book reviews

Disabled children: Challenging social exclusion

Laura Middleton **Blackwell Science, Oxford, 1999, 164 pp.**

It is relatively rare for people with a disability to be asked to talk about their experiences and relationships and the way in which services (or lack of them) impact on their lives. *Disabled children: Challenging social exclusion* is therefore unusual, as the book originated in discussions with disabled students at the University of Central Lancashire, UK, about their childhood experiences. While the book does not exclude the voices of parents and professionals, its core focus is on the needs of young people with disabilities, from their own perspective.

The author, Laura Middleton, states in the Preface that, in writing the book, she is exploring a key question – 'what is the justification for treating disabled children differently?' (p.ix). The themes which emerge from this question, and from the discussions with the young people, cover: community attitudes towards disability; stigma and low self-esteem; the lack of positive role models; personal abuse; institutional abuse; and professional service systems.

The first chapter, which sets the tone of the book, presents the voices of the young people on families, friends, abuse, education, choices, medical interventions and images of disability. This is followed by chapters on:- why and how disadvantage occurs; conceptual frameworks to understand the processes involved in change; and the challenges of, and possibilities for, personal, professional and organisational change. At the end of each chapter is an excellent summary, which leads on to the next chapter.

The book concludes with a chapter entitled 'Disabled children: Excluded citizens', which explores citizenship as it relates to children with disabilities, before moving on to propose clear strategies for change.

Some of the things which stood out for me while I was reading this book were:

- The need to consult children whenever possible about their needs;
- The concern that, in order to receive support, parents may have to present their children as more disabled than they actually are;
- The issue of respite care and how this may reinforce the stigmatisation of the child, as well as feelings of being a burden;
- The concern that children with disabilities in foster care are thought to be more likely than other children to experience abuse of various kinds;
- The need to employ adults with disabilities as staff members and advocates in organisations which provide services to children with disabilities.

Although *Disabled children: Challenging social exclusion* describes the UK context, it has considerable relevance for Australian policy and practice and is recommended reading.

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Taking extra care

Respite, shared and permanent care for children with disabilities

Hedi Argent and Ailie Kerrane **British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, London, 1997, 96 pp.**

This book, which is very different to the one reviewed above, is a practical manual on finding alternative placements for children with disabilities, working with these children and supporting both birth and permanent families before and after placement.

The structure of *Taking extra care* is clear and the text very readable. Chapters are divided into two sections, each of which informs the other. The practice guide, which details the 'how to' with illustrative vignettes, has been written by Hedi Argent. Ailie Kerrane's contribution is largely a diary which records her experience in developing a local authority service for children with disabilities.

One of the strengths of this book is that it challenges practice assumptions and invites professionals to think and plan creatively in collaboration with parents and children.. For example, Hedi Argent writes (p. 24): 'There is an alternative family somewhere for every child – if we haven't found it, we haven't looked hard enough', but also questions: 'But can every child use a family?' and 'Is it always preferable to live in a family, even for a limited period?'

The information in *Taking extra care* on assessing children's needs; publicity; recruiting, preparing and supporting substitute families; residential care; and working with children and their birth families, is presented in excellent short chapters, illustrated by case examples.

Some of the things I particularly liked about this practice guide were:

- The emphasis on supporting birth families to keep their children;
- The presentation of creative shared care arrangements between birth and alternative families;
- The sections which look at what birth parents, children and substitute families 'have a right to expect';
- The fact that residential care is looked at as a possible choice and not dismissed out of hand;
- The list of some of the most frequent conditions which are associated with disability;
- The checklist in Appendix B which reminds social workers of the organisational attributes (including attitudes) necessary for a good service.

While *Taking extra care* is written for professionals in the UK, with sections on legislation and key organisations, this guide is highly relevant to practice in Australia, not only in the area of disability, but also in the areas of foster care, permanent care and adoption.

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Taking children seriously

Proceedings of a national workshop

Edited by Jan Mason and Marie Wilkinson

Childhood & Youth Policy Research Unit,
University of Western Sydney. 385pp.

I have been a supporter of, and contributor to, *Children Australia* for many years for one reason: Australia needs more writing and research on child welfare in Australia. It is one of life's ironies that we are more likely to learn about child welfare initiatives in the UK and the USA than those in Queensland or WA. Another irony is that we continue to listen to experts from the USA even though that country is so full of such awful lessons and contradictions. America is so rich, yet so violent with so many children living in poverty and dying of violence. Surely, Americans should be paying more attention to us.

For these reasons alone, the publication of the proceedings of the *Taking Children Seriously* conference is welcome. Organising a conference is hard enough work and publishing the proceedings is often the straw that breaks the organiser's back. Jan Mason and Marie Wilkinson are to be congratulated for seeing this conference into print.

Before turning to the content of *Taking Children Seriously*, I must declare an interest or four. I attended and contributed to the conference, one of the published papers on 'physical discipline' was written by Bernadette Saunders and me, I acted as one of the panel of international referees, and I attended the launch by Justice Marcus Einfeld. The following review must be read in the light of this declaration.

After the opening address by Chris Sidoti, NSW Human Rights Commissioner, three papers in particular set the scene for the other conference contributions. The first, by Berry Mayall of the University of London, is entitled 'The social condition of UK childhoods: children's understandings and their implications'. As Jan Mason writes in her introduction to the papers, Mayall is a leader in the area described as the 'new sociology of childhood' or 'new childhood studies'. Mayall suggests that a major obstacle to improved childhoods is the view of children as 'incomplete persons', and 'projects for adult attention' (2000:9). Other obstacles include a view of children as lacking sufficient experience and reasoning. Children, according to Mayall, are too often seen as 'morally suspect and unreliable' (2000:10). Furthermore, children are not seen as a priority in social policy terms, with adult perspectives given more weight.

After a brief review of the division of responsibilities between the public and the private, and a comparison of UK and European policies, Mayall moves to the core of her paper. She is undertaking a study of nine to twelve-year-olds in London. The study seeks to explore children's views about, and experiences of, childhood. Mayall briefly summarises the material obtained on mothers and fathers, the social position of childhood, free time, responsibility, negotiation, apprenticeship and moral status.

Mayall concludes by drawing on the Save the Children agenda and its proposals to make children more visible. Jan Mason provides another keynote paper, a contribution that builds on Mayall's paper and that reflects on the policy implications of taking children seriously. The focus of Mason's contribution is that the new childhood studies provide the 'analytical tools' necessary 'to unpack the concepts used by professionals and...the community' (2000:27). Mason suggests that three concepts are central to