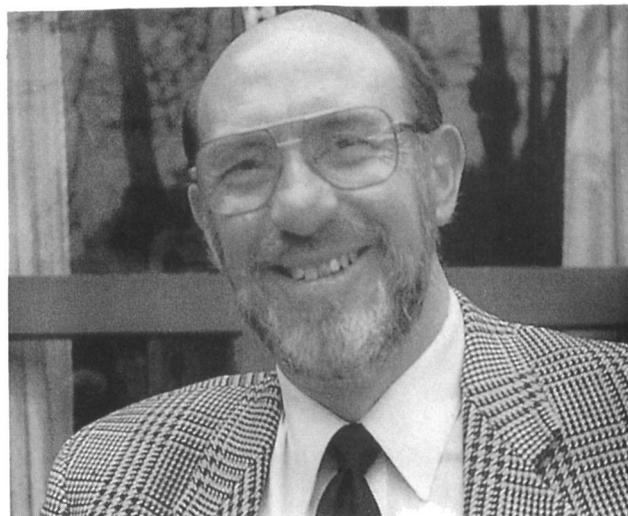


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

As this issue of *Children Australia* reaches you at the end of the year 2000, there is still a sense of standing at the turn of the century and the turn of the millennium – a time perhaps for taking stock. In any event, as a year ends we are surrounded by annual general meetings and annual reports, these being more or less useful for considering where we have been and where we want to get to by this time next year. More than ever we seem to be surrounded, too, by sources of information or potential information and invitations to consult or communicate. But, are we really informed when we make decisions? How do we know what to attend to? What red herrings, distortions of perspective, or hidden agendas get in the way of the kind of vision needed to address preventable death, suffering, displacement, exclusion and ignorance, for there is much evidence that we are also surrounded by too much of these things?

As one contemplates the situation of stakeholders in the systems of care for children and young people, what is available as a guide for action? Typically in our society we look to legislation as enacted social policy formed through the processes of democracy. In Australia we have a remarkable array of legislation for child and family welfare, some at Commonwealth level and substantial Acts in each State and Territory. Rarely have there been attempts to capitalise on this rich resource for comparative study or to share the best and worst of our experience as a guide for legislation and practice. This is not to say that many ideas are not shared through networks and literature searches – they are – within Australia and from overseas; however, accessible, systematic work is relatively recent. The biennial guides to Australian Welfare from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) are a helpful resource, while revealing many gaps in data and variations in counting rules. Ongoing improvement in their work and the work of other national institutes (eg, Family Studies, Criminology) and national strategies in areas such as child abuse, family violence, mental health, alcohol and drug abuse will be welcome. System concerns have often led to inquiries such as the Wood Royal Commission in NSW, reports in Victoria from the Auditor General and Attorney General, the Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions and human rights inquiries. Only

very recently have we seen systematic effort to include the voices of care and service recipients in this field.

One recent development begins to bring together the comparative potential of Australian legislative jurisdictions and the power of recipient input and perspective. It is the first release of CREATE Foundation's Australian Children and Young People in Care REPORT CARD, in this case, Mid Year 2000. Easily accessed for reading or downloading from the web site (www.create.net.au), it provides a national overview of the situation of Australian children and young people in contact with the child protection and care systems, and a ranking of States' and Territories' performances in comparison with each other or against established policy objectives. A set of indicators has been developed to assess safety and well being of people subject to protective intervention. Annual appraisal of a core set is intended, with six monthly exploration of specific additional need areas. Although it is acknowledged that care is needed in interpreting such data, it provides a strong indication of issues requiring more substantial examination and research. In this report, the variations between States' and Territories' reporting rates, orders, placements of different types and expenditures immediately raise questions about variations in the way work is done and variations in what is recorded. In some instances, no information was available at all about important areas of concern. The thirteen indicators chosen include three for safety (resubstantiation of abuse and neglect following a prior concluded investigation, rate of substantiation following a prior outcome of unsubstantiation and record of abuse in care); three for care arrangements (placement with relatives, placement of children under 12 in family-style care, placement of indigenous children with indigenous families); three for well being (two or more years in out-of-home care, placement stability of those in care less than 12 months, placement stability for those in care more than 12 months); four related to indigenous children compared to non-indigenous children (reports of abuse and neglect, substantiation rate, orders and placement in out-of-home care). It is a jolting beginning and shows a startling shortage of information and a preponderance of ratings at a C and D level on an A down to F performance scale. The chosen indicators seriously scratch the surface of a position of concern. Much more development is needed although they

