

Introduction

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There is a growing consensus that children's well being is in crisis in the United States and throughout the world. The current status of children is a grim one marked by increasing impoverishment and homelessness, declining health and education, increasing reports of abuse and neglect, rising incidents of racism and sexism. Millions of children and youth are presently suffering physically, emotionally and socially in placement and service systems that are overcrowded and inadequately staffed. Minority children of single mothers are especially vulnerable to poverty, ill health and poor education.¹ Infant mortality rates in the United States do not reflect the sophisticated status of our health care system. Despite one hundred years of rhetoric on family preservation, the rates of out-of-home placement of children are once again rising to a half million or more in 1992. It is time to take stock of our history in order to understand how this current crisis has evolved. A systematic analysis is necessary to come to terms with our history of fragmented, ad hoc, reactive interventions by policy makers, practitioners, and social scientists, that have produced little fundamental reform.²

¹The decade of the 1980's witnessed a dramatic growth in child poverty, partly as a result of national policy which placed single mother families with children in particular jeopardy, and partly as a result of changes in family composition and employment patterns. This situation has been accompanied by an increased out-of-home placement of children, often for reasons such as the family's lack of health insurance of any type. For further information see Shapiro and Greenstein (1988); Danziger and Stern (1990) and Kimmich (1985). A recent report of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty indicate that there are 250,000 school-age homeless children and many of these children are not attending any school.

²Much of the analysis thus far has focused on rationalistic approaches to improving the existing system without reference to more systematic analysis of the status of children, or to considerations of fundamental changes in existing delivery systems (see, for example, Kamerman & Kahn, 1990).

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This double issue examines some of the "certainties" that have informed the field of child welfare from its beginning, and also presents several alternatives for significant reform in the system. Such reform is necessary if there is to be a change from the present highly bureaucratized system that largely serves only maintenance and social control functions. The authors of the several papers in this issue developed their work within this framework. It is our hope that this special issue might inform the development of a systematic theory-based, just, humane and effective approach to enhancing the well-being of children.

As Friere (1973) has advised we must critically question our beliefs, policies and practices as an essential step in transforming the system into one grounded in interdependence and empowerment of families with agencies. Thus, we need to examine how and why conventional wisdom constrains, directs, and influences policy and practice as well as theory (for example, the belief that the best interests of a child can be served independently of his or her family). We then need to envision new wisdom that might better inform our policy, practice and theory. Taken together the papers in this volume present a critical examination and the bases for a new dialogue about child and youth welfare. It also advocates a more participatory approach to innovation and change - one in which parents and children collaborate with professionals in the transformation of the system.

A further impetus for this volume is the need to consider the politics of child welfare, as Gil (1985) has so often advised. Children and children's issues are critical items for the social agenda of the 1990s. Who will participate in the establishing of that agenda; what will its priorities be; and, how will that agenda be implemented? It is our hope that in the year 2000 we may be able to look back on the 1990s as the period of critical reflection, action and reform for children and youth, as was the decade at the beginning of this century. But, this time we hope that the system will be transformed, not merely "incrementally" improved.

In the opening paper Sarri and Finn question the "common sense" and conventional wisdom approaches to child welfare. They identify three certainties that inform the field of child welfare: the dichotomy of private and public domains; the primacy of autonomous individualism; and, the capacity for corrective intervention. These certainties have served as powerful guides for the behavior of key actors and for the development of child welfare practices and structures.

Good advocates a participatory grassroots approach to organization and program development for adolescent females. She shows that members of affected communities can be effective participants in both the agency and community. With her emphasis on community she challenges the certainty of autonomous individualism and highlights the power of

personal relationships in social change. An economically deprived neighborhood may find great resources for program and community development in its residents. The roles citizens perform and the view that the family is an open system in which community problem solving can contribute to its functioning also challenge the distinction between public and private.

