

## Introducing New Members of the Editorial Consultant's Group

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We have great pleasure in introducing three of our new Editorial Consultants to readers in this Issue of the journal—Dr Neerja Sharma from New Delhi in India, and Drs Antoinette Lombard and Liana le Roux from South Africa.

*Associate Professor, Neerja Sharma* [M.Sc., Ph.D. (Child Development)] from the University of Delhi brings to this role her expertise in the areas of disability and psychopathology, risk and resilience, adolescence, and inclusive education. I asked Neerja to tell us about her work and she told me she has worked on research projects with the University of Newcastle, Australia, the Nutrition Foundation of India, UNICEF and Ministry of Human Resource Development of the Govt. of India, and takes a broad view of the major changes she has observed over the last 40 years. She comments that, since 1972, through her teaching of Child Development, her niche areas became 'adolescence', 'childhood disability' and 'children's well-being'. With reference to adolescence, she conducted her doctoral research on exploring the identity of the female adolescent (1978–1983). At that time, there was practically no Indian research literature to develop a theoretical framework. Interestingly, on her supervisor's advice, she studied 40–50 works of fiction by Indian authors whose central character was a young girl, and used this approach to developing her hypotheses. Neerja's work was published under the title 'Identity of the Adolescent Girl' and she comments that in the last 30–35 years, much research data on adolescence has been added and adolescence continues to be of interest to researchers, NGOs and the government in India.

With reference to her work in the area of childhood disability, Neerja noted 'the absolute neglect of children with disability and negative attitudes towards the child and the family', but says 'Indian society has become more informed. 'The Persons with Disability Act' made into a law in 1996 enabled some institutional support to the children, adults and their families. It also mandated affirmative action in various fields, including education.' However, she believes there is still a huge gap between legal provisions and practice. Several universities in India teach courses and

undertake research related to disability, and Neerja's department (Human Development and Childhood Studies) is an important one in this area. Her department has had an inclusive laboratory preschool since the 1980s. Interest in teaching child and adolescent well-being is fairly recent, but Neerja hopes the perspective of promoting mental health will take precedence over the curative approach.

When asked about what she thinks are the current issues of concern in the child, youth and family sector and how she sees services developing in the coming decades, Neerja commented that 'the areas of priority are early childhood care, development, and education both in practice and research. Two universities in Delhi (Ambedkar University and Jamia Millia University) have recently set up master's programs in this field. India's government funding of a universal Integrated Child Development Services program since 1974 is well known.' In contrast, with reference to young people, Neerja says that for this age group the focus is mainly on management of HIV/AIDS and promoting life skills. Provisions for preventive, promotional and therapeutic work in mental health are very few.

Neerja believes that Indian society is 'more collectivistic than individualistic', and she says 'familism is the dominant theme in everyday lives of people. Thus, families are expected to be responsible for most of the issues that concern children and adolescents outside of formal education and occupation. In fact, many laws that have been formulated to protect the individual's well-being are seen by families as infringing upon their autonomy and privacy. For example, the Right to Education Act 2009 makes it mandatory for all parents to send their children to school, otherwise they are liable for legal action. On the other hand, where families need support, e.g. when they have a child with disability or psychopathology, the state support is inadequate. Even the few private services are expensive and urban based.' These cultural differences bring new perspectives to *Children Australia* and will ensure that there is a more inclusive view of the child, youth and welfare sector being considered.

*Professor Antoinette Lombard* is professor in social work and the Head of Department of Social Work and Criminology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Her scholarly work promotes the developmental approach in social work and, in particular, contributes towards the shift of social work towards social development. She has a particular research interest in how social work, social enterprises and entrepreneurship interact to affect poverty and inequality. Her research is inspired by anti-poverty strategies that facilitate social and economic inclusion, promote human dignity, sustainable livelihoods, and social and economic inclusion of vulnerable groups, especially children, women and people with disability for a more just society. She recently received a University of Pretoria Post-Doctoral Fellowship grant for research on resilience in overcoming adversities among orphan and vulnerable children and families for sustainable livelihoods. Antoinette serves on a number of editorial boards of international and national journals, and has agreed to provide support to *Children Australia* in recent months.

When asked about the major changes she had observed over the last 40 years, Antoinette responded saying: ‘The hardships that children and families face ask for new models and strategies. Psycho-social services are supplemented with integrated social and economic strategies and interventions to bring about sustainable development and social change. People’s capabilities, strengths, and participation are central to capacity building and empowerment strategies. We have to listen to vulnerable people’s views to inform professional strategies and interventions. This includes the voices of children who are powerful in directing professional activities towards a better future for all. Although, there are many children who still have no voice, platforms have been created for children to speak out and be heard. Malala Yousafzai’s winning of the Nobel Peace prize has contributed to giving children a voice. The specific inclusion of children in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is promising for the next 15 years. Linked to the new Agenda, there is a more conscious global, regional and national movement for social work and social development practitioners to contribute to a more just society. The adoption of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development in 2012 confirms this initiative. Advocacy practice, in my view, has become more needed and prominent today in order to stand up to the injustices that impact on vulnerable children and families. Poor children who are disabled have a double disadvantage, as UNICEF’s research has pointed out.’

