

# book reviews

## 'It has to be more than a job': A search for exceptional practice with troubled adolescents

Robin Clark

Policy & Practice Research Unit, Deakin Human Services, Deakin University, 2000.

This rich study should be seen as essential reading for anyone working with or managing programs working with troubled and troublesome adolescents, especially those who at times 'cannot or do not want to be at home, or in alternative forms of out of home care' (p.i). It will also be of interest to students of practice research and the evaluation industry as an example of research which is 'collaborative, iterative and open ended rather than researcher driven, reductive and closed' (p.i). It should also be seen as essential reading for policy makers and those engaged in the political process and government. It distills some of the complexity of subject and connects well to some pertinent broader research.

Commissioned by a group concerned with providing out-of-home care services in Victoria, the focus is on the small proportion of young people who challenge the capacity of the care system through non compliant, risk taking, self harming and/or offending behaviour. The researcher, Robin Clark, brings to the task a wealth of experience in child protection practice and management, in addition to recent related consultancy and research in both New South Wales and Victoria. This reviewer has to acknowledge some small involvement in the study panel.

The researcher describes it as a small, exploratory, descriptive study which seeks to be a study located within practice rather than of practice. It draws on ethnography and Donald Schon's approach to professional development through 'reflection on action' (pp.13-15). Research questions sought guiding principles for practice, how an effective practitioner operationalises these principles, what effective practitioners do, what organisational features relate to their effective performance and what practice knowledge informs them. The study is built on a literature review of the area, including work on risk and resilience. The questions and emerging themes are explored through focus groups and interviews. The report contains considerable verbatim comment from the seven identified by others as exceptional practitioners or people managing exceptional projects.

Things gleaned from the literature included the significance for the young people of a sense of meaning and control, second chances and turning points, the notion of emotional intelligence (the ability to appreciate and manage emotions in ourselves and in our relationships with others). Caring and connectedness within family, school and community emerge as important protective factors. For services, the single most important ingredient for effective work was the capacity of direct care staff to offer caring and connectedness, or to foster caring and connectedness with significant others in the life of the young person. The features of effective case practice enabling this to occur were seen to be: goal directed case practice (which includes holistic assessment of the young person and family and recognition of the iterative nature of assessment and case

planning); recognition of functions of public care which go beyond protection from abuse or neglect (these include Gilligan's (1999) dimensions of maintenance, protection, compensation and preparation (p.29)); evidence based practice; appropriate record keeping; managing behaviour; specialist service responses; therapeutic interventions; and meeting the educational needs of children in out of home care. Attention is drawn to the significance of education and schools as positive and negative forces in the lives of young people in care and at risk. Some useful suggestions for strategies are drawn from the literature.

Findings from group discussions and interviews suggest an emerging consensus in the field about the fundamentals of effective practice. These are listed in addition to some general principles to guide the care system identified by the panel of participants. The latter involve offering programs of intensive support and development to front line staff, especially their capacity to provide unconditional care in an agency context of value for caring and connectedness; a focus on holistic assessment and appropriate inputs for the young person rather than a sole focus on the young person's deficits; and, provision of continuity of care, education and health services through integrated case management (p.42).

In the course of the interviews with those seen as effective practitioners, particular domains were explored and illustrated by examples from practice. Across the range of settings represented, which included child protection, supported accommodation, juvenile justice and education, the domains included a practice approach which empowers, practice which focuses on strengths and adaptive behaviours, the importance of family connectedness, and the provision of unconditional care. Additional exploration looked at the way case practice was helped or hindered by aspects of the service system. Useful insights are offered about the process and orientation of assessment in providing unconditional care. Seeing assessment as a process with a holistic framework and a positive and strengths oriented mind set, rather than a narrowly focussed event, seems to be important. Specific attention is given to educational interventions which have worked, staff skills and the ongoing development of competence, the significance of reflective practice and of coaching and mentoring for staff. Finally there is the challenge of integrating the inputs of the different services which may be needed to meet the young person's particular needs – Weiner's (1990) model is seen as a potential help (pp.56-57).

