Practice Approach Evaluation – Focus Groups Report

Introduction

The Practice Approach offers relational, inclusive, and restorative practice that benefits all tamariki and whānau. It is framed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi, supported by a mana enhancing paradigm for practice, and draws from Te Ao Māori principles of oranga. Practice is arranged and delivered through the Practice Framework and a suite of new models, tools, and resources. The Practice Framework particularly helps make sense of and organises practice within the context of statutory child protection and youth justice in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is a practice map – bringing together and explaining the mana enhancing paradigm. It provides a supportive toolkit, including a clear understanding of what underpins practice (core values, principles, and knowledge), and how this informs our understandings and interventions with tamariki and rangatahi, whānau/family (skills and tools, practice models, and being reflexive learners).

The Practice Approach trial began in August 2022 with Practice Approach orientation and onsite training and concluded end of June 2024. Six sites participated: The National Call Centre (NCC), Otara, Panmure and Pumanawa Westgate, Christchurch West and Rangiora. During 2023 an external evaluation was undertaken and reported on (see Evidence Centre). The 2024 evaluation project, reported on here, extends this work, completing the trial site evaluations. A rich data set is now available to draw conclusions and provide recommendations.

The trials included several tools and resources, and through feedback and iterative design decisions were made to stop the trial of a new consult tool (Mirimiri a-korero), the 'States of Oranga' resource, and the Oranga Framed Recording Template. The remaining core group of tools and resources continued and are being advanced in a national roll out (Learning Cycle 3, Kaupapa 2) –

- Organising my Practice resource
- Te Puna Oranga and Oranga Practice Prompts
- The 'frame within a frame' resource
- Tiaki Oranga (revised Safety and Risk Screen)

- Assessment Report.

Methodology

Budget restrictions in 2024 necessitated a move to internal evaluation, to conclude the evaluation project while providing the best analysis available. Two experienced academic researchers led this final phase supported by our Evidence and Insights Team.

Three data sources were available for this final phase of evaluation

- The Evidence and Insights team administered survey to all trial sites (n=41 completed)
- Quality Systems team case file analysis of 4 sites who trialled the new assessment approach (Otara, Panmure, Pumanawa Westgate & Christchurch West)
- A set of focus groups were held in June 2024 with representation from the six trial sites and purposefully sought feedback, experiences and examples from kaimahi and leaders

The focus groups are reported on next.

Focus groups are a qualitative research method that invites a purposeful sample of people to share experiences and examples with each other. Seven groups were held facilitated by one research lead. Each group was supported by a business analyst who took comprehensive thematic notes. Video of each group session and the analyst's notes provided the dataset. Thematic analysis was applied on a paragraph-by-paragraph, idea by idea basis (Connolly, 2003). Time consuming, it was important to triangulate thematic findings with site-based practice leads. Thematic analysis is a foundational qualitative research methodology, and involves identifying, analysing, and ultimately reporting patterns (themes) present within the dataset.

Each focus group was asked to talk about the practice approach in action - did it work? and if so how, and if not, what was their experience? The aim was to generate talk about the practice approach and its constituent parts. Further, we were interested in the conditions and culture of workplaces that either facilitated the approach in action or conversely prohibited in some way. Attendance was good. An open invite to focus groups tends to attract folk who are keen to share their views (Connolly, 2003). This means attendees who will be quite positive and others less so. Middle ground folk are less likely to attend. This limit was balanced through triangulation of the focus groups data with the survey and quality assurance case file analysis.

Findings

We have a motivated and positive staff and leadership group across the trial sites. While we have good news to celebrate and successful products tested and trialled, most groups did not reference the 'practice approach' in clear or confident ways. Mostly people spoke about the tools and resources in trial, and some suggested we need to offer a clearer visual representation of the Practice Approach to explain and then reinforce how things work together.

Five key themes emerged from the data.

The practice framework, tools and resources work as designed

When used as designed, the practice framework, tools and resources work. The Organising my Practice resource and Tiaki Oranga tool are well regarded - feedback was that these tools lead to and encourage relational work. While some resistance was noted initially, for some this was around the use of kupu Māori, social workers and supervisors could see the gains, and this overcame any anxieties or worries about what the tools and resources offered. Kaimahi reported that family and whānau have said they are noticing us working differently, with several illustrations shared in the focus groups. Several examples were shared where the tools and resources guided kaimahi toward the assessment report.

