

Understanding Oranga to help us work with harm, risk, and uncertain situations

'Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, he toa takitini'

(My strength is not as an individual, but as a collective)

Te Ao Māori provides a sound, holistic and relational emphasis for our social work mahi. The social work discipline is one where relational and inclusive ways of working have always been promoted. However, in child protection services, the dominance of risk aversion and risk management has limited how this happens. Reforming our social work offer to ensure we are understanding situations more holistically and being relational is an imperative for Oranga Tamariki.

To this end, the Oranga Tamariki Leadership Team supported the design and development of our new practice approach in 2019 - where Te Ao Māori principles and practice ideas inform and contribute to social work practice and leadership (the organisation's core practice discipline). Our statutory duties and responsibilities have not changed, rather we are strengthening the way we work with harm and risk of harm through the frame of oranga. Oranga offers a holistic perspective and is a construct from Te Ao Māori that illuminates the dynamism and interconnectedness of the lived experience and where personal identity and oranga only makes sense when viewed within a wider frame beyond the individual or a presenting event (Durie, 2022). Like life, oranga ebbs and flows, best illustrated when we engage with families at low ebbs or stressful times; consequently, the oranga framing helps us to conceptualise the situation holistically, be analytic, be curious, and stay helpful and hopeful.

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We need to understand risk as a potential state that could occur within the broader frame of *oranga*, so resources and potential are mobilised into plans that help to move the situation forward toward improved states of *oranga*. This practice is characterised as relational, inclusive, and restorative. In other words, working *with* *tamariki*, children, *whānau* or families, professionals, and supports to understand and improve the situation.

Accentuating the powerful and effective use of metaphor, we have selected a *puna* (a spring, pool, or body of water) as a way of conceiving *oranga*. 'Te Puna Oranga', holds six dimensions, *Wairua* (cultural wellbeing), *Ngākau* (emotional wellbeing), *Whānau* (family wellbeing), *Tinana* (physical wellbeing), *Waiora* (environmental wellbeing) *Hinengaro* (intellectual wellbeing). This provides 'a frame within a frame' idea, as we keep harm and risk of harm clearly in sight (a small frame) placed within *Te Puna Oranga* (a wider frame) with its six dimensions to both understand the situation and work collaboratively to help sort things out.

To some degree, all six of the dimensions within *Te Puna Oranga* will be impacted when harm occurs. The metaphor of casting a stone into a *puna*/pool of water demonstrates the ripple effect across the entire *puna*/pool not just in one place or against one dimension. This provides an opportunity for us to look for and strengthen the dimensions of *oranga*, by being potential and goal orientated, and providing healing time and spaces for the *whānau* or families. This is not a soft or vague approach to working with risk or risk of harm, rather a more empathic and sophisticated way of working with risky and harmful situations.

Concerns raised to *Oranga Tamariki* are usually framed by everyday ideas about risk - either a child 'being at risk of harm', or young people 'posing risks' to self, property,

or to others. In an everyday sense, this framing of 'child-at-risk' in need of some form of statutory help and assistance has become the accepted shorthand for complex situations of harm, risk of harm, offending, and risk of reoffending.

Narrow and deficit understandings of risk dominate most child protection systems. The deficit risk paradigm has maintained and promoted a focus on tamariki and children (as 'the client') but inadvertently pits the state and whānau or families in an adversarial relationship where parents can feel blamed and judged. Opening up risk thinking then through a wider frame of oranga and tiaki, ensures a more holistic and contextual orientation manner of working. These constructs bring a richness to practice which encourages practitioners to critically reflect on the practice knowledge that informs their work with clients. A paradigm shift is occurring, one that guides us to work relationally in the resolving of harm, risks and worries about tamariki and children.

This shorthand application of 'at-risk' language is problematic because it narrows what is in focus and promotes a deficit orientation for our work. This is maintained and reinforced by a public view that the state has a duty to resolve and eliminate 'risk' from the lives of children. These expectations are most notable following high profile case tragedies. Shifting from a risk dominated system requires a new set of ideas, a new practice paradigm, that can help us to understand risk and harm through an ecological frame¹ - the frame of oranga.

