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New Look for *Children Australia*

Welcome to the first issue of *Children Australia* for 2011. I hope you have had a safe and happy Christmas, perhaps a break from work demands, and have begun the New Year with lots of energy and enthusiasm! However, I am mindful that many of our Queensland colleagues will be experiencing the aftermath of the floods that have severely affected over a third of that state and caused distress and trauma to many. Our thoughts are with you at this difficult time.

This is the first issue of the journal to come to you from Australian Academic Press and you will see that we have a 'new look' and online capacity. It's altogether the contemporary approach to submission, reviewing, preparation and publication of a journal and I am endeavouring to learn the ropes as Editor. From this point forward we need to manage longer lead times in preparation of each issue and have thus endeavoured to plan all four issues for 2011 well ahead of publication deadlines. The tentative program is that in June we will have an issue that focuses on the 'Changing Face of Out-of-Home Care Models' and include articles relating to 'Kith and Kin' care; September's issue will see the publication of articles that have been reviewed and developed during the year; and in December we hope to have a guest editor and articles from the United Kingdom, focusing on the development of Social Pedagogy and its relevance to children and young people across a range of services and programs.

In commencing 2011 we have probably all spent time reflecting on the past year and our achievements and planning for things to come. Evaluating our services and programs, and the effort we put into developing them both professionally and personally, is now a familiar process. However, reflecting on, and evaluating, our work is not always an easy process and I was reminded of this on reading the reports *Snapshot 2010* and *Views of Children and Young People in Foster Care in Queensland 2010,* generously forwarded to me by Elizabeth Fraser, Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian in Queensland. These reports demonstrate the very real efforts to provide strong, research-based information to the field that is also comprehensive and of practical use. They contain comprehensive knowledge about trends, stakeholder perspectives and the data that underpins decision-making and policy development. Members of the public and service providers alike can be confident about a level of transparency concerning children's health and wellbeing, and the Queensland Government's commitment to improving outcomes that in the long run benefit all of us.

Of particular interest in these reports are the graphs showing the high rate of physical harm and neglect of children under the age of 1 year (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, 2010, p. 85) and the high number of children being reported under the 'Child Concern' arrangements (~42 per 1000 children). The rates of incarceration of Aboriginal young people is still many times higher than for non-Aboriginal youth (255.8 per 100,000 compared to 10. 1 per 100,000 respectively), though the overall rate of youth detention shows a slightly downward trend. The figures related to children's physical activity and use of technology provided some food for thought and I suspect there will be more to come in terms of changes to childhood experience and the contexts in which they develop. It is unlikely that Queensland is altogether different on these measures than other states in Australia and understanding these trends is particularly important in the development of policy and practice, but the efforts to improve children and young people's experiences of their workers were notable and to be commended.

Evaluation processes are important, if demanding, and often expensive in time and resources (Carson, Chung, & Day, 2009). We all review and reflect on our activities, and mostly we aim to do better in terms of generating greater wellbeing — improved outcomes — for our clients. However, the level of regard given to an outcome is often dependent on the value and subjective judgments of the observer/audience. I am reminded of the effort spent one day cleaning out a junk room that had long been neglected. At the end of hours of dirty, dusty work I had everything ordered — boxes for the Op shop, boxes to go to the recycle depot, boxes to be kept and an area of floor space now visible. I thought I had done well until I proudly showed my efforts to my mother. Her expecta-

tions and standards were clearly different from mine. There was that hesitation in her voice as she commented that I had 'made a good start'.

Planning, constructing and carrying out evaluations are specific, and sometimes specialist, fields of endeavour, but with expertise we are able to frame really practical and useful approaches to those who are seen as disadvantaged (Lamont, 2009). However, there is also a darker side to evaluation that sometimes stems from situations in which we are asked to provide data on our activities that result in others making judgments (evaluations) without any of the parties to these arrangements having the expertise or depth of knowledge required to usefully apply the information they believe they have acquired. The danger lies in awarding meaning to the collection of data that has not been done in a systematic and thorough manner (Parker, McDonald, & Higgins, 2010), and failing to take account of the context in which the data has been collected. As Cortis (2004) commented:

> Performance measurement, for example, is premised on a neat, logical and linear concept of production, in which inputs directly produce outputs which affect outcomes. Caution about this simple conceptualisation is justified in human services, which are by their nature complex and indeterminate. (p. 3)