In response to my question about the child, youth and family sector and current issues of concern for practice and research, Antoinette commented that she thinks ‘child protection will always remain high on the agenda’. Areas of concern raised by Antoinette included that children have the right to be children and to not be exploited for trafficking; as soldiers; for labour, or sexually, physically and emotionally abused by their loved ones who are supposed to protect them. Families’ sustainable livelihoods should be

strengthened through integrated social and economic intervention strategies which can assist them to generate their own income, and overcome poverty and unemployment.’

Antoinette believes that ‘children’s rights must always be a priority concern—that they must know their rights, but also their responsibilities in participating toward a better future for themselves. One key right is education which starts at early childhood level. Furthermore, children must be enabled to go to school and more importantly, to stay in school so that they have better opportunities to excel beyond a level of survival.’

When asked about how she saw the field of child, youth and family services developing in the coming decades, Antoinette responded by saying: ‘The nature of families has changed over the past years, mainly because of the AIDS pandemic, leaving children orphaned and vulnerable. Strategies to support child-headed households, women-headed households and, in particular, older people who have to look after young children, are important to create a better future for children who live in deprived circumstances. Food security and early childhood development should be high on the priority list to give children a fair start in life. Role players who work with children have to commit to the *2030 Sustainable Development Agenda* and ensure that they invest in a better future with sustainable outcomes.

In addition, children must learn to be innovative and entrepreneurial from a very young age. Youth unemployment is high, and their capacity to create their own destiny must be strengthened from a very young age.

The responsibility of society to create a peaceful and safe environment for children to thrive in is of critical importance. Children are exposed to unbearable levels of violence and insecurity, including war zones, on-going displacements as refugees, and in many instances as unaccompanied minors.’

These are challenges we all face in our work in the sector and Antoinette’s colleague, Liana le Roux has identified a similar range of challenges.

*Dr. Liana le Roux*, a Senior Lecturer also at the University of Pretoria, works in the same Department of Social Work and Criminology as Antoinette, but her research interests are in social work with children and families, early childhood intervention and child protection, and play therapy. She is a member of the national and international councils of social work and play therapy, and is involved in practice with children and families.

I asked Liana about her observations of change during her career and she responded: ‘The developmental approach to social welfare that was adopted in our country during the 1990s has urged us to put more effort into prevention and early intervention services. Recognition is given to the hardships many South African families face in providing basic care and protection for their members; highlighting the need for interventions that focus on the strengthening and empowerment of families to care for their children. More specific to my field of work, the introduction of training in

play-based intervention, or play therapy, in South Africa has equipped many social workers to work on the child's level. It provides a significant avenue for early intervention services to prevent childhood problems from persisting into adulthood, while it allows children from a young age to make their views known.'

As in all countries there are also issues of concern in the child, youth and family fields of practice and research, and South Africa is no different. Liana comments that 'South Africa faces many socio-economic issues that affect the ability of families to care for their children, and that ultimately affect the well-being and optimal development of children in the country. High levels of poverty, unemployment, chronic illness such as HIV and AIDS, and domestic and community violence negatively affect parental capacities and create adverse environments in which children grow up. These conditions contribute to numerous psychosocial problems faced by children, including child maltreatment, socio-emotional problems, children being cared for in child- and granny-headed households, and children living and working on the streets. High social work caseloads hamper sufficient attention to preventative services, which leads to a strong focus on child protection services and an over-burdened alternative care system.'

In the coming decades Liana hopes for changes, some of which are very similar to those discussed in this Special Issue of *Children Australia*. Liana says: 'I would like to envisage a greater focus on preventative strategies that can enhance the realisation of children's rights; amongst

others, their right to care, protection, participation and education. Community-based services to families at risk, with a focus on family preservation, could prevent out-of-home placement of large numbers of children, especially where families are at risk because of structural problems such as poverty. Early childhood development programmes (an aspect legislated in the Children's Act 38 of 2005), parenting programmes and skills training are strategies that could build the capacity and enhance the well-being of children and families.

In terms of related fields, knowledge about the neurobiological effects of trauma on children can sensitise social workers to the need for preventative interventions and for interventions geared at addressing the more persistent emotional and behavioural effects of trauma on children. This knowledge can also lead to a better understanding of children who end up in the welfare system, who are often seen as 'problem' children instead of children who carry the negative consequences of exposure to trauma.'

Many of our readers will recognise the challenges outlined by our Editorial Consultants, together with the expertise they have to bring to their role with the Journal. This adds to the expertise we are able to access and to promote as we work, research and write about the many important factors to be considered in the sector.

A warm welcome is extended to Neerja, Antoinette and Liana. We hope your involvement with *Children Australia* will be enduring.