¹ Ecological theory is fundamentally concerned with the interaction and interdependence of people and their environment. The profession of social work was built upon an acknowledgement that individuals, families, groups, and communities interact with their environments and are shaped by them. People and communities are influenced by their physical, cultural, and social environments in which they live and interact. We are shaped by this and contribute to the shaping of society around us.

Offering an antidote to individualised risk dominance, the social models of mental health and disability are being drawn on by child protection systems to offer new frames for understanding and working with child abuse and neglect (see Featherstone et al, for new framing to understand and work with family and gendered violence). There is a growing body of literature and practice informed research supporting a shift from risk-driven systems to social and ecological models of child protection (Featherstone et al, 2014; 2018) where a more contextual understanding of harm and risk is made, one that is whānau and family and situation focussed, and premised on supporting them and their supports to resolve child abuse and youth justice problems, with our help.

The problem we are trying to overcome is working with risk and harm and uncertain situations, as is our statutory mandate, while opening ways of understanding and effectively responding to each situation. How we understand 'risk' and 'harm' understood within the holistic and ecological context of oranga offers us a more sophisticated way of working with child protection and youth justice matters, and this is strongly connected to international trends where indigenous voices and visions are increasingly shaping the way that social work practice develops (Munford & Sanders, 2010, p64).

This paper explains the problems that emerge when risk is applied narrowly in our child protection and youth justice work. As explained, an 'at risk' frame promotes ideas that children are the sole subject of our focus, in need of our intervention. This can mean whānau or family are out of frame, and not in focus. Such a narrow risk frame can encourage us to see parents, whānau or families as the sources of harm, ultimately resulting in an adversarial experience. The paper explains how we can

work more effectively with harm and risk of harm through a ‘frame within a frame’ idea - harm and risk considered inside the wider frame of oranga.²

Individualised risk ideas run counter to our Te Tiriti o Waitangi / Treaty of Waitangi responsibilities and Te Ao Māori obligations of upholding mana tamaiti, whakapapa and whanaungatanga, embedded in the Oranga Tamariki Act (s5 and s7aa principles). Further, while ‘at risk’ ideas emphasise individual and actual events, best illustrated by medical advice of non-accidental injury, they are limited because they fail to consider and take account of the broader historical, current, and future impacts on oranga and the potential solutions (Wilson and Smith, 2014). Importantly, the holistic oranga framing ensures that all children are seen within the context of their whakapapa, holding potential, aspiring, and staying connected and belonging to whānau or family, places, values, and beliefs.

The Oranga Tamariki Act (s5, 1989) sets out a range of principles to guide us while emphasising the statutory duty to respond to concerns and worries raised about children. Rights may seem in tension when in fact they cooperate to support tamariki and children to thrive and flourish in family life.

All tamariki and children have rights to live free from harm and abuse; at the same time, they hold rights to belong to and be cared for by their whānau or family (TOW, UNcRC). These are not a competing set of rights, and they are important for social workers to understand. There will be times when the taking of a statutory order is needed to keep children safe. This is a legitimate form of action in the pursuit of

²Risk is a nuanced construct, but in everyday use denotes a negative or poor outcome or possibility. The risk of something occurring outside of one’s control, like waitlists in mental health services is also a risk that can adversely affect whānau and family life. Risk, harm, at-risk, possibility of harm controls the narrative whereas oranga opens the narrative to exploring how its dimensions can assist in understanding more holistically and moving towards wellbeing.

oranga. Our work, however, keeps focus on children belonging and maintaining their family connections, while we help to sort things out so children can stay or return home.

This is a more sophisticated approach to working with harm and risk of harm, one where social workers and supervisors will need a range of supports like the Oranga Tamariki Practice Framework to guide them.³ Resolving risk issues may mean the child needs to live elsewhere for a time, but their right to whānau or family life in whanaungatanga and connection terms needs to be a core focus for our social work while we sort things out. The problem for families is that they are too often left out of the professional meetings and discussions where important decisions are made. The voice of 'professionals' tends to dominate, further impacting the negative experiences for whānau or family. A wide range of knowledge is needed in understanding each situation.

