

As the colder months set in and the economic situation bites harder, there are many more families and young people facing tough times here in Australia. The affluence of the last decade was never going to last, of course, but with the predominance of short-term perspectives on so many issues, we are often ill-prepared for the cumulating events of increased unemployment, fewer jobs and higher costs of commodities. Coupled with the impacts of natural disasters and climate change in Australia and the potential for a pandemic of swine flu, it is hard to imagine a more complex and fragile state of affairs. And in spite of the affluence we have had, the wealth has not found its way to our disadvantaged groups in the population—as a nation we did not take the opportunity to seriously redress inequity issues with any breadth or depth.

This is borne out in *Report Card: The Wellbeing of Young Australians* by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY 2008) in which, in the reference to Material Wellbeing, it is stated:

For all of the indicators in this domain, Australia's results are worse than the best international result. Indigenous Australians have a higher rate of reported deprivation than the rate for the total Australian population (p.2).

However, there are individuals who continue to strive to overcome the obstacles presented to Australia's children and young people, and these people give inspiration to us all.

In a recent '7.30 Report' program on ABC television (28.4.2009; <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/>), it was reported that Australian of the Year, Professor Mick Dodson had voiced concerns over the estimated 20,000 children, many of them Indigenous, who are continuing to miss out on schooling. Linked to this report was a segment on Djarragun College at Gordonvale, south of Cairns in Northern Queensland, where there have been remarkable achievements that have resulted in some 600 children attending primary and secondary schooling and about 100 Aboriginal young men attending on AbStudy. Noel Pearson is the patron of this school, taken over by the Anglican Church in 2001. And with the vision of Principal, Jean Illingworth, it seems that a vision has come to fruition. Interestingly, there are a number of young people continuing to attend into their late teens when job opportunities are not immediately available—an echo of what many in the field have been saying in relation to the need for continuing support for young people beyond the age of sixteen or seventeen.

Listening to this story, I pondered again what it is that is brought to bear to achieve such success and such fundamental change of attitude and behaviour. And I think we know some



of what is needed—a depth of commitment to humanistic values and beliefs, determination to stick with the issues, to take risks, to use mistakes as learning opportunities, and genuine engagement with, and inclusion of, others. And I suspect there are other important qualities too—single-mindedness, refusal to be distracted by outside voices, minimal time devoted to unproductive activities and maximum time committed to the hands-on action that underpins real change and achievement of long-term goals.

Our formal institutional arrangements, while endeavouring to support new developments, still seem to struggle to get beyond administrative systems that so often slow things down and direct attention away from the main game. I continue to hear from staff in the field of the time that is committed to managing data collection systems, the time spent in meetings on strategic planning, risk management and quality assurance; with much of this allegedly being to make things look right, rather than to bring about any real changes to the services delivered and improved outcomes for clients. While many would argue that much can be achieved through steady, incremental change, I think I must be impatient to see so much more than the adjustments on the edge of whole systems that no longer work to the direct benefit of disadvantaged individuals.

There will never be a single, perfect way to do the work we do. There are 'better ways', depending on the array of factors impinging on the context and the individuals concerned. We need to avoid over-reaction to errors and make long-term commitments to outcomes that don't get watered down by the fashion of the day. And right now, as we face increased budget restraints and reduced growth in our sector, we need people of vision and energy who are able to ensure that resources are directed from systemic support activities to practical community development and child, youth and family services. It is time for courage and determination, a time to listen to voices offering alternatives, a time to direct resources away from system maintenance to the hands-on work that changes lives. And the papers and book reviews we present in this edition of the Journal each, in some way, point to some of the better ways of practicing.

The opening paper is authored by a group of human service practitioners who have delved into the complexities of mentoring for at-risk youth. Candice Boyd, Evan Kemp, Toula Filiadis, Damon Aisbett and Martin Markus present the first of two papers addressing innovative mentoring through a mountainboarding project with young men who might otherwise have avoided seeking assistance from youth programs. Some unique challenges faced this project which

aimed to meet the needs of a special and previously neglected group of youth – rural Australian adolescent males at risk of mental health problems. This paper presents the background literature and the approach taken in this project, including the findings associated with the setting up and evaluation of the project. The outcomes for the young people involved will be the topic of the second article to be published in our next edition.

Our second paper provides the sort of in-depth information that is needed for informing practice; in this instance in the Children's Court in relation to the seeking of protection orders. Titled 'Parental drug and alcohol use as a contributing factor in applications to the Children's Court for protection orders', Lindsay Leek, Diane Seneque and Kaija Ward have presented the results of studies undertaken by the Western Australian Department for Community Development in 2004 and 2007. These studies explored parental drug and alcohol use as a contributing factor in applications to the Children's Court for protection orders. The results of the 2004 study confirm what has been, to date, anecdotal evidence—that parental drug and alcohol use is a common contributing factor in protection applications. It was also confirmed that drug and alcohol use rarely occurs in isolation, with strong links identified to neglect and domestic violence, as well as other factors, including physical abuse and homelessness/transient lifestyle. This knowledge can be used to underpin the nature of services to children and families in both government and non-government program delivery.

Our third article, by Patricia Hansen and Frank Ainsworth, is a review and discussion of the Wood Report which resulted from the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW that was set up in June 2006 and reported in November 2008. As acknowledged by the authors, the NSW Government published a response to the report in March 2009 titled: 'Keep them safe: A shared approach to child wellbeing'. This was followed by the passing of the Children Legislation Amendment (Wood Inquiry Recommendations) Act 2009, with little debate, by the NSW Parliament in April 2009. This legislation has introduced many of Justice Wood's recommendations and has enacted other changes that were

not included in the Commission of Inquiry report. The authors argue that while many of the amendments are welcome, there is cause for concern about the likely consequences of some of the new provisions. It is legislation like this that guides the policies and, in turn, the programs designed to assist children and their families. This is another point in the continuum of care provision which needs attention if we are to offer 'better ways' of responding with long-term outcomes.

Our final article presents the details of a small, exploratory study undertaken in South Australia as part of a larger qualitative study on the processes and outcomes of identity development for young men in residential care. Ivan Raymond and Karen Heseltine, in their paper 'The nature, role and qualities of the staff-client relationship as seen through the eyes of young men in residential care', report on the perceptions of young men in residential care of their relationships with their youth workers, using attachment theory as an organising framework. Amongst other findings, the authors identify a number of qualities associated with positive staff-client relationships. Policy, program and research implications drawn from the study are briefly discussed.

Finally, we have included three book reviews in this edition, covering diverse topics: the first decade of early intervention through the Newpin program in Australia; the story of the discovery of widespread child sexual abuse on Pitcairn Island; and the documentation of the specific experiences of forty people of varying ages who spent at least part of their childhood in institutional care.

Jennifer Lehmann

## REFERENCE

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (2008) *Report card: The wellbeing of young Australians*, viewed 12/5/09, [www.aracy.org.au](http://www.aracy.org.au) (Publications and resources).

**Children Australia** is a refereed journal – all papers submitted are peer reviewed to assess their suitability for publication. Peer reviewed papers are expected to meet contemporary academic standards. However, at the discretion of the editor, papers which have not been reviewed are published from time to time. Such papers may include: short commentaries on practice issues that are essentially based on observation and experience; reports on program approaches, initiatives or projects that are both short and unreferenced; historical overviews; short papers that respond to a peer reviewed article published in an earlier edition which adds to informed debate or provides an alternative perspective. It is anticipated that no more than one such paper would be included in each issue.

In order to clarify which articles have been reviewed and which have not, we now include a symbol at the end of each article as follows: ■ = peer reviewed article □ = non-reviewed article