Conversely, when not used as designed the practice approach tends to stray into more open, exploratory, and descriptive work. This was highlighted by one site who used Te Puna Oranga for a variety of purposes, and the risk was noted of description over analysis of cases. Kaimahi said they could understand Te Puna Oranga easily and it quickly became the "go to" resource, in the site mentioned. This was corrected by on site practice leads to offset the risk of description over analysis of case situations.

Across the focus groups people spoke about working in purposeful ways, indeed the phrase 'being on purpose' featured heavily as people recounted how the tools worked and what they offered. Several case examples were offered to illustrate the tools in action. The following case example was shared.

> New baby, young parents, a previous child removed, drugs and violence with multiple police call outs to the home. Extended family demanding of us to remove the child. The social worker and supervisor said that Te Puna Oranga and the 'frame within a frame' resource allowed them to be clear and focused on the level of concern and harm this baby was potentially facing, while effectively understanding the context of family life and situation in a fuller and deeper way. The social worker said that the tools and resources supported them to remain clear on the safety task at hand while working relationally, and through a very close case management focus, she wove in extended family while being very clear with the parents about the levels of harm and risk this new baby potentially faced. Baby remained with parents, and they moved closer to extended family.

Organising my Practice was reported as a helpful resource in the planning and organising of mahi, in preparing for case hui and FGC, transfers and in reviewing and moving stuck or drifting cases. This resource is simple, accessible and kaimahi found the prompts very helpful. Youth Justice supervisors who participated in the feedback said this resource had clear applicability for their mahi. They noted the resource easily accommodated a victim perspective. Supervisors more generally reported the resource highlighted areas where social workers were focussed and areas needing more attention. Further, this opened korero between kaimahi and supervisors in an empowering sense – the social worker is asked to define where their thinking is at and to share this. The supervisor was enabled to be less directive, more relational in overseeing and engaging in case work. Care giving supervisors also regarded this resource as helpful for their mahi.

The Tiaki Oranga tool was also well liked. This was most reported when kaimahi understood the purpose of the tool. Feedback was a much-improved tool for safety focus, however, and for some kaimahi, an impression that this was an 'assessment' emerged, and this meant more time was needed. When supervisors gripped the focus and purpose, the tool was kept to its design intent of immediate and current checking of safety and tiaki. This highlights the investment needed in supervisors and Practice Leaders to understand the purpose and function of the tool, and what quality mahi looks like. One trial site used dedicated supervisor learning sessions to develop them as a roopu to this end. Kaimahi added the clear connection of tiaki oranga to an assessment report. The 'frame in the frame' resource further supported tiaki oranga to be focused, and not slipping or widening to an initial or fuller assessment.

Kaimahi reported advantages in the cumulative offer of the tools and resources, with clear links to the assessment report noted. Many noted the advantages of regular tool use, as this grew the practice. Further, it appears that a slower start for many was the case, and then when the purpose was clearly understood kaimahi then

maximised the tool or resource. Ongoing support with Te Reo meanings was reported as necessary and helpful.

While tools and resources were discussed, practice models were relatively absent save Va'aifetu. This is explained because at the time of the focus groups an in-depth trial of three island approaches within Va'aifetu was occurring in Tamaki sites. Neither Te Toka Tumoana or the Indigenous and Bicultural Supervision were mentioned in the focus groups. This is an important observation and supports the planned learning cycles in 2025 where the models of practice will be in focus.

The shifting of practice from overly descriptive culminating in one Tuituia report will need support and encouraging leadership. We know from trial sites that there is a tendency to fill in tools and resources rather than use these more flexibly. Some kaimahi regarded Tiaki Oranga as an assessment tool, tending to see this as needing a fuller treatment of information and analysis, rather than a temporal consideration of safety. An ongoing issue will be to shift the culture of recording from description and fuller case noting to succinct and purposeful recording that culminates in the assessment report. The multiple use of tools and resources that build and deepen the case understanding is a new concept for many kaimahi and this will need supportive reinforcement.

2) Our practice has shifted

This was attested to by every focus group and found in the quality systems case file reviews. A number of case examples were shared including the case above. Other examples included kaimahi saying cases are less likely to re-present, and they are checking in with their own views, biases and staying more open to feedback and other views. This was tempered by clarity that the social work view and perspective was one that needed confidence.

