

Professionals' Learning from Casework in Child Protection: The View from Within

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Abstract : Child protection is a complex and sensitive practice. The core responsibility is the care and protection of children and young people who have been subject to or who are at risk from abuse and neglect. The work involves investigating allegations of harm, preparing for and making representations to the legal system, and case planning and management across a continuum of complicated care interventions. Professionals' learning for child protection practice is evident in a range of literature investigating multiple learning processes such as university preparation, student placements, professional supervision, training, and other post-qualifying professional development experiences at work. There is, however, very limited research into how caseworkers learn in and through their daily practice. Little is known, therefore, about how learning at work unfolds for caseworkers, the dimensions in which it can be understood or the ways in which it can be best facilitated and supported. Compounding this, much of the current child protection learning literature reflects an orthodox conception of learning as mentalistic and individualised, in which knowledge is typically understood as abstract theory or as technical skill or competency. This presentation outlines key findings from a PhD research study that explored learning at work for statutory child protection caseworkers from an alternative interpretation of learning using a practice theory approach. Practice theory offers an interpretation of learning as performative and grounded in situated experience. The findings of the study show that casework practice is both a mode and site of learning. The study was ethnographic in design based and followed 17 child protection caseworkers via in-depth interviews, observations and participant reflective journaling. Inductive and abductive analysis was used to organise and interpret the data and expand analysis, leading to themes. Key findings show learning to be a sociomaterial property of doing; the social ontological character of learning; and teleoaffectivity as a feature of learning. The findings contribute to theoretical and practical understandings of learning and practice in child protection, child welfare and the professional learning literature more broadly. The findings have potential to contribute to policy directions at state, territory and national levels to enhance child protection practice and systems.

Keywords : adult learning, workplace learning, child welfare, sociomaterial, practice theory

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