



Lessons Robin Clark taught me in child protection

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Robin Clark was an inspirational leader in the child protection and out-of-home care field throughout the 1980s and 1990s in Australia. Robin died in 2001. However her legacy continues due to her mentoring of social workers throughout her career and her numerous reviews and evaluations of child protection systems. This article pays tribute to the lessons Robin Clark taught administrators and practitioners in the design and delivery of child protection and out-of-home care systems.

In the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the author, Mitch Albom, interviews his old professor, Morrie Schwartz, who is dying, about the meaning of life. One Tuesday they discuss what will go on the tombstone, and they decide upon 'A Teacher to the Last' (Albom 2001). This statement epitomises the life of Robin Clark.

Robin Clark, who died on 18 April 2001, was a significant contributor and inspirational leader in the child protection and out-of-home care field in Australia. She worked extensively in the evaluation, review and design of child protection and out-of-home care systems in Victoria, Queensland, Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales (Clark 1996a; Clark 1996b; Clark 1997; Clark 1998). I had the pleasure of working with Robin Clark as a co-consultant and can attest that she was first and foremost a teacher. After her death, despite the considerable loss to the field, I recognised that Robin had handed down to me, and to many others, her wisdom and frameworks for analysis of complex child protection systems. The purpose of this article is both to recognise Robin's significant contribution to the field and, more importantly, to represent my interpretation of the lessons Robin taught me.

LESSON NUMBER ONE USING A SYSTEMS APPROACH

Robin was a firm believer in analysis of the child protection area using a systems approach. By taking this approach she demonstrated larger patterns of interaction and connection of the child protection area, alongside analysis of the sub-components of the

system. Implicit in the systems approach is that change is assisted both through recognising the relationships with the wider system as well as understanding the interconnections of the sub-components.

The Macro Environment

Robin demonstrated that to achieve comprehensive outcomes for children in the child protection system required an understanding of the external environment, and the impact on and relationship with other systems. In this way, Robin highlighted that change cannot be confined to one system. She advocated multi-systemic work and multi-sector community strategies (Morton, Clark & Pead 1999). This approach strove to develop systemic and collaborative service provision between systems and agencies for children and young people. Robin was particularly interested in bringing the education system together with the work of the child protection system. It is a well-established fact that children in care fail to attain adequate educational goals. The national report card for children in care undertaken by CREATE Foundation and released in December 2001 made explicit the poor performance of the school system in supporting and educating children in care (CREATE Foundation 2001). Instead of replicating existing systems, Robin shared my belief that children and young people should be integrated within existing mainstream school environments. This approach requires a broker to move between the systems, with the responsibility of ensuring that children in care can access the education system, job training programs, remedial education and intensive skill building programs.

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The Micro Environment

Robin conceptualised the child protection system as being comprised of a number of sub-components. These sub-components can be likened to inputs, service activities, outputs and outcomes, that is, a program logic model. The capacity Robin possessed was to demonstrate the inter-connections between the sub-components. Robin would demonstrate how decisions made at the 'front-end' of the system would later affect the 'back-end' of the system. That is, if there was a tendency to focus on removal of children as a child protection intervention at the 'front-end' of the child protection system, then this would result in limited resources for reunification work and care later on in the child protection system. Robin was also able to make explicit the connection between the type of intervention offered and the outcomes this had for children. This was strengthened by her knowledge around evidence-based practice, including her involvement in the Looking After Children initiative¹ (Clark & Burke 1998).

Robin was also very skilled at taking national child protection data and relating this at a state level, primarily through the use of comparison. Thus state administrators could start to understand how they were performing in comparison with other states. This work highlighted state differences, such as the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in statutory care, the predominant types of placements offered by states, or the absence of certain types of care in some states, such as kith and kin placements. Because Robin had been a senior child

protection administrator in the Victorian government, she was able to converse effectively with state administrators and non-government organizations by 'speaking the language'. She made explicit the consequences for children and young people of the design of these state systems and their historical and ongoing peculiarities. That is, she was able to demonstrate the variations in practice due to definitional issues, interpretation and variations in legislation and, most importantly, discretionary policy and practices. She worked systematically, examining the details of individual cases, then moving to the population level. For example, on one evaluation I found Robin puzzling over the number of children who had come into the system because it did not add up to the number who had left – a child had 'got lost' along the way. Robin would want to know the characteristics, ages, educational and disability information and other demographic profiles of every child and family that entered the system. She would match these client details with the types of services offered, including details on the nature of placements and the type of order. Conclusions would be drawn about the suitability of the intervention offered. The feedback that Robin provided was never critical, but offered in a supportive learning environment focussed on change.

