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INVITED COMMENTARY by Cathy Humphreys

on 'Building community capacity for children, youth and families' by Robert J. Chaskin

I write this response to Associate Professor Robert Chaskin on the eve of the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States. Much has been made of Obama's role as a community organiser on the Southside of Chicago – skills, knowledge and values he so effectively deployed in building a mass, grassroots campaign for his presidency. Clearly, Chicago has a rich heritage in this area to which Robert Chaskin contributes.

Foregrounding community capacity building unlocks a rich but marginalised strand in Australian children, youth and families work. Nothing could be more timely as the sector works to engage with consultation for a proposed National Child Protection Framework. In this consultation a clear stance was taken by a consortium of community sector organisations and academics that more resourcing was needed 'upstream' to prevent children washing into the tertiary, statutory system of child protection which is currently draining resources with little evidence of family capacity building (Australia 2008). Community building is a central, not a marginal, aspect of such a strategy.

It is very easy to find an alignment with the themes raised in Robert's paper. The way in which the notion of community is both affirmed and problematised has resonance for everyone. The ideas and succinct description of the ingredients of community capacity building provide a thoughtful and informed discussion of key issues in building local communities to support children in their diverse families. In response to Robert Chaskin, I thought it worthwhile to build on his work through consideration of three areas which are pertinent to the Australian context.

Firstly, community capacity building to strengthen the environment in which children can grow and thrive in Australia should begin with acknowledgement of Indigenous communities. Our Aboriginal child care agencies across Australia are of one voice in advocating community strengthening: family is part of community and community is situated in country (SNAICC 2007). It is not a relationship which can be ignored in spite of its complexities, and those complexities include high levels of family violence and child abuse and neglect in many communities. Nevertheless, the family and community level is the start point in addressing

safety and well-being for Aboriginal children and their families if we are to avoid some of our more dismal endpoints illustrated so terribly in the Stolen Generation.

Secondly, there is much in Robert's paper which builds on and condenses the rich tradition of local community capacity building. I am struck by 'a next generation' move in the Australian context which has developed useful tools in 'measuring' community capacity. This allows communities to 'benchmark' their work – and strikes me as something different from earlier community development work which could have been accused of 'cardiac evaluation – if it feels good then it must be working'¹.

One rich strand of work involves Jesuit Social Services working with Professor Tony Vinson. These projects have looked at ways of documenting social disadvantage and social cohesion in Australia (Vinson 1999, 2004, 2007). In these studies, neighbourhoods are taken by postcode and parameters of adversity, disadvantage and cohesion audited. Of particular interest in relation to Robert's work is the documenting of community cohesion as an issue of resilience. Three parameters of cohesion are identified: i) the extent of local volunteering; ii) the availability of help from neighbours at times of adversity; iii) participation in sociable recreation activities. A comparison between neighbourhoods of similar disadvantage designated by postcode showed that the connections between unemployment, limited education, low income and their sequelae of low birth rate, court convictions and child maltreatment (illustrated by lower notifications in areas of higher cohesion) were weakened when there was a high degree of social cohesion (Vinson 2007, pp.86-94).

Examples are given of community development projects which evidenced major changes in social cohesion rating, and significantly a major drop in all indicators of social exclusion, including child notification rates. It illustrates Robert's point that, 'a sense of hope' is an important aspect of community strengthening.

¹ A term used by Nick Collins from Glastonbury Child and Family Services, Victoria.

The other, and I would say related, community measurement project is the way in which the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) is now being used in many places throughout Australia to engage communities in more targeted programs to increase the opportunities for early years development (Centre for Community Child Health 2005). It is a strategy which takes very seriously the 'neurones to neighbourhood' concept. Using benchmarking by teachers for children in their first year of schooling, community planning and action can be taken to capacity build early intervention work to change the community profiling over time. Major changes have been shown through successfully focusing, not on individual children and families, but community strengthening to lift the profile across five different dimensions of children's development.

The third area to raise in the Australian context concerns salutary issues: the barriers to community capacity building. I cite two, the most salient of which is the three year funding cycles – cycles which in the slow process of community development undermine the creation of hope and skills in people committed to their local work.

The other barrier of great significance lies in the depletion of the workforce – who is training the next generation of community workers? While it remains an aspect of social work training, the ground has shifted from the centre to the margins. The workforce issues were not ones raised by Robert but I believe are ones which are important in the Australian context.

In conclusion, Robert Chaskin's paper provides us with some of the tools with which to unpack the concept of

community and community capacity building. These are complex and nuanced ideas which provide us with the foundations on which to build and share new ideas, to recognise the barriers and to support new trajectories in community capacity building in Australia.

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