The investment from learning cycle one in terms of 'Ko wai au' has paid dividends as this was referenced several times in the focus groups. Our people are connecting themselves to their practice (reflexively) and this is leading to a more confident self-aware social work and supervisory delivery. This was particularly noted for new graduate social workers who said their learning and education in social work is closely aligned to the practice approach, best illustrated through the rights based, principled and relational social work. Staff told us that a rights-based approach leads to more purposeful practice, and they shared that some whānau and families are telling us they are noticing us working differently.

Supervisors and leaders noted a more confident and articulate social work group on site and evidenced in consult hui and case notes and assessments where examples of high-risk cases and decisions were explicated through the tools. Leaders referenced a less anxious response to case matters, and connection was made to how the tools and resources support the explication of case analysis and decisions.

Some kaimahi did reference the continuum of assessment (the new assessment approach) using the tools and resources to help build understanding and reach clear views about next steps. This shows promise and indicates where investment will pay dividends.

Youth Justice participation in the focus groups testified to a shifting practice culture. Admitting a late start to involvement and 'not quite seeing themselves' in the practice approach, supervisors and social workers said that when they understood what was on offer and when they engaged with it things really improved in both purpose and clarity of the social work task and offer. Youth justice kaimahi who participated in the focus groups said that they can see a clear framework for their practice and the tools and resources on offer are inclusive for their use.

There is a wider system issue that will need addressing. There is some push back and pressure from police and health colleagues because the way risk and harm are constructed differs from our more proactive working with risk approach. There was some evidence that confident explanations of what we are doing, and how, is helping here, but for many this is a significant pressure that we will need to support. The significant shift from peremptory child removal to working relationally to understand and resolve risk and harm will need ongoing support and leadership. The determining that a child stays or is removed from whānau (through statutory action) requires clarity and explication through the tools and practice resources; these are used to support understandings of each situation, and will help to explicate and explain kaimahi professional reasoning.

3) Analysis is evident in case work

Focus group attendees reported improved decision making. Some noted this is clearer and case transfers are better facilitated because tools and resources (Organising my Practise and Tiaki Oranga most mentioned) feed directly into the assessment report. The ebb and flow metaphor was helpful to remind folk that family life ebbs and flows, that incidents of harm or offending are not the sum of family life, rather need our assessment. Kaimahi linked this to Te Puna Oranga as the beginning for our holistic understanding of the situation. This is leading to a more confident social work practice and supporting social workers to manage the emotional intensity of working this way.

The 'frame within a frame' resource was mentioned in the managing of high-risk matters and this ensured a focus on safety and children while encouraging the holistic understanding we aim for. Kaimahi and leaders easily grasped how this resource works. This offers the analytic device that Te Puna needs – and encourages a move from description to meaning. Kaimahi shared that this also helps them to be child *and* family focussed, not overly identifying with parents or adults (which is a known risk in child protection systems).

When the new assessment report has a corelation with the report of concern (ROC), or youth justice referral, we are addressing the issues, analysing needs and harm, and recommending ways forward. Social work decision making is clearly linked to a stronger analysis because the tools and resources are evidenced in the report helping the reader understand what was used, and what this showed, and therefore what this means for the situation at hand. Supervisors noted that case notes are more purposeful because key documents like the Assessment Report are clear, and more purposeful than Tuituia.

4) Supervisors are closest to practice

Supervisors are critical - making space for social work curiosity while setting clear expectations of the social work role & function so that the social worker is charged with the task of thinking things through, using the tools and resources as designed, and coming back to the supervisor with what they think and what the tools and resources are showing them. This offsets a tendency for some social workers to seek the views of others, whether that be a cultural expert, a supervisor or indeed other supervisors who they seek out to validate their initial hypothesis, view or direction.

Supervisors expressed the need for more time and space for them to understand the offer and workshop together how things work. They were clear that they had 'unlearning and new learning' to do. The investment for supervisors is an important message. This was self-reported and observed by others. When they understood the purpose of the tool or resource, they then could work more effectively with it. Supervisors that created an open and trusting space for curiosity and hypothesising, for attending to the emotional needs and demands of the work, reported benefits for the social worker, their practice and understanding. For some, a shift toward a more narrative style created anxieties and so questions posed by supervisors, for instance "how did you get here?", "how did you reach your view in this matter?", "is there another way of thinking about this case?" encouraged curiosity and were helpful. The introduction of the new supervision model will encourage curiosity and hypothesis exploration.

