

BOOK REVIEWS

Life Chances: Stories of Growing Up in Australia

Janet Taylor (2014). Annandale, NSW: The Federation Press, paperback, ISBN 9 781862 879416, Aus\$39.95, pp. 208

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This volume is presented in seven chapters, five of which are the stories of the lives of three young women and two young men, all of whom were born in 1990. The other two chapters are, first, an Introduction that provides an overview of the content, the purpose of the book and sets the context for the Life Chances study; and a concluding chapter, entitled 'Reflections', that situates the issues highlighted in the stories in the broader context of the study findings.

The stories presented in this book have emerged from the Life Chances study which was, itself, a part of the Brotherhood of St Lawrence's longstanding role in the campaign to alleviate poverty. The campaign was precipitated by the now famous promise made in 1987 by Prime Minister Bob Hawke that by 1990 no Australian child would live in poverty (Museum of Australian Democracy, n.d.). It was what could be called a 'courageous' ambition, but was met with scepticism and considered a rather foolhardy statement by many at the time. This was because it was clear to those associated with the welfare sector that poverty was, and continues to be, a complex situation linked to issues of social policy, family background and culture, life events and systemic disadvantage. Of course when 1990 came, there were still many children living in poverty for myriad, complex reasons, hence the campaign and this particular study that began in 1990. A number of papers and reports concerning the results of this research have now been published, but this publication differs in that it uses the qualitative data from the study and a narrative approach to bring alive the nature of the 21 years of life of these five young adults.

By way of background, the Life Chances study involved 167 children born in inner Melbourne in 1990 and it was always intended that it would be longitudinal in nature. The Introduction provides a summary of the study and its participants and a brief social policy background with reference to the Australian context at the time. This opening chapter is supported by an Appendix that gives considerably more detail about the Life Chances study for those who want this information.

The chapters that follow trace the development of Debbie, Amy, Tom, Sally and Will, focusing on key events and influences at different points in each person's life from birth

to 21 years. Much of the description and detail is quoted directly from interviews with parents and the young people themselves. The engagement between parents and young people and the research staff is evident and has led to the narrative accounts being highly credible. However, the chapters are also somewhat formulaic in nature and perhaps could have been edited more strongly to achieve greater strength, with less repetition of ideas and commentary. While the structure of the accounts provides a useful basis for comparisons between the families and the lives of the children as they are growing up, the overall effect is more report-like, with the data presented somewhat like a Findings chapter. I wondered if it could have been written in a more engaging manner to draw the reader into accounts that were more alive, especially as living in poverty is a major issue in this country with the ever-increasing gap between the haves and the have nots.

The choice and reporting of the life stories is well balanced – not all the families reported in this book were living in poverty, or continued living in poverty, but there are consistent concerns expressed by the parents about the risks of their children being exposed to drug use and antisocial behaviour while growing up in the inner-city environment. This was a higher risk for those living in high-rise flats, who faced living in crowded conditions with limited opportunities for free play out of doors. Three of the families were living on incomes well below the Australian average annual full-time income at that time, but it was notable that regardless of income all parents wanted their children to be educated and have choices in relation to career and life opportunities. Over the years, some moved away from inner Melbourne, but the degree of mobility was linked to income too, and it was those in the high-income bracket who were able to travel overseas and interstate.

The final chapter, entitled 'Reflections', draws together some of the key factors that influenced the lives of the young adults, and discusses these in the light of the broader findings of the Life Chances study. The chapter is presented in sections addressing these key influences: income and poverty; employment and unemployment; school and career choice; and social services. The conclusion is brief – emphasising

the importance of income, housing and resources in the development of children. These factors are also drivers of attainment and maintenance of family cohesion, with the tensions and anxieties associated with a lack of resources often contributing to family dissolution.

This book provides an excellent example of how research-based data can be presented in a way that ensures both a sense of continuity and of change. Furthermore, using the qualitative information in this way makes it both meaningful and, by extrapolation, practical for professionals employed in the welfare sector – and it avoids the ‘dryness’ that sometimes dogs research reports that are reliant on statistical evidence alone. For instance, understanding the ongoing concerns of people raising children in a crowded inner-city environment, where they are exposed to drug users, pollution, noise and lack of safe open spaces for play, tells us something about the environment needed for social housing development. This is pertinent to contemporary debates about housing, choice of housing options and locational issues.

The study is also an excellent example of a longitudinal project that has maintained, as an inherent value, the need to understand development over significant life stages rather than addressing only single points in time. For this reason it will stand as an example of what can be gained from the commitment over time to research studies and will, hopefully, be evidence for the value of funding further studies of this nature.

For those new to the welfare sector, and those in the political and advocacy spheres, this book is a powerful account of

what happens to families, their concerns about raising their children and the difficulties of maintaining wellbeing in the face of language difficulties, marital disharmony, ill health and other adverse circumstances. I suspect that our politicians are inclined to view the lives of Australians through their lenses of advantage, and seldom have significant exposure to disadvantage in any real sense. This book could provide the ground from which to reappraise the reasoning underpinning what remains of the ‘welfare state’; and perhaps encourage our politicians to be less dismissive of the outcomes that policies can have on those with least power and influence.

I particularly liked hearing the voices of the participants in the study and felt that their values, attitudes, ideas and aspirations were well integrated into the book overall. It is a credit to all who contributed, and especially to the parents and young adults who agreed to have their lives presented in this volume. We owe significant thanks to the families, the author Janet Taylor, the Federation Press and the Brotherhood of St Lawrence for this publication, and it will no doubt stand as a resource and teaching tool for social work, public health and sociological coursework.

Reference

Museum of Australian Democracy (n.d.) *Australian Federal Election Speeches: Bob Hawke 1987*. Retrieved from <http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1987-bob-hawke>

Children’s wellbeing in the media age: Multidisciplinary perspectives from the Harvard-Australia Symposium

Editors. Handsley E., MacDougall C., & Rich M. (2015). Publisher: The Federation Press, Sydney, Paperback ISBN 978-1-1-76002-028-6, \$59.95, 260 pages.

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Handsley, MacDougall and Rich enlist 15 scholars from Australia, New Zealand and the United States, representing nine different disciplines and professions, to explore each field’s approach to research about children and the media. Represented were Psychology, Library Science, Paediatrics, Law, Public Health, Bioethics, Nutrition and Dietetics, Social Work, Philosophy and Media Production. This book advocates for multidisciplinary research in the field of children and media with the aim to encourage constructive engagement between scholars from diverse intellectual backgrounds. It is designed to present a backcloth to each discipline’s domain and provide insights into the

research methods currently used, strengths and weaknesses, and contributions of each field to advancing knowledge about children and media. It depicts substantial awareness of an array of disciplinary frameworks, research paradigms and methods. I have one caveat, however, in that arguably one of the most important disciplines, that of Education, has been omitted or overlooked. One chapter author holds a degree in education and works in the field of media production, and the chapter focuses on producing evidence-based documentary films. This leaves a crucial gap for potential readers concerned with children’s wellbeing in relation to media.