are useful markers for a system lacking much information. There are some small studies which could help a new round of refinement such as the work of Cashmore and Paxman (1996) on leaving care, and the work of the Community Service Commission (2000) which taps the experience of 66 children and young people in foster care. These studies do penetrate the care and post care experience in greater depth. Rightly, though, the Report Card calls for immediate action to expand the range, quality and consistency of data collected by authorities (especially about outcomes and collected and published over time); to develop an Australian research agenda (including the identification of current research); to develop and introduce quality improvement processes; to survey client satisfaction using peer support processes available through CREATE, an organisation of children and young people in care.

Another development is the proposed Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), a long awaited development. Funds have been allocated to develop and carry out an Australian study over nine years. Tenders will be called next year. It will add much to and complement the few other Australian longitudinal efforts which bear on families and children – the Western Australia Child Health Study, the Mater University of Queensland Study of Pregnancy, the Australian Temperament Study (birth cohort now aged 17) which will soon be reported in book form, the Negotiating the Life Course Survey (ANU), the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research) and the Australian Family Panel Survey (AIFS).

For the present, this issue of *Children Australia* contains an array of contributions from some very experienced practitioners and researchers. They include some challenging ideas but together they reinforce the significance of day to day, face to face, developmental, inclusive, empowering work. Single and simple solutions are rare. The work we are involved with carries all the significance, complexity, hard work and attention to detail of having and raising any child, but with amplification of some aspects of the task.

The first article reports on a symposium on permanency planning presented as part of the most recent Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference held in Sydney in July. Sarah Wise introduces the symposium and draws together the product of the contributions from Cas O'Neill, Howard Bath and Judy Cashmore. These contributions have come from lengthy immersion in direct personal and practice experience and are informed as well by available research. These are challenging papers and essential reading for practitioners and policy makers concerned with out-of-home care and adoption. Caring and connectedness are the essence of positive developmental outcomes but the elements and means of achieving it go well beyond the simple provision of a permanent placement. From South Australia, Penny Sih and Rosalyn Shute explore the research and controversies surrounding children left to look after themselves in out-of-school hours. As society increasingly demands parent participation in the paid work force, particularly as children move on through the primary school years, the psychological effects and physical risks emerge as matters of public anxiety

and some debate. 'Self-care' has been chosen as a descriptive term over the emotive 'latchkey' label coined earlier, but again, the issue turns out to be more complex and laced with structural and mediating issues.

It is becoming clearer that while some children will emerge well from the self-care experience others will not. Those less likely to fare well include those from low-income families, those living in less safe neighbourhoods and those with poor relationships with their parents.

For these children at least, out-of-school hours programs remain important components of the spectrum of primary and secondary services. Victor Coull provides an enlivening description of the process and outcome of a self-help group which seems to have made a heap of difference in the lives of some previously alienated and 'stuck' parents. He goes on to relate the observations to theoretical conceptions of justice, exchange, citizenship, social functioning and self determination. Chris Trotter and Rosemary Sheehan report on a Victorian evaluation of the use of family group conferencing in child protection practice. Twenty-eight conferences were observed and some participants were interviewed to explore the degree of actual involvement of the families in decisions made, the appropriateness of case plans developed and the extent to which they were sustained over time. Although limited in scope the study makes a start on spelling out some of the issues needing exploration in this increasingly popular form of practice which has great intuitive appeal.

Book reviews include some exciting local work, a contribution for children and some useful local and overseas material on foster care.

Finally Chris Goddard reports a powerful interview with Alison Taylor, a witness in the Waterhouse Inquiry concerning abuse in care in North Wales. Although initially considering its publication in parts, our final view has been to extend the size of this issue to accommodate the full interview and all the complexities of human behaviour and organisational culture entailed.

Lloyd Owen

REFERENCES

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Community Services Commission (2000) *Voices of Children and Young People in Foster Care*, Sydney: CSC.