



Book Reviews

The Practice of Child Protection – Australian Approaches edited by Gillian Calvert, Adrian Ford & Patrick Parkinson. Hale & Iremonger: Sydney 1993. 218pp. \$23.95

This book brings together twelve papers presented at the Australian Child Protection Conference held at Macquarie University, Sydney in April 1990. The nineteen contributors (some papers have multiple authorship) raise issues about child protection from a wide range of disciplines and a variety of service contexts.

There is a short introduction where the editors point out that this is not an introductory text on child protection practice, rather the book aims to review existing practices and share insights.

The chapters are grouped thematically with a brief introductory summary for each section. Unfortunately each summary is little more than an outline of the chapters to follow and there is limited discussion of the issues. This is surprising in a book about service responses to child abuse and neglect, a problem which poses so many dilemmas for the wider community and the professionals, and given the contradictions and complexities within the practice.

Like many edited collections the quality of the book varies. Some chapters are straight forward descriptions of a service response while in others, issues are explored coherently with well referenced arguments.

Interestingly, a few of the papers which were very compelling when presented at the conference do not translate so well into printed form. This is particularly true of the chapter dealing with the use of the mass media to prevent child sexual assault and the one outlining a professional education program for teachers. The kind of immediacy offered by the author's interaction with the audience which was part of the conference format is missing for the reader. Nevertheless these chapters contain

important ideas if we are to make any significant gains in preventing child abuse and neglect on a large scale.

Also under the heading of Prevention, is an outline of a small community based agency's support program for families where children were considered to be at risk of statutory intervention and likely to be removed from their families. The agency's research projects are outlined. One of the findings – the correlation between case outcome and team functioning – is supported in other chapters. In spite of the smallness of the research samples, the studies outlined will give heart to others who are struggling to measure effectiveness in similar settings.

It is good to find that a book on Australian approaches contains a chapter on the protection of Aboriginal children. The author briefly traces the impact of colonisation, the imposition of western culture on the Aboriginal people and the consequent trail of oppression. The author starkly presents the social structural and economic inequities which underpin child protection issues for his people. At the same time he acknowledges the need to take action where a child is abused and/or neglected and points to legislative practice and initiatives in some Australian states which ensure the local Aboriginal community is an integral part of the decision making process. The author refers to the Indian Child Welfare Act in North America as a goal to be pursued in this country but unfortunately, provides no details about the nature of that legislation.

Under the heading of 'Teamwork and Decision Making', the editors have grouped five chapters covering a wide range of practice experiences. At first sight this looks a strangely unconnected group of papers, however, the

reader will find this is not the case. For example, in the chapter on management of that rare form of child abuse, Munchausen by Proxy, the authors put forward five propositions which could be applied more generally to management of child abuse cases.

There is an interesting analysis of the findings of child death inquiries where the authors highlight the recurring themes of inquiry reports both in Australia and overseas. In spite of the scepticism with which many practitioners view such inquiries, we ignore these reports at our peril. Indeed as the authors point out, the best of those inquiries have been able to highlight the complex interplay which exists between the actions of the individual practitioners and the imperatives of the organisation in which they work. Also in this section there is a discussion of the use of case conferences in decision making. A quite comprehensive search of the literature on this subject leads the author to question the case conference as a reliable decision making and case management tool. This is interesting in the context of a plethora of child death inquiry reports which identify the absence of a case conference as critical in contributing to the tragedy. All of this must go to show the practitioner in child protection that the high solid ground of a scientific practice base is not yet for them, rather they are working in the marshes.

One of the most interesting sections of the book is the one focusing on children in the legal system. The capacity of children to serve as witnesses to their own sexual abuse is explored against a background of research in developmental psychology of children and in particular in the context of studies of children's lying and truth telling behaviour. Of this research the author concludes that children are no more capable than

adults to mislead a jury. This will provide useful material for practitioners who, in trying to argue the case that a particular child is not lying, have seemed doctrinaire and unconvincing in their assertions.

The author argues that there is little research evidence to support the pre-occupation of those child protective workers who seek to reorganise the court room. However, a number of helpful suggestions are offered by way of preparing children for court.

Another chapter explores the pros and cons of legal intervention in parent and

child conflict. The author concludes that while such legislation is playing a number of different roles in the three Australian states where it is employed, counselling and mediation are nevertheless the most effective way to deal with parent-child breakdown.

The final chapter in the book will provide practitioners with a rights and advocacy framework against which they can examine their practice. This author includes brief reference to some current initiatives in the provision of advocacy for children and young people who are caught up in the protective system.

Despite some shortcomings this will prove a useful book for practitioners and there should be enough new ideas to spark discussion and take us just a little further along the path of understanding the complexities and contradictions inherent in the practice of child protection.

*Reviewer: Robin Clark
Regional Director Community Services
North East Health & Community
Services Department.*

Take This Child ... from Kahlin Compound to the Retta Dixon Children's Home by Barbara Cummings.

Aboriginal Studies Press : Canberra. 1990

The name and work of Albert Namatjira is known throughout Australia and beyond. His grand-nephew recently opened an exhibition of his famous predecessor's artwork at the National Gallery of Victoria. In his speech, Mr Williams referred to his own past in which he had been separated from his family - to be reunited only much later in life. For one with aspirations in the world of art, the reunion with a kinship network of which Namatjira was a member was of great significance. With no family contact in his earlier years, Mr Williams exemplified the fate of many Aboriginal Australians who were removed from their families and denied their heritage in the name of 'protection' and 'assimilation.' Barbara Cummings shared similar experiences and in her book *Take This Child...* she charts the movement of government policy, societal attitudes and personal experiences which surrounded the Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory from the early twentieth century to the present.

The author draws attention to the fact that Albert Namatjira was one of six Aborigines of full-descent in the Northern Territory to be exempt from

acquiring the status of 'ward' under the Welfare Act of 1953. Under this Act, people of mixed descent were intended to inherit a greater measure of independence from the government which had hitherto assumed the role of protector for these people. Barbara Cummings relates the development of government policy and its manifestations, beginning with the era of protection and segregation during which it was deemed necessary to create categories of Aborigines according to levels in the degree of descent. She recounts the effect on the earlier scene of figures such as Baldwin Spencer who reported on the situation of 'part-Aborigines' in the Northern Territory and made recommendations which advocated the separation of all Aboriginal people from the white population for fear of racial mixing. His theories of race reflected a consensual attitude in the early 1900s which assumed that people of mixed descent were of a lower intellectual capacity than Europeans and would isolate them from their full-blooded relatives (who were supposed to be of an even lower order of intellect) and white neighbours alike. The subsequent legislation and the shifts in emphasis and constitution it entailed directed the plight of what increasingly

became a misplaced, confused and restricted group of people.

The influence of missionaries on the lives of this group in the Northern Territory was considerable, and the author details this alongside the efforts of the government with regard to the 'half-caste problem'. The Retta Dixon Home is a central feature of the book: it was the backdrop for the childhood and youth of Barbara Cummings' own life.

As Director of the AIM (Aboriginal Inland Mission), Retta Dixon established accommodation firstly for Aboriginal children who were orphaned, and then, in line with the Aborigines Act of 1910 and the Aborigines Ordinance of 1911, for Aborigines of whom the Chief Protector had custody. It was believed by those such as Spencer that it was necessary for half-castes to remain isolated in order for them to interbreed and so cease to be a problem in an increasing white population. Hence the large numbers of children of mixed descent were taken from their mothers and families and placed under the protection of the government. The missions played a more formal role in these affairs when it was decided that they would act as suitable 'repositories' for a large portion