

Keynote Speech by Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott

10th Anniversary Celebration of the Institute of Child Protection Studies

2 December 2014

It is a deep honour to be invited to speak on this special anniversary of the Institute. Was it really a decade ago that I spoke at the opening of the Institute in the garden on a glorious Canberra day? It was an occasion full of hope and possibility. How wonderful it is to witness these hopes and possibilities fulfilled. Under the visionary and dedicated leadership of Professor Morag McArthur, the Institute has pioneered new directions in the field of child protection and child well-being.

The paths in the history of child protection have often been paved with pain. The voices of the Stolen Generations, British Child Migrants, the Forgotten Australians and those affected by Forced Adoption practices have all been heard in the past decade, as we now hear the voices of adults harmed by institutional child sexual abuse.

On the other side of the balance sheet are achievements, achievements I have personally witnessed in my 45 years in this field:

- The deinstitutionalisation of child welfare and a shift to family-based care such as foster care and kinship care;
- Services to prevent children entering care, and services to assist children to be reunited safely with their families;
- The public and professional recognition of child physical abuse;
- The recognition of the reality of child sexual abuse;
- The understanding that children are harmed by witnessing family violence;
- Perhaps the most transformational of all, the growing acceptance of children as holders of human rights, including the right to participate in decisions affecting them;
- And last but not least, the massive growth in research in the child protection field.

The role of vulnerable children in research is something which has really only emerged in the past decade, and the Institute has been an international leader in this. This is reflected in its recent ARC Discovery Grant to explore this very topic.

The ACU research ethics process has supported the Institute's research, which explored the voices of children and young people long before the ethics bodies in other universities would consider this. This was farsighted. Inspiring examples of the Institute's research with children and young people includes children of parents who are incarcerated, children in homelessness services with their parents, and vulnerable young people in relation to identity and meaning.

The window such research gives us into the inner world of vulnerable children and young people, and how their inner world affects their outer world, and how their outer world affects their inner world, is profound. It gives us a far deeper understanding than that which emerges from the traditional research focus on children as 'objects of concern'. Among other things, the Institute's research shows us children's attachment to, and concern for, their parents, and the strengths in their family situations which are not always obvious to others.

Such research is as profound as the insights we are given by adults who draw on the adversity of their own childhood. A prime example of this is Professor Raimond Gaita, who had a long association with ACU, when he speaks of children whose parents have substance misuse and mental health problems, and says, "these children need two things – to be loved and to love their parents without shame" (Scott, 2014, p. 121).

To love their parents without shame - what must such an experience be like for a child? This powerfully reminds us that in the field of child welfare, the respect we show to a child's parents, matters not just to the parent, but also to the child. We must not add to their burden of shame.

It also reminds us, in the words of the UNICEF report on child abuse deaths in rich nations, that; **"the challenge of ending child abuse is the challenge of breaking the link between adults' problems and children's pain."** (UNICEF, *A League Table of Child Maltreatment Deaths in Rich Nations*, 2003).

What are these adult problems? They are primarily alcohol and drug misuse, mental illness, family violence, incarceration, and homelessness. The Institute has been at the forefront of recognising this, and undertaking research into such parental problems which cause children's pain.

The breadth and depth of research undertaken by the Institute in its first decade is truly impressive:

- Encompassing both the domains of policy and professional practice;
- Working across different academic disciplinary boundaries;
- Working across different sectoral boundaries;
- Ranging in scope from the ACT to national and international.

The following exemplars from each of the past 10 years capture something of the richness and diversity of the work of the Institute:

- 2005 - Workforce Planning in the ACT Care and Protection System
- 2006 – Being ‘child-centred’ in child protection – what does it mean?
- 2007 – They’ve Gotta Listen – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People in Out of Home Care
- 2008 – International Recruitment in Child Protection
- 2009 – Who’s in our family? An application of the theory of family boundary ambiguity to the experience of former foster carers
- 2010 – May Do, Should Do, Can Do – collaboration between Commonwealth and State Service Systems for Vulnerable Children (this original work by Gail Winkworth and Michael White is now having wide impact far beyond the field of child protection)
- 2011 – How Relevant is the Role of Values in Child Protection Practice? A National Survey of Statutory Child Protection Workers
- 2012 – National Analysis of Workforce Trends in Child Protection
- 2013 – Mothers in Methadone Treatment and their Involvement with the Child Protection System (a complex area in which ethical, legal and clinical issues overlap)

The current projects are perhaps the richest and most diverse set in the decade in relation to their topic, and in keeping with those which precede them, are characterised by the hallmark trinity of the Institute’s work: values, knowledge and skills. These are central to all good social justice research, of course. Values are the foundation stone on which the research knowledge and skills sit. The Institute not only upholds values of integrity and respect in the way it goes about its research, but it also conducts research on values. In relation to knowledge in the field of child protection, the challenge is twofold:

1. Closing the gap between what we know and what we don't know; and,
2. Closing the gap between what we know and what we do.

The Institute is a role model in how both these challenges can be met, with their 'research to practice' approach being particularly praiseworthy as a form of knowledge transfer.

There is a third gap of which we hear little, but which in a field such as child protection is at the core: *closing the gap between what we do and who we are*, to use the words of Parker Palmer. In one sense, this is what the Institute's highly original study of the values of child protection workers explored.

At the heart of this is the notion of vocation. An old Quaker definition of vocation is that it is where the heart's desire meets the world's need. In the field of child protection it can also be where the heart's anguish meets the world's need.

And the values in the field of child protection are not cerebral. They are visceral. They exist in a context in which contested values and raw human emotions are inextricably intertwined – love and loss, cruelty and compassion, the state as protector and the state as an agent of social control. Add politics to the contested values and the raw emotions, and one can see why child protection is such a complex and controversial domain in which to undertake research, let alone professional practice. It is a prime example of what Donald Schon in his classic work, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, once wrote:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground, where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and techniques, and there is a swampy lowland where the situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however, great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or the larger society while in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern. (Donald Schon, 1987, p 1)

Child protection research, policy and practice most certainly belong to the swamp – there are no simple technical solutions in the territory in this great problem of human concern.

But friends, do not despair. The swamp is a rich and fertile place, where all life began. It is precisely the place where an Institute of Child Protection Studies, in a university such as the Australian Catholic University, should be.

I congratulate the Institute and the University. You have done extraordinary work in the past ten years. May you continue to do so in the years to come.

References

- Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals Think in Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Scott, D. (2014). A crucible of compassion, a harbinger of hope: reflections on child protection and the vulnerable child. In C. Taylor & M. Graefe (eds.), *A Sense for Humanity, the Ethical Thought of Raimond Gaita*, Melbourne: Monash University Publishing.
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