LESSON NUMBER TWO

PLANNING THE IDEAL SYSTEM

Robin had a view that practitioners needed to know what the ideal system looked like, and that it was the goal of every policy maker and practitioner to share the same vision. The ideal system was to be conceptualised as within reach of achievement. However, encouraging workers to think about the achievable system is an activity that is often neglected. As part of the process of visualising the ideal system, Robin was also interested in getting practitioners to state when 'enough is enough'. She held the view that systems often grow unrestricted, but the expansion does not necessarily reflect the priorities or needs of the child. In deciding when 'enough is enough', Robin would ask child protection

workers to reflect on how many and what type of placements were sufficient for the total population of children and young people in care. The point of this discussion was to re-focus workers away from supply driven service delivery towards client demand driven services. That is, the driver for a child protection system often becomes the number and availability of placements.

Robin strongly advocated that removal of children was the 'last resort' as it ultimately led to 'net widening'. Instead the ideal system should be designed around 'doing the hard yards' with families up front to prevent removal and placement of children. The 'hard yards' involved rigorous assessment of the family's capacity and capabilities and the appropriate needs of all concerned. Robin advocated for the more frequent use of kith and kin placements as long as these were adequately monitored and supported. To Robin, support included financial support, in-kind support, and practical and personal human support. The ideal system responds by matching services to the presented need, rather than by responding to families on the basis of availability of existing services.

LESSON NUMBER THREE

CHILD PROTECTION WITHIN A FAMILY SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

Political, sociological and educational perspectives informed the analytic framework from which Robin worked. It is increasingly important to acknowledge the significance of these perspectives in child protection, as case management has tended to individualise and pathologise clients in recent years. Robin made no bones about the fact that child protection research indicates that it is mostly poor people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are reported. Therefore child protection systems are basically, as Robin described, 'services for the children of poor families'. Conceptualising child protection in this way also starts to define the solutions to the problem. Robin's early work in the United Kingdom led her to form a similar view to the seminal work of Dingwall, Eekelaar and Murray (1983), to which she would refer. These authors found that in the English system, the families

¹ Looking After Children (LAC) is a case management system developed by the Department of Health in the United Kingdom which is designed to improve the parenting experience of children looked after by welfare agencies. The LAC materials provide a structured agenda for good parental care by identifying the experiences, concerns and expectations of children at different ages and stages by bringing to the attention of those responsible for their upbringing the probable consequences of different actions (Barnardos Australia, undated).

reported tended to be those whose 'social credit' had run out. They were often families known to the child and family welfare system, who were seen to have exhausted normal avenues of support. Robin believed that access to services and addressing social isolation were keys to unlocking poverty and breaking the cycle of child abuse. She was also influenced by the early work of Lisbeth Schorr (1988) in the book *Within Our Reach*, as well as her later works (Schorr 1997) which outlined seven attributes of highly effective family support programs.

When removal of a child was the appropriate intervention, Robin chose to conceptualise this intervention within a family systems framework. Thus natural parents were very much part of the picture and needed to have supportive and resource rich environments constructed around them to enable them to perform the role of parenting. Biological parents remained the authority and experts on their child. Robin suggested that out-of-home carers '... must now see themselves more as a family support service than as a substitute family for the child' (Clark & Spall 1999:10). This was a theme that ran through much of Robin's work. She was influenced by the analogy of foster carers as the custodial parent in a divorced family, who recognises the importance of the child's relationship with the non-custodial parent (natural parent) and facilitates this relationship accordingly (Kates, cited in Spall & Clark 1998).

LESSON NUMBER FOUR

DESIGN A SYSTEM FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

It is known that in every jurisdiction in Australia, and in other parts of the world, there has been escalating demand for child protection services because of the significant growth in the number of children being notified. This is not matched by an equivalent growth in the number of children needing to be placed on protective orders. Australian research has concluded that a relatively small proportion of children notified and registered as being 'at risk' had actually suffered abuse, and that many children are registered because parents are experiencing difficulties, rather than

because there is independent evidence of parental abusive behaviour (Thorpe, cited in Clark & Spall 1999:24). Robin had a view that child protection systems should be designed for maximum impact. She visually equated this design to a bell-shaped curve, believing that it is the group of children and families who fall under the middle of the bell curve that the system should be designed around. In this way a standard system of care, or program, can offer maximum impact to the greatest number. Such a design does not ignore the needs of those at either outer end of the bell-curve who might have more specialist needs. However the design of the system should not be driven only by specialist needs because these children will be fewer in number. Thus the standard system is built with the capacity to supplement specialist services required for children with complex needs.