Achieving a nurturing and developing place and a sense of belonging for these young people with exceptional needs requires exceptional practice in case work and case planning, in addressing educational needs, in accessing a continuum of care and necessary therapeutic intervention. Reflection on action also

stands up as a means of developing and enhancing exceptional practice, but success comes from a commitment to 'something more than a job', something akin to what most parents do.

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This publication is available from: Lyn Thane, Deakin Human Services (03 9244 5290) Cost: \$25+\$6.50 ph+GST

### Getting near to 'Baby'

Audrey Gouloumbis

G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1999. 211 pp.

This novel for children is a gem of a book that, despite some intensely sad moments, has a hopeful view of the potential for growth of adults and children as they pass through the grief process.

It tells the story of two children's experiences when their 'Baby' sister dies and they are temporarily looked after by their maternal aunt Patty and Uncle Hob.

The book opens with Willa Jo and her 'Little Sister', who has not spoken since 'Baby' died, sitting on the roof of their aunt's house.

Willa Jo, who tells the story, explains that, followed by Little Sister as always, she 'came up on the roof to watch the sun rise and ... just stayed'.

She tells us about the accidental death of 'Baby' by poisoning and how her mother had become obsessed with painting 'Baby' 'with the angels' to try to make sense of what had happened to her baby. As a consequence she and the children had lost all sense of time and daily routine and had to be 'rescued' by Aunt Patty.

We hear how Aunt Patty had insisted on taking their clothes and storing them in a box on a shelf in the hall closet, quickly to be replaced with new outfits. Willa Jo observes that her aunt behaves like this not because she has not been able to have the children she desires (as her mother might have explained it) but because she just wants to dress them like dolls and make them look like miniatures of herself.

Willa Jo describes how, despite her best efforts, her frustration with Aunt Patty's apparently rigid and fearful lifestyle gradually leads to more open antagonism between them. Especially difficult for her to tolerate is Aunt Patty's attempts to choose her friends. However, this does not stop her from making friends with Liz, who according to Aunt Patty 'is no better than she should be', but who is the first person to allow her and Little Sister to cry about the loss of 'Baby'.

Life is also made more tolerable by Uncle Hob whom you can talk to because, although he doesn't always have the answers to a problem (unless it is a mathematical one), he agrees 'that is some serious problem you have there' and 'you feel better, that's all'.

The book is full of these insightful and sometimes witty observations by Willa Jo on the behaviour of her family and friends. They become more poignant as the story proceeds, such as when aunt Patty admits to her that she doesn't know, 'the right thing to say to someone who is in such pain, even if she is my sister', and Willa Jo tells her that she should have said to her mother that no matter what she had done, 'it wouldn't have made a bit of difference' (to whether the baby died), and then realises at the same time that 'it wouldn't have made a bit of difference' (what her aunt said because) 'there are no right words. Words are not enough'.

The story illustrates how family members are affected by the loss of 'Baby', but their differing personalities and past experiences mediate the way they cope and change. Aunt Patty acknowledges this succinctly when she responds to Little Sister's explanation of why she would not talk - 'I tried but my voice was lost in sadness', with 'We've all been lost in sadness Little Sister'.

As well as being a powerful description of the grief process the story also points to some of the do's and don'ts for alternative caregivers of children who have experienced a separation or loss, be they kin or foster carers. As such it could be a useful adjunct to the reading list of foster and adoptive carers, and their children - considering that the book is a children's book! (for pre-teens upwards).

Reviewed by: Dr Tony Lunken

### Issues in foster care: Policy, practice and research

Edited by Greg Kelly and Robbie Gilligan

Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2000.

These editors from Belfast and Dublin respectively have drawn together an impressive array of authors, including themselves, for the chapters of this very up to date text on foster care. Altogether the book canvasses all the current debates around foster care practice in its various forms. The types of carers considered are the child's relatives, largely untrained

volunteers who are paid expenses, trained and supported volunteers and salaried foster carers. The varieties of foster care includes respite for parents, short term care in emergencies, short term care for assessment and preparation for long term care, medium or long term care and specialist placements for adolescents. Throughout the book attention is given to the theory