In summary, several problems that emerge in child welfare systems are dominated by deficit ideas about risk and the drive for risk elimination:

- Child protection systems are organised and managed around the reporting, locating, and responding to 'risk'; rather than offering a prevention response (Parton, 2018).
- Risk seems easy to understand and a risk averse backdrop promotes this.

³ [Our Practice Approach - Te Puna Mātauranga \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

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- Anxiety in the system and by supervisors to 'not miss' a risky situation pervades and maintains risk aversive practices, best evidenced by pre-emptory removal decisions.
- Public expectations, media, and harsh criticism in times of practice tragedy promotes unrealistic risk elimination expectations (Parton, 2018).
- Individualising 'the child' as 'client' easily pits the state against parents and whānau or families, who are then seen as responsible for the actual or risk of harm.
- The language of risk can be easily weaponised and then employed to pressure vulnerable people living in violent homes ("if you don't leave him, we will take your children") (Stanley, 2013).
- The work is demanding emotionally, and a focus on the 'child at risk' can feel more straightforward to sort out. This is called 'bracketing off' so we focus on bite size chunks of the work.
- Socio-economic ideas of neoliberalism are organising principles for our day to day lives. We are encouraged to think about the self, the individual, rather than the collective. This perpetuates and promotes 'the individual child' as independent from family. This promotes Eurocentricity over Te Ao Māori.
- Ideas about risk provide a shorthand for interagency work, as we all feel we are sharing a common language, and this further perpetuates the child as 'the client' in need of statutory intervention.
- Sorting out what a child needs may feel like easier work than sorting out what whānau or families and communities may need to do the best they can in providing the care and love that children need.

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- Pressures and stressors for whānau or family are simply not attended to not regarded as our work (e.g., poverty, housing precarity) - rather, the focus stays on reporting and responding to risk.

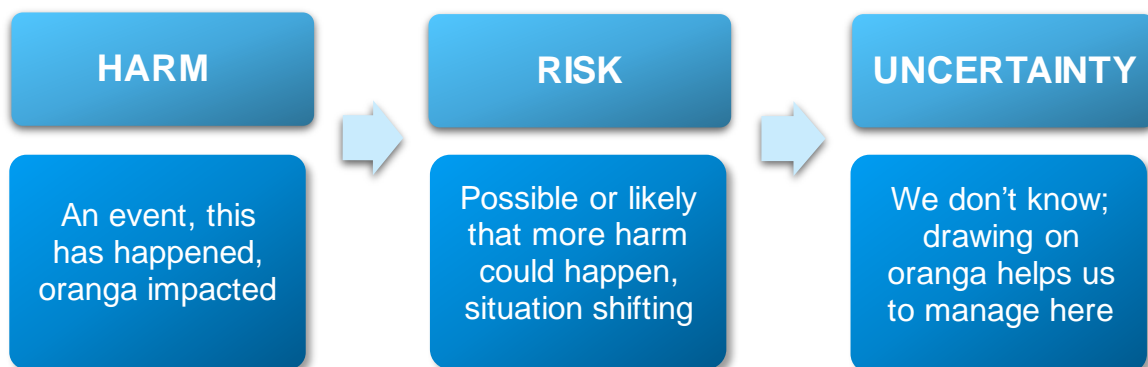
A problem saturated risk-focus tends to encourage adversarial practice and reinforces ideas that our practice is safer when we stay child centric. Parents and the whānau or wider family are easily distrusted, and the work tends to be transactional and driven by ideas of risk management and risk elimination. This is illustrated next.

Ngarita is Māori, 33, and mother of three children. She does not know her whakapapa and has told social workers to “keep out of that”. Along with her siblings, Ngarita was removed from the care of her own whānau when she was very young. She rejects all things Māori. Her partner, Peter, is older, pakeha and his elderly parents and brothers do not know that social workers have been involved for several years because of ongoing family violence, drugs, and poor school attendance for the children. Peter is very aggressive to social workers, often drug affected. Their 18-month-old pēpē ingested methadone and is now very ill and in hospital. Peter and Ngarita say that they do not know how methadone was left on the coffee table nor who it belongs to.