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LESSON NUMBER FIVE

TAKING AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Robin was very conversant with the problems and cumulative developmental losses associated with a childhood marked by deprivation, disadvantage, abuse and neglect. The aggressive, depressed and impulsive behaviours of young people were challenges that she understood well. Robin brought a certain level of optimism to even the most damaged children and young people, believing that children can grow out of delinquency, and that ongoing care can bring about change. However she also believed that child protection workers

had a collective responsibility to conceptualise their role as taking affirmative action for children and young people. That is, due to the high level of exclusion of children in care from mainstream service settings, it was necessary to indicate that exclusion was a structural problem. It required systemic and structural solutions that proactively addressed the needs of children and young people in care. Through structural advocacy and service design, children and young people in care could be included in mainstream and decision-making processes. I perceived that Robin saw this role of taking affirmative action as the moral responsibility of every child protection worker.

LESSON NUMBER SIX

CHOOSING THE BEST CARERS

Within our discussions on foster care, I proposed greater formalisation of the foster carer system as a strategy to improve the quality of care. Robin held some reservations about the connection between formalisation and quality of care. She was concerned that formalisation would lead to greater levels of professionalisation of carers and, in the process, run the risk of diluting the capacity of the 'intuitive carer'. Without arriving at any firm conclusions, we searched for ways of improving standards of care without losing the intuitive caring one finds among foster carers. Robin saw the significance of the ability of carers to offer unconditional love to children and young people. One point about which Robin was firm was the need for foster carers to value education and to provide stimulating and encouraging educational environments for children in care. On the basis of her teaching background, Robin declared that teachers made some of the best foster carers!

LESSON NUMBER SEVEN

PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND ITS ROLE IN CREATING THE CONTEXT OF INTERVENTION

An area of intense academic interest to Robin was the old chestnut of whether professional knowledge, judgement and practice constitute 'an art or a science'

(Clark 1989). This was of interest because of the variety of work styles used, suggesting that individual workers might apply professional knowledge and judgement differently. In the child protection area, workers come from a range of disciplines upon which their practice rests. However workers also bring an applied component used in day-to-day practice as well as skills and attitudes. Schon (1995) believes that reflection-in-action makes a critical difference to how workers respond in practice settings. Some workers lock themselves into being technical experts at the expense of reflecting on the uncertainties of practice. Professionalism tends to be identified with technical expertise and is seen as the legitimate form of professional knowing, rather than reflective action. When undertaking evaluations, Robin would make linkages between the professional training and primary discipline of workers and the extent to which this influenced practice to the exclusion of reflective action. For example, some disciplines might work predominantly from a clinical perspective using therapeutic interventions that have little reference to wider systemic effects. By pointing out the dominant paradigm being used in the practice setting, it is possible to increase the effective use of reflective action. This in turn can lead to changes in the culture and institutional environments of organisations and systems, which then impacts on the care of children and young people.

LESSON NUMBER EIGHT

A COMMITMENT TO RESEARCH

Following on from lesson seven, Robin believed that reflective inquiry could be made rigorous in its own right if it is linked to the scientist's art of research. That is, the means and the ends of child protection are not kept separate but are defined interactively and assisted through the process of research. Robin was a very good researcher, perhaps an intuitive researcher. In the research we undertook together, she used Pecora et al's (1995) approach to conceptualising research. Robin was exceptional in terms of her conceptual capacity to outline research questions, research assumptions, research strategy and method. Additionally, her design of

research methods was accessible to the target audience, with data collection methods aimed at the triangulation of data. Most importantly Robin had a fine sense of policy development, but she was first and foremost a practitioner. Therefore she was careful to make recommendations that were capable of being implemented within complex systems. In this way she distinguished between research findings and evaluation recommendations, giving governments 'plenty of room' to move in the implementation of evaluation recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Robin Clark was a remarkable woman who was instrumental in bringing about many changes in Australian child protection systems throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. My regret is that I did not work with Robin earlier in my professional life. She was challenging to work with, but fun at the same time, with a dry wit and a sense of humour that was unparalleled. This article seeks to convey both Robin's conceptual and analytic capacity to independently evaluate child protection systems, as well as her 'hands-on' advocacy for children, young people and their families. Robin was driven by her commitment to social justice and her religious beliefs towards a fair and equitable society. She had a genuine and unstinting interest in people's lives, and in helping workers to understand their role and achieve good practice. She conveyed a workable simplicity within the complexity of child protection responses. On such a note, we aim for the lessons she taught to continue. ♦

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