Some noticed a tendency for social workers to overly seek validation by supervisors and indeed sought out others to support their initial hypothesis and thinking. Developing supervisor confidence to use the tools and resources as interruptions for this validation was illustrated by asking the social worker to spend a bit more time with the Organising my Practise resource – benefits include slowing practice down in real time because the exercise of engaging with Organising my Practice is literally a few minutes, & secondly, highlighting areas and gaps in the planning and thinking for the social worker, who was self-alerted to areas needing more focus. The supervisor could also indicate areas for further thinking and conversation.

The culture created by the supervisor and their team was critical; people reflected that when this was in place it was helpful for learning transfer (see Burke & Hutchins, 2007, and Clarke, 2013). Supervisors having their own sessions of learning and debate supported their growth and assisted them to then lead their teams with the new tools and resources. The work is emotionally intense and supervisors attending to their workers was spoken of and when linked to the resources and tools supported more focused mahi. Overall, this practice supported social workers to do deeper thinking in their mahi and contributed to a more confident social work understanding. One supervisor said she learned "not to be the expert" and that helped her to lead more relationally.

5) Invest in Leaders leading

Leadership stands out as a crucial ingredient in driving a culture of high expectations and giving permission for working through the practice approach. Those leaders that attended more drop ins were from sites that also showed stronger results. This is best illustrated by the NCC attending very frequently, availing themselves of learning and training support from the programme, investing in the ideas and concepts like Oranga Framing and working with reports of concern. There were no adjustments to paperwork or Cyras processes in the NCC, rather leaders reported the investment in learning then supported kaimahi to complete paperwork in ways intended (see Clarke, 2013). KPI's were mentioned as an ongoing pressure, with one leader noting this could limit the offer of a more open oranga framing.

Technology is to some extent a barrier and moves to change Cyras later in the year are welcomed, however technology did not stand out in the focus groups as a significant barrier to good social work or leadership (While not a feature in focus groups, the drop-in sessions and Quality Systems attested to Cyras being a barrier to the practice approach).

The practice leader is a critical position on every site. Clear expectations and permission giving were critical in trial sites; some said they had this given explicitly from above, while others less so or not at all. Reflections from kaimahi and leaders are clear - permission giving from above and from regional teams is necessary for practice to shift. Over optimism is an everyday challenge when we are encouraging relational inclusive ways of working and yet we still need to maintain a clear role and distinction because of our statutory and regulatory mandates – the tools and resources can support and guide us to work with purpose.

Leaders suggested an easy user guide for the Practice Approach would be helpful, a visual resource that explains how the tools and resources fit together and really drive home the new assessment approach being one of building and deepening our understanding, culminating in a written report that is brief, succinct and purposeful. Leaders are aware that culture is everything, and sites that are open, creative and

curious in exploring hypotheses in consults and conversations showed dividends in supporting social workers in the use of the tools and resources.

Recommendations

1. Promoting the core purpose of our work and clearly explaining how the models, tools, and resources work and supporting their use in an everyday way pays dividends.
2. The place and offer of practice models needs to be clearer.
3. A Practice Approach resource for leadership includes an easy guide for Learning Cycle 3.
4. Promote social workers as Kaitiaki of their role and knowledge that includes their contribution to assessing and sorting out child abuse and youth justice issues.
5. Leadership to create dedicated space for supervisors to wananga, share and discuss ideas and learnings around supervising the practice approach and using the models, tools and resources.
6. Based on the previous external evaluations and in light of practice models mostly absent in the focus groups, clarify the relationship and analytic offer for Te Puna Oranga and Te Toka Tumoana.
7. Briefing with our police and health colleagues about the practice approach and supporting regional staff regional leaders to understand the approach.
8. A 'frame within a frame' resource to be developed that supports our use of a more holistic and strengths-based approach to understanding child abuse, risk and harm and youth justice.
9. Clarify joint allocated cases – e.g. which social worker completes the assessment report.
10. Leadership proactively challenging myths – eg "we have no time," and promoting this as BAU good social work.

