Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Social Work

of

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BSW (University of Victoria, 2004)

“Risky Business: Child Protection in Canada”

School of Social Work

Tuesday, April 7, 2015
10:00AM
David Turpin Building
Room A144

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Jeannine Carriere, School of Social Work, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Robina Thomas, School of Social Work, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Harpell Monty Montgomery, Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Martin Farnham, Department of Economics, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

‘Change,’ the inevitable winds that blow through the fields of child protection every time a child death inquiry takes the media by storm. It is caused by the vicarious sway of a pendulum that bounces back and forth, back and forth leaving social workers hanging, no grasping on the balance of risk. Edgy, anxious and fearful our workers step forward hoping this time they have made the right decision, based on an assessment of risk preordained by our Ministries as, “the one” that ensures safety and thereby saves the lives of children. Risk assessment is ‘risky business’ when we consider that it is based on the individual values, knowledge, experience and personality of thousands of unique social workers throughout the Country. And, combined with the personalities, charisma, charm and manipulative capacities of families we essentially have nothing but a bunch of checklists or ticky boxes. I would argue that the very structure of our organizational capacity to effect change with families in crisis is as senseless as it is useless: We cannot apply a systematized set of procedures, guidelines and solutions to the human condition. People are not mechanical, they are not engines that contain in similar fashion, parts and pieces that can be replaced or even understood. They are unique, they are complex, they contain immeasurable differences in their thinking, doing and believing: They can apply rules, values, and experiences to manipulate, charm, and confuse workers. So, just how do we prescribe a methodology to the madness of crisis? How do we ensure that outcomes are based on a thorough, thoughtful and critical analysis of each and every family who comes to the attention of the child protection authorities and ensure safety while protecting the child’s right to remain in the biological family home?

My Mentor, Dr. Andrew Turnell once said, “Child Protection suffers from a crisis of vision,” the reality of this has become evidently more clear to me. But what is also clear is that it is so because we have made it so: We have created complexity within the systems that manage us and have thereby made insignificant the significance of human work. What is needed is a complete restructuring of the systems we work within; the way we work, the way we think and the way we approach our understanding of risk and safety. But considering the depth of practice this would need to reach, the number of workers that would have to change, the belief systems, social systems, bureaucracy and barriers that would have to be overcome, we need to ask, “is this possible?” Can we successfully implement a change of such magnitude in child protection practice today? The purpose of this research is to support organizations, regions and even entire provinces across Canada in their pursuit of change within the child protection field. It is based on the premise that child welfare reforms of the past have ill-addressed the needs of children and families; the deficit based frameworks utilized until recent years have often left families broken and helpless in the struggle to keep their children at home. There is a strength-based framework available to many child protection authorities across the world today, but what will it take to make its implementation successful? Using my experiences both as a social worker and as a consultant/trainer in the implementation of practice, this study will take an in-depth look at the historical context of social work highlighting the need for systemic, organizational and legislative change while identifying a process for successful implementation of the Signs of Safety practice framework by first exposing the indicators of success. Utilizing an autoethnographical methodology grounded in the critical race theory I will provide my personal experiences working within organizations, the successes, the challenges and the barriers to change of this magnitude.