In line with Good's discussion, Gambrill and Paquin address the web of social connection beyond the nuclear family and point to the important potential of neighbors as resources. In recent years practitioners have come to view neighbors as key sources for identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect; they have given less attention to their potential for providing social support. Gambrill and Paquin challenge this limited view of neighbors as resources by enumerating a variety of roles neighbors are able to perform. They outline the knowledge and skills that can enhance neighboring as a source for social support. Their paper presents a framework for studying the neighborhood as a physical and social environment whose resources can enhance individual and social well being. They offer a strategy for developing organic solidarity and point to the need for developing new structures, such as neighborhood block organizations, to provide family and community support. Their work also warns against the neo-conservative position that advocate radical self-help by arguing that neighboring can complement other strategies for social support, but it is not a substitute for socially responsible and equitable public policy.

While Gambrill and Paquin and Good address the neighborhood and community context of practice, Figueira-McDonough offers a critical examination of this context, emphasizing the importance of structural characteristics that impact children and youth. She develops a framework for analysis of the dimensions of community structure (poverty, employment, housing, family structure) as predictors of individual behavior. Her focus is on the urban poor community from which the majority of children and youth in the child welfare system are drawn. Figueira-McDonough points to the risk of reification of notions such as the "underclass." She challenges us to move beyond stereotypes to a new critical wisdom. She questions beliefs that poverty is "self-induced" and critiques the gender biases embedded in popular "solutions" for the problems of the inner cities. She also raises critical questions that demand rethinking of some widespread and deeply held beliefs about the intent and effect of school integration. Her work suggests that the practice of integration alone is not enough. These practices may imply subjugation rather than empowerment, when they are carried out within fundamentally racist systems where minorities lack political and economic power.

Pelton examines and critiques both the family preservation programs and the family support movement currently being advocated as the

vanguard for child and family welfare reform. He argues that both have developed within the extant social structure and are thereby at risk for cooptation within that structure. These efforts have accommodated to rather than challenged the certainties of the social welfare system, such as the dichotomy of public and private domains and the ideology of autonomous individualism. As a consequence, these efforts to transform the child welfare system end up as mere incremental changes. Pelton proposes a functional reorganization of the social service delivery system to encompass a broader range of needs, populations and service modalities.

Iglehart calls attention to the serious institutionalized racism in our child welfare/juvenile justice systems. Using information from a larger study of adolescent youth in the system in California, she shows that the worker is the embodiment of both child welfare policy and the bureaucracy from the perspective of the youth and his/her family. Rapport between the worker and youth was observed to be the single most important predictor of successful outcomes. However, organizational maintenance worker requirements more often control worker behavior than do the needs of youth. Iglehart also documents the serious problems of lengthy and multiple placements for many adolescents who have been placed in the system.

The paper by Dames places the issues of child welfare in a global context as she considers the responsibility of the United States government to the insular areas of the Pacific and the Caribbean. She presents a brief history of territorial relationships, discusses the indicators of child well being in the territories, and points to the multiple jeopardies children experience in the territories when they become targets of the child welfare system. Dames calls for a new approach in policy and program development that recognizes the needs, values, and characteristics of the insular areas.

In his provocative paper on street children in El Paso and Mexico City Peralta challenges views about the independence between family, market and state as well as the public-private distinction. He locates these children in the context of today's global economy. His description of the various roles these children play in this economy is informative for practitioners who work with them and their families, in the United States as well as in Latin America, Africa or Asia. He points to the strengths of these children and their families as they cope with dire economic and social distress. He also discusses the implications for children's well-being of the change to a "free trade" economic relationship. Practitioners who work with these children and their families need to look beyond the limits of national boundaries in their problem-solving, as well as find solutions outside the usual "treatment-rehabilitation" technologies.

Pottick, Lerman and Micchelli discuss the differential perceptions of children and their parents from the perceptions of mental health profes-

sionals. Professionals often fail to address parents' reports of children's behavioral problems. Instead, they focus on a limited range of problem definitions linked to mental health treatment technologies. The authors challenge practitioners working with children to examine the characteristics of social systems (e.g. schools and social agencies) that may exacerbate, create or maintain the very problems that professionals purport to treat. The schools are the critical arena in which the needs and problems of children must be assessed. Parents are likely to be more actively involved when the problems that they bring to the agency are directly addressed.

These works, taken together, move us toward a new wisdom ground in participatory knowledge development and action. Working together - practitioners, policy makers, research along with young people and their families can transform a system that up to now has promised far more than it has delivered.

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