References

Connolly, M. (2003). Qualitative analysis: A teaching tool for social work research. Qualitative Social Work, 2(1), 103112.

Burke, L., & Hutchins, H. M. (2007). Training transfer: An integrative literature review. Human Resource Development Review, 6, 263296.

Clarke, N., (2013). Transfer of training: the missing link between training and the quality of adult social care. Health & Social Care in the Community 21(1), 1525.

Appendix - Quality Systems case file analysis headlines.

Great practice

"I came across a case in Chch West [in the care standards work] and it used the Oranga-framed report. The report presented a much clearer understanding of the situation for the tamaiti than any of the Tuituia reports I'm seeing, and it also set out really clearly the social worker's thinking, so it was easy to understand why the decisions were made... and it was a tricky situation, but the social worker made sense of it. A Tuituia wouldn't have done that."

"Children's needs and voice clearly heard in assessment and plans despite them both being preverbal. Was good to see efforts made to engage and build understanding with those that know children and can speak on their behalf... the assessment document itself was well articulated and reasoned, good understanding of the concerns and what needs to happen next. The concerns identified were all addressed, considered and responded to."

"The assessment report was, quite frankly, a joy to read. My anecdotal comments to this one were, "better than any Tuituia I've ever seen, and I've seen hundreds if not a thousand". The purpose and scope linked back to the initial concerns. The background had a great analysis of the whānau circumstances. There was a clear analysis about what needed to happen next. The risks were absolutely identified but also held within that wider oranga framing. The findings and outcome section had a reasoned explanations for the family group conference and also linked back to the original concerns as well as the newly understood oranga needs. Overall, it was a great assessment, some excellent work in a short timeframe with a clear and confident decision that a family group conference was needed."

"The assessment templates were well written and the sw used their own culture to identify with the whanau and the use of practice tools was really good."

Reflections from review team

- There are examples of great social work and evidenced reasoning when the products are used
- The implementation rates are low despite messaging and support, it will be critical for successful national rollout to understand what the barriers were, but also what worked well in Christchurch West
- The availability of the Safety and Risk Screen and the Tuituia Report are specific risks to the use of the screen and report
- We have not been able to review how Youth Justice are using these products due to low numbers
- Due to low rates of use of the Oranga Framed Assessment Report, the number of care cases where the report has been used is anticipated to be low and therefore offers no further insights to any useful degree. However, the report seen in regular Quality Systems care standards review work suggests that when the practice resources are used, the report can meet National Care Standards requirements.
- The next step is to engage with sites, how will this be done considering the low uptake through the trial sites?

Appendix – Focus Group Sessions overview

Session Name	Date	Questions asked	Attendees
Open focus group	11 June 2024	Focused on experiences while supporting sites to learn, adjust, embed the Practice Approach into daily site/ BaU practice: What worked well/ didn't? What helped and/or got in the way	Social workers (SCAF, YJ) Supervisors (SCAF, YJ) Practice Leaders Site and NCC - 48 attendees
Leadership, technology and culture drop-in	12 June 2024	What helped you to lead the practice approach in your trial site? What, if anything, was in the way for you to lead?	Practice Leaders Kairaranga a whānau Site and NCC
New Assessment Practice with Supervisors	13 June 2024	What helped the new assessment approach in your trial site? What, if anything, was in the way?	Practice Lead – 1 Supervisor SW - 1 Intervention Supervisor - 1 Supervisor SW YJ – 2; NCC - 3
Trials debrief with site support leads	14 June 2024	What worked well/ didn't? What helped and/or got in the way	Site Support Practice Leads – - 3
Leadership, technology and culture drop-in	18 June 2024	What helped you to lead the practice approach in your trial site? What, if anything, was in the way for you to lead?	Site managers YJ managers
Site based focus group	19 June	What worked well/ didn't? What helped and/or got in the way, Exploration of high risk cases	Whole site

Session Name	Date	Questions asked	Attendees
Trials evaluation engagements at sites with site support leads	Multiple between 3-21 June 2024	Demonstrating the Practice Approach in action Case examples of models tools resources Kaimahi being proud of social work Where understanding/ planning with occurred	Multiple including care giving recruitment leads & YJ