

CHALLENGES IN CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

In many conversations about child welfare practice these days, two concepts have a high probability of being mentioned. These are 'evidence-based' or 'evidence-informed' practice, and 'complexity'. The definitions of these concepts are not always explored in conversation as there is an expectation that they are understood in the sector. The lack of definition masks the tension between the two concepts in this area of practice. On one level the concepts are in conflict with each other. Evidence-based or evidenced-informed practice suggests we are able to simplify situations to apply a particular response in practice. Complexity, or the unexplainable phenomena of a situation, suggests otherwise. There is tension between both concepts. This is one of the current challenges facing practice today. A third concept, which is also frequently present, is that of culture. It is perhaps this concept that can provide a link between the other two in practice.

The definition of evidence-based practice is contested in many areas of practice. In child welfare practice the term 'evidence-informed' is used to convey the importance of the use of scientific knowledge to inform systems and interventions (Hoagwood et al. 2001). In the child and family sector, rigorous clinical trials required for evidence-based practice are usually not possible nor desirable. However, the sector does have years of experience and research data which can inform practice. Much of that knowledge and the research findings have been published in this journal over many years. In publishing Australian research, *Children Australia* is a key journal in disseminating knowledge to the sector. However, disseminating knowledge does not necessarily mean that research findings are applied to practice.

The nexus between research findings and practice is difficult to achieve. Maybe this is, in part, because professional education can separate research and practice, leaving integration to the practitioner. A recent example which has bridged this division is findings of the impact of trauma and disrupted attachment which is being used to inform practice. The impact of dissemination of this knowledge has been more effective practice with children and young people traumatised by abuse (Jackson et al. 2009).

Finding an effective nexus between practice and research is also challenged by complexity. In a modernist world, response to the needs of vulnerable families was divided into service sectors which did not engage with each other. The sectors of family violence, mental health and substance abuse have developed in parallel to each other. Only recently are the sectors being integrated and this is occurring largely through the work of practitioners.

Whilst the word 'complexity' is possibly over-used in our sector, it does convey recognition of multiple phenomena with multiple relationships which confront practice. To borrow a concept from space, we can say the multiple phenomena act like black holes in practice. These are areas where fundamental forces collide and become invisible – only the impact can be seen. Understanding how these relationships operate holistically is important in informing practice. Research has the role of exploring knowledge which will inform this understanding. Acknowledging complexity cannot be a reason for not using evidence to inform actions. It is here that the concept of culture may be useful in beginning to understand the phenomenon. Culture gives context and identity, and gives meaning to actions. It provides a framework of meaning for individuals and communities. If this is ignored, it is difficult to understand the meaning of behaviour in many situations. Putting evidence in a cultural framework will increase our understanding. Changes in outcomes for Indigenous children can be seen when Indigenous culture informs the service system and practice (Jackson et al. 2009).

NEW COURSES IN CHILD AND FAMILY PRACTICE

An exciting development in education in the sector is the development and delivery of the Child and Family Practice Graduate Certificate and the Child and Family Practice Leadership Graduate Diploma¹, both of which commenced in Victoria in August 2009. These courses have been developed as part of the Victorian Department of Human Services leadership strategy. They are being offered by a consortium of La Trobe University School of Social Work and Social Policy and the Bouverie Centre, University of Melbourne School of Social Work, Berry Street Take Two and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. Culture, knowledge, skills and the nexus with practice reality is a key paradigm of the programs.

Associate Professor Margarita Frederico
Head, School of Social Work and Social Policy
La Trobe University, Bundoora, Vic 3083

REFERENCES

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- Jackson, A., Frederico, M., Tanti, C. & Black, C. (2009) 'Exploring outcomes in a therapeutic service response to the emotional and mental health needs of children who have experienced abuse and neglect in Victoria, Australia', *Child and Family Social Work*, Volume 14, Number 2, May, pp.198-212(15).

¹ For information, contact La Trobe University (Tel. 9479 2407).