Take, for example, the evaluation of a new family day support program involving attendance at a venue for parenting support and education. The goal might be to provide the program to 30 families at a cost of $80,000. However, what if only 16 families used the program and, of these, seven families reported achieving their goals while the other nine reported a lack of satisfaction with being able to contact the coordinator, cancellation of the program for a period of weeks and the poor quality of the cramped venue? Already, you might be feeling concerned about the value and efficacy of the program given its cost. But what if you were now informed that the coordinator had been in a serious car accident and, after 12 weeks of medical care, had been able to return to work only part-time for the rest of the year? We would change our opinion, I think. Further, if we were told the venue was in a transportable in a semi-industrial area at considerable distance to the location of the refugee population, which was the primary client group of interest, we would again change our judgment. And, parenthetically, venues are usually the responsibility of agency management though they often have a major impact on how the quality of the program is perceived by clients and are not always considered satisfactory by the program staff either.

The above example is probably rather self-evident, but I continue to have moments of surprise at the way important decisions are made without real application of broad-ranging, evaluative data. The difficulties often relate to what is meant by 'performance' and how we measure it (Talbot, 2010) and the rather fuzzy nature of what we want to measure. Given that a lot of time and energy goes into recording and maintaining data about service delivery — an expensive way of using welfare resources — we should expect to have strong reporting from government about what is being achieved, with a level of sophistication that ensures we can be confident about the judgments being made. Perhaps there will be more sharing of comprehensive evaluative information in the coming decade in line with what I received from Queensland.

In this issue we have four articles and three book reviews that will be of interest to many of you. The articles are quite varied in topic, but each contains the theme of evaluation in some form. The first of the articles is that by Stian Thoresen and Mark Liddiard titled 'Failure of Care in State Care: In-care Abuse and Post-Care Homelessness'. This article is based on a study that had the primary purpose of examining housing outcomes among Australian young people with out-of-home care histories, but in this process some alarming accounts of in-care abuse were intrinsic to the narratives of the young people interviewed. This feature of the research warranted attention and this articles was developed to draw attention to what appears to be continued failure of the out-of-home care system to be reliably safe for young people.

The second article is by Patricia Hansen and Frank Ainsworth who will be familiar authors of work in this journal and have been committed to publishing papers for many years now. In this article they raise concerns about the use of the term 'the best interests of the child' — one that is used constantly in discussions and decision-making about children and young people who need care and support. While there will be those of you who may not necessarily agree with the sentiments expressed in this article, it ensures the debates and practices that reflect this concept are kept to the forefront of our thinking. Evaluating the use of this concept is important and, while clearly the factors that contribute to decision-making are complex, this does not exempt us from being sure that the terms we use are scrutinised.

An article by Marilyn McHugh focuses on allowances paid to foster carers and reviews some of the policy, research, reporting and changes to the payment of allowances over the last decade. While primary attention is given to the NSW context of carer payments, there is considerable benefit to be gained from understanding how payments have been established and the factors that have brought about an increase in allowances over the years. This article also provides some understanding of the variations between states when it comes to payments.

Finally, an article by Melanie Boursnell addresses the topic of parents with mental illness who grew up in households in which mental illness, violence, abuse and neglect were experienced. This work has been drawn from

Melanie's research and discusses issues of intergenerational mental illness, impacts of parenting and on coping with one's own children given less than ideal antecedents. There is limited research in this area and it is very easy to assume that the experiences of parents will be visited on their children, rather than considering the nature of the services required to ensure vulnerable parents get the support they need.

Included in this issue are four book reviews, the first by Kathy Mendis who reports on *Belonging and Permanence: Outcomes in Long-Term Foster Care and Adoption* by Nina Biehal, Sarah Ellison, Claire Baker and Ian Sinclair, published in 2010 by the British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF), London, and which is highly relevant to the subjects raised in this issue's articles. The second review is by Frank Ainsworth, who remains permanently on the ball when it comes to children issues. The volume reviewed is *Understanding and Working With Parents of Children in Long-Term Foster Care*, published by Schofield and Ward in 2010, and points with clarity to the nature of the approaches required for successful outcomes for fostered children. The third review is by Phillip Swain, who generously agreed to provide a review of *Physical Punishment in Childhood: The Rights of the Child*, by Bernadette J. Saunders and Chris Goddard, published in 2010. A fourth review is of *Baby Strengths*, recently published by St. Luke's Innovative.

I look forward to bringing you a varied diet of articles across 2011 and wish you well for the remainder of the year.

Jennifer Lehmann

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