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Second Chances: Youth Justice Co-ordinators’ Perspectives on the Youth Justice Family Group Conference Process

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ABSTRACT

In New Zealand’s system of Youth Justice (YJ) the Family Group Conference (FGC) process plays a pivotal role in addressing the offending behaviour of young people under seventeen. Mandated under the Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act 1989 (the Act), the FGC is a formal meeting in which the persons most affected by a young person’s offending, typically the young person, their family, their victim(s) and associated professionals, collectively decide how the young person should be held accountable. The process is managed by a YJ Co-ordinator, appointed by the Department of Child, Youth and Family (the Department). This dissertation presents the findings of an evaluation of the YJ FGC process from the perspectives of YJ Co-ordinators.

The study aimed to understand the process and the development of practice, to identify factors constituting best practice and current areas of weakness in the process. It comprised of semi-structured interviews with \( n=19 \) YJ Co-ordinators with at least twelve years’ practitioner experience (Project One) and four focus groups \( n=27 \) of Co-ordinators with a range of practice (Project Two). Three major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of data: a) The Act as Anchor – philosophical underpinnings of the FGC process, b) Working with the Act – best practice and current issues in YJ FGC service provision, and c) The Office – organisational factors.

The results indicated the YJ FGC process was effective for the majority of young people, but generally inadequate for recidivist young offenders with complex additional needs. Aspects of best practice included: aligned professional approaches to FGC philosophy and practice, service delivery by trained YJ Co-ordinators and the quality of FGC preparation. Also considered best practice was the inclusion of victims in the process to assist in the development of a strengths-based personalised plan for the young person. With several areas of weakness identified, recommendations for improving the process included: addressing Co-ordinator training and Departmental leadership, reviewing the process for recidivists, improving process information quality, enhancing professional collaboration and addressing Police training in the Act and the FGC. Limitations of the study and directions for future research are discussed.
This dissertation is dedicated to my family, especially Danielle and Thomas
and to the memory of my parents.
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