those of an educator whose responsibility is the future education and training of child protection workers and the quality of practice resulting from that education.

Long held assumptions about vocational and professional education are being challenged by government, industry, the professions and consumers. By way of illustration, CSV has a slogan: *competencies equals curriculum*. Government agencies such as CSV are pushing both TAFE and higher education to adopt

specific curriculum requirements based on enterprise competencies and competency based training.

The response of higher education has been predictably hostile. The Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC) is concerned that industry and the professions will dictate what is taught and how it is taught, removing academic judgement and placing education in the hands of yesterday's people. (Wilson,1992a, 1992b).

There is common ground. All parties are concerned with development of skills and competency. Students with professional and vocational competencies do need both skills and competencies to create and maintain quality practice. The unanswered questions are: how are these competencies to be achieved and what are these desirable and specific competencies.

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A major difficulty with the itemised contents of the CSV model is its underlying assumptions, especially the hidden curriculum. Firstly, the 600 items as they currently stand make no sense either individually or collectively. Even when condensed, the assumption remains that professional expertise and competency are developed through teaching those specific skills, if skills they be; that is, through development of technical expertise in child protection. This assumption is reinforced by CSV in the workplace. They have asked workers to list existing skills and those skills missing from their repertoire. On the basis of this analysis, will CSV package a modularised staff development program

to ensure all workers have a complete package of competencies? Is the corollary of this that a worker with 60% of the skills is 60% competent?

Throughout the process of competency development for industry and the professions, little time has been given to consider just how professional and occupational expertise is developed. The technical and competency approach is but one way, and like other approaches is flawed. Students and workers are in danger of defining situations according to their educational and/or professional expertise. These definitions may not match those of their clients. Kennedy (1987) has reviewed ways to develop professional expertise. Professional expertise is also developed through the application of theory and general principles to practice, which like the technical skills approach is prescriptive. Critical analysis is another method for development of professional expertise. Here a discipline paradigm is used as the basis to interpret situations, for example law, or education. Many who enter the field of child protection have a liberal education and are thereby exposed to the paradigms of history, political science, sociology, and psychology. Child protection workers also include a variety of professional groups who have been subjected to a range of professional paradigms, law, medicine, social work, nursing and psychology. The final method for development of professional expertise outlined by Kennedy is the expertise developed from deliberate action. Here the professional school assists students to consider analysis and critical examination of their action and its consequences. With the imminent introduction of competencies, now is the time to reconsider how best to educate workers for professional practice in child protection.

The greater concern in the CSV competencies is the hidden messages about the control and management of clients. When competencies are seen as curriculum, the messages about clients become the hidden (or not so hidden) curriculum in the education of child protection workers. Competencies make clear statements about work practices, about the relationships of workers to clients and by implication

the nature of education in child protection. Education is a powerful method of socialising students for practice. All practitioners urgently need to ask some fundamental questions about education for child protection. How do you want future child protection workers to be educated? Do you want future workers to have an instrumental morality, where means and ends are separate, where good is definable, where techniques are elevated, and where results are the justification for the actions of workers?

The author considers herself to be a pedagogical carer, that is, she cares for and about the education of students, their uniqueness and their circumstances. She cares about the impact of this enterprise competency approach on both students and clients and believes the answer to be as follows:

Helping students to relate means to ends and to bring to their work an attitude of intellectual and moral integrity, and that profound respect and compassion for humanity without which no one has the right to be a (child protection worker, sic).

(Younghusband, in Jones 1984, p 55)

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APOLOGY: In the last issue of Children Australia (v.18 no.1), the author of the article entitled 'Aboriginal children and the UN Convention...' was misspelt - it should have been Jenny Gerrand not Jenny Durrant.