

BOOK REVIEWS

30 Years of Childcare Practice and Research: An Overview

Roger Bullock and John Simmonds (Eds.). (2010, Autumn). *Adoption & Fostering*, 34 [Special edition]. London, England: British Association of Adoption and Fostering, ISBN 978 1 907585 07 4, £12.95, 108 pp.

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As I started to read the special edition of *Adoption & Fostering*, celebrating ‘30 Years of Childcare Practice and Research’, I was sent a news story from the United Kingdom (UK) newspaper *The Times*. The headline read ‘Make adoption priority not last resort, councils told’ (Bennett, 2011). The story reported that Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills), the UK regulator, is demanding that social workers should:

provide inspectors with evidence that they have ‘always considered adoption’ for each child early on in the planning process, and not just as ‘an option of last resort’. (2011, p. 17)

The regulator, according to the news story, is investigating whether ‘too few children in care’ are being considered for adoption (2011, p. 17). Social services’ performance is reported to vary ‘widely’ with one council in South London ‘securing permanent new families’ for only 2% of children in care, compared to 17% in ‘the most successful councils’ (2011, p. 17).

To my knowledge, no such comparisons are possible in Australia, given the opaque nature of our protective services. We do know, however, that there were 412 adoptions in 2009–10. Some 54% of these were intercountry, 15% local, and 31% were ‘known’ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2010, p. vi). Only three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were adopted (AIHW, 2010, p. 31). The alarm bells are ringing in England because adoptions fell from 4,637 in 2007 to 3,200 in 2010 despite the number of children entering care rising (Bennett, 2011). Adoption is treated as ‘an afterthought, not a priority’ (2011, p. 17). In Australia, adoption is not even present in our consciousness, unless we are considering intercountry adoption.

In addition to a foreword by the Right Honourable Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss (2010), and the journal’s regular features, such as ‘Legal Notes’ and ‘Health Notes’, the special edition has 14 articles. These commence with a wide-ranging review of the key developments in services for children in care by Professor Roy Parker (2010). The following article, ‘The Changing Context of Child and Family Social Work’ by Weyts and Randall (2010), provides a

thought-provoking analysis of the challenges of social work practice.

Other useful articles include ‘The Challenges in Planning for Permanency’ (Selwyn, 2010), ‘Thinking on Developmental Psychology in Fostering and Adoption’ (Rushton, 2010), Adcock’s article on changes in assessment (2010), Mather’s article on the role of the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) in putting health at the heart of practice with children in care (2010), and McLeod’s article entitled ‘Thirty Years Of Listening to Children?’ (2010). The question mark is significant.

There are one or two articles that appear to be of limited interest to Australian readers. Maclean and Hudson’s review of 30 years of fostering and adoption in Scotland, is one example (2010). Reading this, however, prompted me to reflect once again on service provision in rural and remote regions. Maclean and Hudson emphasise the challenges in Scotland where a country half the size of England and Wales has but only a tenth of the population. Scotland, they say, has one authority that is as big as Wales and three very small island authorities, all inhabited by fewer than 27,000 people.

As Butler-Sloss writes in her foreword to the special edition, BAAF has faced many challenges including:

open adoption; the requirement to practice from human rights legislation; controversy surrounding intercountry adoption and transracial placements; dealing with revelations of past abuse in care; the growth of independent care agencies; adopted people’s access to birth records; supporting gay and lesbian carers; developments in AID, DNA and genetic screening; independent representation of birth parents and children; the need to develop methods to ascertain children’s wishes; and the need to move from a system to an outcome focus. (Butler-Sloss, 2010, p. 3)

There are items on this list that, from an Australian perspective, appear to make up an agenda for action rather than an historical review.

The special edition is worth reading just for Professor Parker’s (2010) overview of key developments in the field, ‘Change and Continuity 1980–2010’. He describes the

decline in the number of children in care as ‘perhaps the most striking shift’. He also reviews the ‘rapid growth’ in the number and proportion of children in foster care. Changes in recording make some areas hard to decipher but the proportion increased from 35% in 1980 to 73% in 2009. In 1978, 37% of children were in residential care while the figures are now 11% in England and 4% in Wales (2010, p. 6).

The other ‘notable change’ Parker (2010) describes is adoption of children from care. In 1978 there were 1,600 such adoptions, and these represented some 2% of all discharges. By 2009 the number had risen to 3,560 or 5% of children leaving care (these figures demonstrate how different time frames can give a different picture). The ages of the children also changed dramatically: In 1978 almost one quarter (23%) were less than one year of age but the proportion had dropped to only 2% by 2009. Parker (2010, p. 6) notes that this is partially explained by ‘the virtual disappearance of the stigma associated with illegitimacy’. But Parker notes other factors including:

a marked shift from adoption being regarded as meeting the needs of infertile couples to it being seen as a way of meeting the needs of certain children for a permanent home. (2010, p. 6)

Parker also acknowledges the role of central government, which has strongly encouraged such practice for more than 10 years.

Apart from Parker’s excellent reflective article, another outstanding article is provided by Emeritus Professor John Triseliotis (2010) who examines the challenging issue of contact between children in care and their parents. He examines the benefits claimed, the frequency and duration, as well as the vexed issues of supervision and venue. He concludes his review by emphasising ‘the difficulties of providing substitute care and the danger of unsubstantiated allegations’ (2010, p. 65). In his final paragraph he declares that Britain

is ‘fortunate’ to have a journal such as *Adoption & Fostering* that blends ‘the publication of research-based articles and the sharing of practice experience’ (2010, p. 65).

Australian children would benefit if such a journal with a title that includes the word adoption were possible here.

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Uprooted: The Shipment of Poor Children to Canada, 1867–1917

Roy Parker (2010). Bristol, England: The Policy Press, ISBN 978 1 84742 668 0, US\$34.95, 368 pp.

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In 2009 the prime minister of Australia apologised to those whose lives had suffered from the dislocation of family life, not only on account of them being ‘stolen’ Aboriginal children, but because of the impacts of child migration on those sent to this country from Britain. Australia had failed in its duty of care. In the following year the prime minister of the United Kingdom (UK) issued a similar

apology to families disrupted by child migration from Britain to colonies of the Empire. ‘Uprooted’ was the title of Roy Parker’s study of the schemes through which children were ‘shipped’ (the term generally used) from the UK to Canada during the late nineteenth–early twentieth century — this term being chosen because this was the effect suffered by the majority of children involved. Over