In this scenario, coupled with a long history of Oranga Tamariki involvement, and we can understand how this happens, ‘social workers reach an immediate view that pēpē is at ‘high-risk’, and the home and parental care is neglectful. The other two children get caught up in this risk thinking, and court action to seek a statutory order is directed by the supervisor.’

We can see that this way of thinking is intended to manage the 'risk of harm', but this paradoxically produces new risks and stress through the very swift and peremptory uplifting of pēpē and the other tamariki or children. We are not working *with* the situation, nor involving of the parents and others who are responsible for the care of the tamariki or children. We don't know what is going on in the day-to-day lives of this family. The practice here is narrow in scope and focus. The parents are seen as neglectful and responsible for causing the risk. An empathic relationship is probably not in place, and the views and ideas, stories, and experiences of parents and whānau or families are not included nor invited. Through this peremptory course of action, the state creates more risk and possible harm for the children and more stress for the whānau. It is in the swift managing of risk to control uncertainty that we get into problems. Harm, risk, and uncertainty can be understood as shown next.

The harm risk uncertainty continuum



- **Harm** is an event that **has occurred**, there is clear impact on oranga; our social work purpose then is to understand the situation and guide relational, inclusive, and restorative ways forward (this ensures we deliver on our

legislative and ethical imperatives); this may include seeking of a statutory order.

- **Risk is the possibility** of a harmful situation or event happening, recurring, getting worse or changing in adverse or positive ways. We need to understand, as best we can, the trajectory in each situation. A risky situation is often confused with an uncertain situation.
- **Uncertainty** is something we need to work with, and not try and sort out too quickly. Uncertainty means **we don't know what could happen**, but this invites us to explore to build an understanding and protection with others.
- **Need** must be in focus: e.g., understanding how disability, neurodiversity, and FASD (Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder) needs and or high and complex needs (like parental mental illness) can impact children. Harm can also occur through unmet needs: e.g., parents struggling to provide food and warm clothes because of high rent and petrol costs resulted in the loss of paid work, thus compounding stress.

Harm is the result of an adverse experience or set of experiences created by single or multiple negative events. A combination of harm that has already occurred and the likelihood of those negative events reoccurring produces a risky situation. We are not always sure what could happen, and this uncertainty needs to be worked through. It can feel uncomfortable not to know, and this often leads to hasty and risk averse practises. It can feel safer (for us) to sort out uncertainty by taking what we think is swift corrective action. Paradoxically, premature conclusions and swift decisions results in uncertainty and stress for families (compounding a broader experience of harm).

How the Oranga framing helps us to understand and work with harm and risk of harm

We need to draw on oranga as we work proactively with the risk others see and report to us, and this means we work with some uncertainty while helping to sort things out. This does not mean we avoid actions to ensure children are safe, and that can include the seeking of statutory orders. This means managers and leaders being clear on what kaimahi draw on as they make sense of situations with others and support them to be more comfortable to work with uncertain situations. It does not mean we ignore harm or risk of harm, or leave matters to sort themselves out, rather we work collaboratively *with* whānau or families, professionals, and others to understand the situation and then plan together for what's needed. We have a range of legislative options and remedies to support us as we work to this end.

For example, there will be times when the seeking of a statutory order is required to ensure child safety. We at no time leave things to whānau or just take a child's view. Our understanding of each situation is considered and reasoned. It is through the full range of views, voices, reports, and knowledge available that we understand and then work to support changes as needed.

The oranga framing encourages us to take a wider view of tamariki and children's lives and situations. This is a Te Ao Māori perspective applicable and helpful for all tamariki and children. It invites us to address harm and risk of harm through deeper and wider conversations with tamariki, children, whānau or families and others. The frame guides our conversations so that we focus on what's impinging on oranga, on

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what may need to shift and change to enhance and restore oranga and to build on what's already in place.

Our oranga frame has six dimensions, from Ngākau/emotional and Tinana/physical wellbeing to Whānau or family wellbeing, to Waiora the environment around tamariki, children, whānau or families. Stress and problems in whānau or family life can manifest into situations where harm occurs. Poverty, precarious work, and housing stress, plus the rising costs of living can all be issues that cause family stress.

