

Editorial

Jennifer Lehmann

Children Australia has a strong tradition in focussing on issues relevant to practice and this edition focuses our gaze on a number of specific fields of practice in the child, youth and family field. Each article provides us with perspectives that reminded me of the wide range of expertise we need to draw upon to work successfully in the complex worlds of our clients. This edition features both articles and a practice-based paper that raise specific challenges not only in terms of our daily work, but also in terms of how we define ourselves as professionals.

Frank Ainsworth focuses on parental drug use and its impact in child welfare. As he comments, the gravity of this issue is well documented in a number of reports from government and in annual reports from relevant state and territory departments. Yet attention to this issue is limited in spite of the fact that parental drug abuse is a critical issue for child protection services. The paper suggests that parental drug use is almost certainly responsible for the rise in the number of children, especially young children, entering out-of-home care; and that it creates issues in relation to family reunification. Frank's article is followed by another that takes this issue further, addressing the concerns of staff working with parents who use drugs.

The article developed by Erla Hallgrimsdottir, Karen Healy and Henrietta Foulds describes a small, qualitative study undertaken with staff who work with parents who are substance users/abusers and the implications of this behaviour for workers. Not only are the risks accentuated for the children of these parents, but also the risks to workers are heightened due to the unpredictability of parents' behaviours when using substances. Interestingly, while there is much anecdotal evidence and knowledge about the difficulties working with substance using parents, there has been very little research into the impacts on staff working with these families. This study begins the process of redressing the absence of investigations and research-based literature in this area, recognising the perspectives of workers who are constantly walking on 'unstable ground' as they carry out their work.

Kerry Brydon's article reviews the permanent care literature and the concepts of permanence for children in relation to contemporary legal structures and practice. The issues of timely decision making for children and the rights of parents are contrasted in the discussion. Kerry makes it clear that we have not yet achieved optimum outcomes for children under current legal and practice arrangements. Giving parents an



opportunity to rehabilitate themselves from drug use or other behaviours that jeopardise the well being of their children is far more complex than many people appreciate, particularly when children have needs that 'can't wait' for their parents to demonstrate the rehabilitation required by child protection services.

The practice-focused paper written by Suzanne Jenkins provides a detailed description of the Parkerville Children's Home approach to working with traumatised children. This is a timely contribution as there is considerable concern in the field about how to work with children and young people who exhibit challenging behaviours and for

whom foster care is often unsuccessful. There will no doubt be many people interested in the outline of the therapeutic approach currently being used by the Parkerville staff. In addition, this article reminds us of the need for cooperation and consolidation in our approach to children and young people by all those engaged in their care and development — an issue that is sometimes difficult to overcome, but certainly underpins the best care programmes in Australia and overseas.

In this edition we have included a new section titled 'Where the Action is ...' that brings to our attention current practice issues. The focus is on developments and concerns in the field of child, youth and family services with services for sexually abusing young people the topic under consideration on this occasion. Liz March and her colleagues voice their disquiet about the very limited access to specialist services for youth who sexually abuse. What services are available are based in metropolitan Melbourne which further disadvantages regional and rural families. For these young people the issues of placement, rehabilitation and reunification with families are all jeopardised with research suggesting they spend years in often unstable out-of-home care with the likely outcome of continued offending into adulthood.

And finally we have two books reviewed in this issue, both of which have been prepared by Dr Cas O'Neill, Research Fellow, School of Social Work, University of Melbourne. Both books are on the topic of foster care and were published this year. Cas was clearly inspired by the first of these which was written by a carer in UK. The second book, also from the UK, is equally interesting, being about a longitudinal study of children in foster care. Both are important contributions to this area of practice.

Reading the material submitted to this edition of the journal I was struck by the broad range of knowledge and expertise

that is demonstrated by professional staff in the field. However, at the same time this poses challenges to our helping professions. While the making and unmaking of professions is not an issue we address on an everyday basis, recent decades have presented us with a number of dilemmas — the definition of our disciplines, multi-skilling and specialisation to name a few. As Fournier (2000, p 83) has commented:

Seeing professional knowledge and the constitution of its field as performative and malleable ... suggests the possibility for the professions to reconstitute their field and knowledge in line with the version(s) of reality popularised by recent discourses ...

Fournier is speaking specifically of the market and enterprise discourses, but there are others that will no doubt emerge over time, as they have in previous eras.

There are a range of boundary issues that contribute to the definition of our professions and these include the tenuous nature of our identification with the organisation in which we work and our particular discipline. We might ask ourselves: are we social workers or case managers? what difference does it make to client outcomes if the case manager is a social worker, a nurse, or a psychologist? It seems there is slippage in our identification not only due to challenges to values, ethos and loyalties, but also connected to organisational role issues. In addition, there are the boundaries between work (public) time and private time which have been eroded through practice imperatives such as working from home and flexible working hours.

More recently, boundaries of professional competence are being addressed, particularly in the health sector, in which there are concerns about best practice and evidence-based practice. The focus on 'credialling' is now impacting on the education of professional staff and raises issues about who is to provide the specialist training that some services believe is essential to specific professional roles.

Some professional groups have been quick to recognise the power of specialisation and its companion concept: multi-skilling. To have achieved a thorough grounding in a professional discipline is not enough; for instance there is now pressure to be trained as a social worker *and* a drug and alcohol counsellor, or a social worker *and* a cognitive-behavioural therapist. Ironically, this comes at a time when more tightly defined categories of clients and eligibility for services create 'gaps' in service, which may, in part, have precipitated the calls for development of stronger partnerships, increased networking and focussed case management. And following Tony Blair's concern about social capital and social inclusion in the UK, we are revisiting community development, which is again seen as having the potential to reduce the need for services, particularly those arising from a lack of social supports, social isolation and disadvantage.

There are few things here that are new to us, but there are some factors that we may need to address in the near future. My guess is that, while we continue to work with disadvantaged children and young people, we will also need to turn our attention to aspects of sustainability. Water, air and land are already scarce resources and their ownership is likely to re-emerge as an issue while we struggle to find ways of living in a changed environment. Social work and the helping professions could pursue the route of ever-increasing specialisation across an ever-widening range of areas — with the concomitant costs and elitism this would bring — or ... what other path? Is there some other way? A radical change to the way we think about our discipline, how we teach it, and how we practice it? If Fournier is correct and the constitution of our field is performative and malleable, what does this demand of us now, and in the immediate future?

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REFERENCE

- Fournier, V. (2000) 'Boundary work and the (un)making of the professions,' in *Professionalism, Boundaries and the Workplace*, ed. N. Malin, Routledge, London.