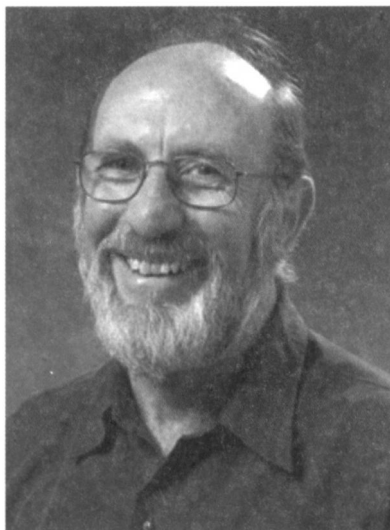


As we write, news reports include the Federal Minister opening National Child Protection Week with the comment that the protection of children is a matter which involves the whole community. I doubt that many would argue with such a notion though what it means in practice can quickly move us into angst and contest, not to mention a fair measure of uncertainty about many things. For those of us struggling to get a grip on the big picture, there is an abiding discomfort about the way power and resources are being gained, distributed and used at global, national and state levels. We are somewhat dominated by the spectres of evil and calamity which make up 'the risk society' which to me seem to run the risk of impacting negatively on any broad sense of community and which seem often to give rise to more and more calls for regulation and defensive behaviour. Two recent books which I have yet to come to grips with appear on the surface at least to typify some of the intellectual challenge in the big picture. They are *Australia's Welfare Wars: The Players, the Politics and the Ideologies* (2003) by Philip Mendes (Sydney: UNSW Press) and *Hard Heads, Soft Hearts: A New Reform Agenda for Australia*, Peter Dawkins and Paul Kelly (Eds) (Crows Nest NSW: Allen and Unwin).

Since the last issue I have been fortunate to meet up with some of our Asian and Pacific neighbours at the APFAM Conference in Malaysia. The theme was 'Facing up to global challenges: Building resilient families and caring communities in a troubled world'. Many issues were discussed, leaving little doubt about the universality of many social problems. Of great moment also was the sense of fellow feeling apparent among the many new acquaintances made across a variety of national and cultural boundaries. Relationships both personal and structural arose as a significant theme for this age while collegial relationships were renewed, established and enjoyed. One Australian paper, by Associate Professor Alison McClelland and Associate Professor David Green, focussed on the role of the State. The paper argues that:

Profound change is impacting on families, communities and on the nature of society more generally, in such a way that family relationships are being damaged and social cohesion threatened. The forces of globalisation and economic restructuring that are driving these changes are likely to continue for some time and in many respects, they are irreversible. What must change is the way governments have responded. In particular, governments must have a greater sense of managing these changes, and to bear the risks associated with them, rather than devolving them



to families and to communities. Otherwise it is unlikely that families will have the material security required to foster relationships, and that our services and institutions will serve to promote relationships and inclusion, in a sustainable and equitable manner. As argued by Culpitt (1999: 4), the unfair distribution of uncertainty to those most vulnerable to its impacts, will only be changed if governments are prepared to identify the moral cause of justice as more important than the minimising of risk.

Relationships and partnerships are apparent in Australia's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) which was launched in April 2000. There are now

over forty community projects spread through Australia being supported by the Stronger Families fund and backed by a training and support team. Projects involve a mix of direct service, preventive education and training and community building activities. A clearinghouse and learning exchange has been established within the Australian Institute of Family Studies web site (www.aifs.gov.au/sf) and periodic bulletins are being issued. Unfortunately I missed what was reported to be an excellent, action-oriented seminar in July on national indigenous child welfare and development, organised by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). Proceedings were taped and further information can be obtained from SNAICC (tel: 03 9482 9380).

Another significant conference has been the CAFWAA Practice Exchange 'When care is not enough', held in Canberra on 17-19 September. Its aim was to bring together the best available knowledge about therapeutic foster care, residential treatment services and inter-agency partnerships attempting to address the needs of children and young people with complex needs and challenging behaviours. It was an outstanding event, and available papers can be accessed on the website (www.acwa.asn.au/CAFWAA/symposium2003).

Some of the upcoming conferences likely to interest readers include the Third Australian Family and Community Strengths Conference in Newcastle, 30 November - 3 December (familystrengths@pco.com.au), the Ninth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Sydney, 24-27 November (childabuseconference@augment.com.au) and a national conference on Juvenile Justice in Sydney at the beginning of December (www.aic.gov.au).

In the last few weeks I have been lucky also to have had some frank grass roots contact in both the drug and alcohol and youth welfare fields. The first involved gathering up

some service user perspectives in small discussion groups. Among other things, we had an opportunity to reflect on some of the strengths and shortcomings of drug and alcohol treatment services and the attitudes and policies which impinge on them. Many questions flow from the experience but one simply has to ask – why do we miss so many of the brief windows of opportunity to respond constructively to the needs of people with addiction problems? Marginalisation, criminalisation and exclusion often seem to do more harm than good. The second has involved taking on some family work concerning adolescents at risk of child protection notification or renotification. A great deal of very good work is being done, but again one has to question the very evident rationing one encounters at many important points in the service continuum. Many families are battling challenging odds, many schools are well short of optimum functioning, not to mention some of the broader contributions they could be making to social capital and safer passages for children and young people (Dryfoos 1998). As we also found in some recent work in the disability field, very tight targeting and constrained or delayed resourcing leads to much effort being expended on finding ways to refuse service (Owen et al 2002).

Contributors to this issue take us into some very topical issues as well as some territory where Australian research has been sorely needed. Clare Tilbury works within the thoroughly modern idiom of performance measurement to explore Australian policy implications flowing from contemporary understanding of rates of notification, substantiation and resubstantiation in Australian child protection jurisdictions. She thoughtfully challenges the 'impulse to risk assessment', again pointing up the need for 'more attention ... at multiple points along the child protection process, to actually helping families who have serious difficulties in caring for children'. A renewed commitment to family support is warranted. Jenn McIntosh, in her article about the inside journey through care, uses a phenomenological approach to study issues of attachment and its loss in fostered children. The children in her study paint a powerful picture of journeys punctuated by multiple placements and multiple losses:

For carers, the journey toward attachment is like piecing together a broken eggshell.

Lynette Tadros picks up an area hitherto poorly researched in Australia – the perspectives, roles and concerns of the other children in foster caring households. Caring for children who care acknowledges the importance of the natural and adopted children of foster parents who contribute and suffer as part of the caring team. A number of very significant practice issues are identified. Lynda Campbell and Margaret Kertesz share a study of boys aged 9-12 using the services of Anglicare Victoria. Carers and teachers will attest to the challenges posed by this group and their exuberance and movement toward the big transitional issues of early adolescence. It is clearly a time for strong, sensitive and supportive services and it is not a time for just waiting. Elizabeth Reimer picks up a theme which has had much more acceptance overseas than in Australia, notwithstanding the notable efforts of CREATE and others such as the NSW Community Services Commission to give children in the care system a voice. She constructively explores many of the issues and metaphors which have appeared in recent years around the participation of children in decision making. The deliberate approach of UnitingCare Burnside in NSW to move ahead with the expression of the rights encapsulated in article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC) are to be applauded.

Book reviews by Chris Goddard and Trish McNamara introduce us to publications which take us into some of the deeper emotional territory which many have to traverse or negotiate in their journey through life.

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