Paying attention to harm and risk of harm within a broader oranga frame helps us to be clear about what needs to change and encourages empathic and caring support.

Bringing the oranga frame to the case scenario discussed above bears this out.

Ngarita and Peter's 18-month-old pēpē ingested methadone and is now very ill and in hospital. Social workers contact a community support agency who has been visiting the whānau. The social workers are clear that the situation for pēpē and the children needs to change and be safer. They consult with their supervisor and legal for advice on the principles in the act and consider the lowest form of intervention that would ensure safety. The community worker calls Peter, and they agree to meet at the café, downstairs at the hospital. Peter and Ngarita are clearly distraught for pēpē. The community worker opens the hui, asking the whānau if she can lead with a karakia. She then invites the parents to share their feelings about what is going on. The Oranga Tamariki social worker explains her role as one to help support the whānau to ensure pēpē and the children are living in a safer situation. She enquires into who is with the other children, and Ngarita says 'a good friend'. This opens a conversation about who helps, and who is around. The social worker considers waiora (the socio-economic situation for the family) and this helps her to explore

stressors and challenges like being behind in rent and high food costs, and who is around and how they could help. She asks about what sorts of pressures were bearing down on their day to day lives. She found out that a social network is on hand, and the social worker asks if they can all meet, and plan ways forward. She asks the parents to speak to their friends and whānau and then invite the 2 workers around. This happens later that day, and a conversation around Ngarita's childhood where drugs and violence featured, was followed by Peter's story of his own family and their aspirations for their children. Links are made, conversations keep opening around wairua, tīnana of pēpē and whānau hopes. The stress of precarious housing and food costs are part of the kōrero that informs the social work plan. The parents tell the social worker they feel more supported through the kōrero and do not want their pēpē harmed again, but to flourish and for their children to live happy and safe lives. They clearly love their children. With the parents, some wider whānau and friends, who had previously kept away from us, safety and needs planning was achieved later the same day.

The social worker was an advocate for the tamariki and whānau, while maintaining a clear focus on what is needed to ensure pēpē is safer today and next week. She was clear that risks needed mitigating and working collaboratively they could do this. The social worker spoke with hospital staff and other professionals who were working with the whanau. Importantly, the whānau are clear on the role of the Oranga Tamariki social worker to support them to be the best parents and whānau they can be, and that they all share a goal for pēpē and the tamariki living a safer whānau life. The social worker reiterates her statutory role, and they agree the shared goal for oranga to be realised means the children will be better cared for because planning

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around drugs and people who visit means keeping the kids clearly in view. *For example, agreement was reached that on Fridays and Saturdays, pēpē and the children would stay with nana while the parent's used drugs. Nana was called and agreed. Nana was asked what her strategy would be if the parents showed up intoxicated demanding the children back and a plan was then agreed with everyone. A home visit is arranged for the following week where the plan will be reviewed and updated as needed.*

Key differences in working proactively with risk inside the oranga frame in this case study include:

