

## BOOK REVIEWS

### THE STRENGTHS APPROACH

Wayne McCashen

St Luke's Innovative Resources, Bendigo, 2005

Two mature and striking eucalypts reach into the quintessential blue of an Australian sky. The symbolism is powerful: growth and development occurs in parallel with other factors and within a context; shared aspiration; the importance of roots that reach deep into a ground that nurtures and into a philosophical ground that supports what is seen and experienced; the intense beauty of life beyond the struggles for survival. All of these ideas and more are conveyed as one picks up Wayne McCashen's recently released *The Strengths Approach*. And between the covers ...?

I was not disappointed. The depth and breadth of strengths based practice was captured in this book which is written in one of the most gentle and inspiring writing styles I have encountered in human service texts. The reader becomes a valued colleague and is drawn into what is almost a dialogue as questions emerge and answers explored.

*The Strengths Approach* is a carefully crafted work of nine chapters that represents the work of Wayne and his colleagues over many years. Grounded unashamedly in a value base that maintains the core principles of hope, respect and justice, this text is explicit in its promotion of practice methods that flow logically from an articulated philosophical stance. Wayne explores casework, community work, supervision, management and organisational activities, placing each in context and drawing out the inherent links between each. The text will serve as a guide to students of human service disciplines and professionally qualified workers alike, as it contains material that brings alive the strengths framework in a manner that is convincing and elegant.

The examples used to illustrate practice are well chosen and reflect the realities of contemporary practice contexts. The tools illustrated convey a sense of immediacy, purpose and achievement in terms of their application. All exemplars are in balance with the topics being addressed so the book, as a whole, avoids any tendency to deteriorate into the 'how to' nature of a manual and maintains rigour in the philosophical and theoretical dimensions of the strengths approach.

The one criticism I had of this volume is that no attempt is made to locate the Strengths Approach in the context of contemporary human service practice. While this is not a serious oversight, I thought it might have been useful to mention a range of ideological and other pressures that surfaced, and impacted on, practice during the same period in which the Strengths Approach was developed; this being

the late 1980s through to the present. These challenges have created debate and tensions for professional practitioners who must now work within a range of regulatory, risk management and accountability systems. In many ways the Strengths Approach stands as a beacon that not only guides, but warns of the dangerous rocks of rampant individualism, of imposing a narrow range of values and expectations, and riding roughshod through people's lives. Thus more could have been made in the early pages of the book of the need to find safe passage for our clients, and ourselves, through what could be a dehumanising experience of formularised responses, reports, statistical data and a paperwork stream in a context of wanting more for less.

The one dilemma with which I was presented was wanting more! When it came to applying the Strengths Approach to activities at the organisational level, the importance of maintaining parallel practices was clear. However, the business of achieving this could not be easily condensed into this volume. Perhaps there are another two books in the making — the development of partnerships and supervisory relationships using the Strengths Approach, and the development of organisational culture, management and governance based on this philosophy and framework. We can only hope!

And, in closing, how is it that Bendigo — and St Luke's in particular — has been fortunate to attract people of the calibre of Wayne McCashen, Fiona Gardner and Linda Beilharz? With Fiona's recent volume *Working with Human Service Organisations* (Oxford University Press, 2006) emerging from the Centre for Professional Development, and the release of Linda's book *Building Community - The Shared Action Experience* (Solution Press, 2002), there is certainly some distinctive work emanating from this increasingly dry, but clearly vibrant region in Victoria.

Reviewed by:  
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### UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM SEEKING CHILDREN ... THE RESPONSE OF SOCIAL WORK SERVICES

Jim Wade, Fiona Mitchell and Graeme Baylis

British Association for Adoption & Fostering, 2005

The Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs would undoubtedly have a fair idea of how many unaccompanied young people are seeking asylum in Australia. In writing this review, I attempted to locate this information, but was unsuccessful. However, refugee support groups all know of

young people (the majority of whom are young men) who are currently, or have been, in this predicament.

*Unaccompanied asylum seeking children* is a somewhat different book to those reviewed in the March edition of *Children Australia*, in that it is essentially the report of a research study undertaken between 2002 and 2004 in the UK. The study was undertaken in three locations: in London, a southern county and a northern city. It sought to understand:

- How unaccompanied asylum seeking children were first referred to social services and how these referrals were managed.
- The nature of services provided for these young people.
- What factors constrained or facilitated the support which was provided.

The authors acknowledge the difficulty in ascertaining the actual numbers of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum and note that many young people arrive with someone (a relative, family friend or even an agent) who is subsequently unable, unwilling or unsuitable to care for them. Different estimates of numbers in the UK range from 3,180 in 2003 (based on asylum applications) to 2,800 in 2004 (based on local authority figures) to 3,189 in London alone (based on London Asylum Seekers Consortium data). Whatever the figures, the authors state that most (approx. 70%) unaccompanied young people are in London and the majority are male.

The research design involved:

- an analysis of 212 case files;
- in-depth interviews with 31 young people and their current (or most recent) support workers;
- focus groups with social workers in each of the three locations;
- analysis of policy documents in each of the three locations.

The book interweaves a discussion of policy and practice with case vignettes and quotations from young people and their support workers; and each chapter ends with a useful summary of the material discussed.

There are many important points and findings made – for example:

- What does unaccompanied mean? Being completely alone, or living with adults other than family, or living with other young people? (The research covered a broad range of situations.)
- Young people are often very hesitant to divulge information about their families and how they arrived in the UK. In fact, in this study 62% of the young people had no known family links either in the UK or overseas.
- Not surprisingly, young people who were in stable care with relatives or other caregivers were most likely to be participating in education and training.
- ‘Cases’ were closed routinely when the young person was 18 and support for ‘leaving care’ was sparse. The authors note the need for long term planning, whether the young person is staying in the UK or being returned to their country of origin.

The book concludes with a list of detailed recommendations in the areas of assessment, placement, support, education and training, health and wellbeing, and transition to independent living.

This book is probably for a specialised readership, those who work with and support refugees, although it is also a clear and detailed account of a large research project. The final chapter gives an excellent summary of the issues raised by the research and these will undoubtedly be of interest to policy makers and practitioners in this field.

Reviewed by:  
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## ***Children Australia* — Special Edition**

**Volume 31, Number 3, 2006**

### **Towards Better Outcomes for Young People Leaving State Care**

A special edition of *Children Australia* will be published in September 2006 which will focus on the important topic of young people leaving care. The articles will be centred around the papers presented at the 'Towards Better Outcomes for Young People Leaving State Care' conference held at Monash University in November 2005.

Dr Philip Mendes and Dr Catherine Forbes from Monash University will be Guest Editors.