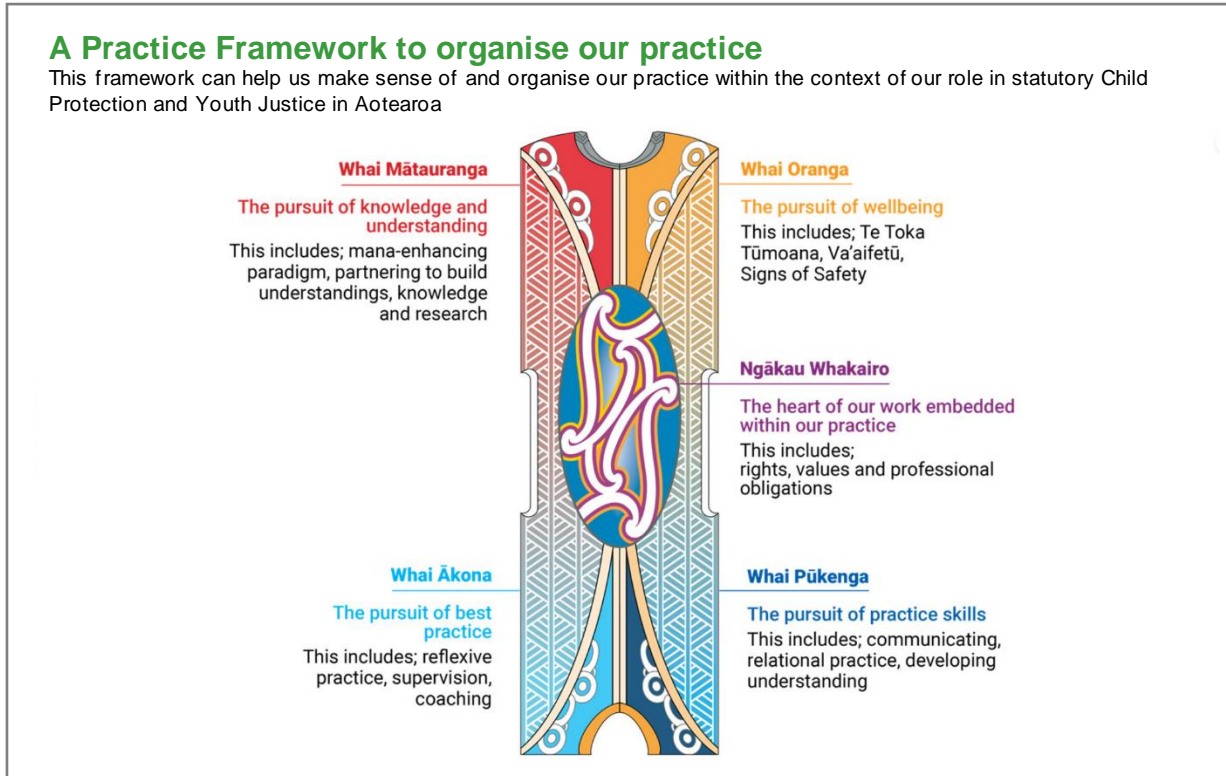
- Being empathetic to the whānau situation while keeping a focus on pēpē's safety.
- Understanding and exploring the significance of history.
- Applying Te Ao Māori principles and tikanga as resources for working with all children; for example, employing ideas of tiaki and manaakitanga.
- A wider frame through which we understand the situation and the impacts of harm, while resisting a blame or culpability starting position.
- The incident is not the sole focus, rather an ecological understanding is co-produced with the whānau.
- Planning to meet whānau, and where, in times of stress, in this case inviting a key person who can help us to build relationships.
- Valuing the whānau stories and views, ideas and hopes for pēpē, tamariki, children and whānau or families.
- Drawing on the knowledge and observations of professionals – in this case health staff.

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- A clear focus on social work ethics, and Te Ao Māori oranga principles, through mobilising whakapapa and whanaungatanga.
- Spending the time to hear from the parents, and be alongside them, feel with them, empathise, and acknowledge how distraught they were.
- Hearing the narratives of the parent's childhood experiences vis-a-vis the actual situation for pēpē.
- Learning about networks of support that are around and welcoming these folk in to help and support.
- Focussing on aspirations for pēpē and children and laying a pathway of how we help whānau to get there in realistic and achievable ways.
- Understanding the present situation more holistically, galvanising options to ensure this does not happen again, while supporting whānau led solutions.

Social work practice in a statutory setting is hard work. How do we decide that pēpē needs to leave their home while another child is safe enough to stay? What models or methods are we drawing on as we work through each situation? How am I using the practice framework to guide me? Whānau and families have rights to know how we reach our practice judgements. By being clear in how we reach these we can collaborate on ways forward in the restoration of whānau or family life. We need supervision and leadership support to work proactively with harmful and risky situations, and support kaimahi to resist peremptory, anxious, or defensive decisions.

The Practice Framework supports us and guides our mahi



The practice framework, with our models and tools are on hand to help us work with the oranga frame, a frame through which we work relationally, in inclusive ways to build safety in ways that help sort out what is needed.

Starting mahi from the Ngākau Whakairo domain, the beating heart of our mahi, our five-domain practice framework guides us to stay the course, encouraging understanding (assessing) that is collaborative, analytic and evidenced, whilst ensuring the fullest range of views, knowledge and voices are included (Whai Mātauranga domain), guiding social workers to be clear on what we are doing and why, with whom, being current in knowledge, research and new models, and importantly, helping social workers articulate how they are guiding change.

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The framework helps social workers to articulate the purpose of their work and, when asked for, provide explanations of how they do it – that is being clear on the methods and approaches in use; the theories of change they draw on and the inclusion of the family's theory of change or practises of change. The opportunity here is a more risk-sophisticated approach to child protection and youth justice mahi. A more confident approach to working with risk and uncertainty.

A significant contribution is in the unmuting of the social work voice by guiding our kaimahi to articulate *how* they have reached their understanding, view, or decision. This is a needed move from description to analysis. And when we are unsure or feeling overloaded, the framework offers clarity and support in next steps.

The practice framework encourages kaimahi, supervisors and leaders to be proactive in their learning and in growing their practice (Whai Ākona domain). This is being reflexive. Reflexivity happens when kaimahi check in with how they, themselves, may be affecting the mahi. What do I bring? Who am I? How do my values shape the practice? Why am I attracted to certain practice models? We need to be aware and sensitive to the power we hold and use in practice. This helps us to work in anti-oppressive ways.

Like using the London tube, or Auckland's Britomart, a practice framework asks us to start from where we are standing. A practice framework offers the same technique of orientating and guiding, offering a map to follow with flexibility around which line to take or stops to make along the way. Questions then emerge early on like 'what is the right thing to do?' 'What does my professional knowledge tell me?' 'What hypothesis is forming as I start my work?' Like changing trains on the subway, or a roadblock on the trip, we may need to change our course in practice, and revise our

hypothesis and draw on different practice approaches and theories to help make sense of the situation, and then collaborate about the changes that may be needed. We will work with differing views and a range of reports. Our job is to sense-make and reach a social work judgment. What theories and knowledge operate in these situations? What will be helpful? For example, 'how might poverty be affecting this family's day-to-day life?' What ethical debates may need clarifying? Am I being empathic or possibly biased? How do I know? In busy practice settings we often revert to patterns and routines, like taking the same tube or train line, unquestionable, every day. Being flexible, like changing trains and buses when things change or a new route is needed, is a key idea promoted by the practice framework.

Oranga framing supports me to sense-make in multi-dimensional terms and build my understanding of the situation. Practice models help to deepen our understanding, ensure I am working from a culturally sound perspective, and logically guide actions needed in the pursuit of an improved situation.

It is important to note – working through the oranga frame to understand and sort out risk and harm is harder work. It is emotionally demanding to work with situations that are less certain or unclear. It will feel easier to 'sort the risk out.' But overly risk-focussed work has disrupted too many whānau and families when working with them was needed. This shift in seeing tamariki, children and young people within the context of whakapapa with oranga as the frame requires analytic and reasoning skills (sharpness of mind) with heart (empathy for humanity) and clear practice models and tools so that we can explain to whānau and families how we have reached our views and judgements as to what is needed. It requires work cultures where emotions and stressors of the work are welcomed in. We are asking social

workers to be courageous and work with situations that will be less certain, and not shy away from situations where tamariki and children need to live away from their parents because things are simply not safe enough. The social work task is to work with situations that are risky and uncertain; to work with them in the pursuit of oranga. The practice framework therefore provides guidance and a supportive function. It keeps us focussed and purposeful.

Social workers have a unique contribution to ensure whakapapa, whanaungatanga, and mana tamaiti responsibilities are upheld and promoted, and the oranga framing provides us with a starting perspective that ensures our focus is inclusive to both the context and situation for tamariki, children, whānau or families. It is not a soft option, and we are not minimising risk or harm. Harm or risk of harm to tamariki and children is in focus with the social work offer being one of partnering to understand and tackle issues and stressors that can manifest into harm, abuse or offending for children and young people.

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