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Guest Editors Áine de Róiste and Fred Powell

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Foreword

Áine de Róiste

Cork Institute of Technology

Fred Powell

University College Cork

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Foreword

This landmark issue on ‘Reflections on recent child abuse reports: Implications for policy and practice’ is a most welcome and needed special issue of the journal. It brings together a number of diverse interdisciplinary and practitioner perspectives on what is striking for policy, education and training and practice from the recent Irish child abuse questions. Thought provoking questions are raised for discussion and relationships drawn between various cases which are of significance for all those working in the fields of social care, social work, child protection and related areas.

Not surprisingly, the debate about the introduction of mandatory reporting is referred to in several of the papers. Kilkelly teases out the corollaries and uncertainties of the introduction of mandatory reporting consequences. She emphasises the need for constitutional reform and the Children’s Rights referendum may introduce one ‘step forward’ in this regard. She concludes that along with mandatory reporting and constitutional reform, robust child care inspection systems, would assist in addressing many of the problems highlighted in the various inquiry reports. With the Children’s Rights referendum pending Kilkelly’s paper draws clear links between the inquiries and reform on children’s rights.

Burns and MacCarthy question the system’s capacity to deal with the anticipated extra work mandatory reporting would in all likelihood entail. They argue that heavier caseloads since the 1990s as well as a rising number of referrals compromise social workers’ abilities to meet the greater expectations and demands prevalent in the fields of child protection and welfare. They draw attention to the fact that a small number of time-consuming cases can ‘saturate’ or dominate caseloads, resulting in crisis work being the norm for child protection social workers. Consequently, there is a neglect of other cases and no time available for preventative and supportive work. Drawing on their research on social worker caseloads, the authors question the ability of the Irish state to meet its commitments as outlined in the Ryan report implementation plan.

In his paper Howard questioned residential child care workers’ abilities to forge supportive relationships with children given the time-consuming demands of administrative paperwork which takes them away from being with the children. Inquiry reports have contributed to a culture of increased recording and accountability but perhaps, according to Howard, this may have gone too far. He queries whether these lead staff at times to spend less quality time with the children in their care? Have routine incidents and disagreements now become disproportionately problematised? More time is now being spent on related paperwork rather than using an ‘incident’ to assist the child to learn from the experience. Howard’s passionate stance forged during his years of experience in residential child-care is undoubtedly provocative. Interestingly, in her paper Buckley also noted how “the bureaucratisation of child protection work can out-manoeuvre therapeutically oriented practices” (p. 58).

The lessons Ireland can learn from reforms in children’s services in the UK arising from inquiries undertaken there are imparted in the paper by Featherstone, White and Wassell. The perils of standardization processes are discussed and an alternative presented based on socio-technical principles, the “simple organisations, complex jobs

approach” involving small autonomous work groups, as recommended by the Munro Report (2011). They also warn, akin to Howard, against “the seductive proxies for quality that timescales and targets produce” which may undermine relationship trust between the child and professional and professional intuitive knowledge.

International practice in the UK, US and Australia is examined in Buckley’s paper and the lessons for Ireland are succinctly presented. Standardized data collection is one of the ‘lessons’ specified as currently there is a lack of adequate child protection and family support data as well as ‘disconnectedness’ in the information retained by services working with families and children. This, along with a high degree of inconsistency and non-compliance with child protection policies and procedures, has meant that today’s child welfare and protection services may still not be ‘fit for purpose’ despite all the recommendations and insights from the various inquiry reports. The “folly of going too far with proceduralisation” concurs with concerns raised also by Howard and by Featherstone, White and Wassell in this volume.

Gendered notions of parenting and how they may compromise professional practice as well as gendered processes in child abuse are explored in Mulkeen’s paper. From a feminist perspective, she discusses the problems related to stereotyped discourses of femininity and masculinity and gendered professional responses with examples drawn from various inquiry reports. The import of hearing parental experiences of parenting as well as greater professional training in engaging with violent parents and the assessment of neglect were also explored in this paper.

The requirement for on-going training and development for professionals in the assessment and support of parenting in adversity (poverty/deprivation) is to the forefront of Halpenny’s paper. Based on the inquiry reports, she contends that parenting assessments need to assess stressors impacting on parenting and incorporate substance abuse and mental health screening. Further invoking the various inquiry reports, she advocates the need for professionals to seek out and hear what the children, extended family members and perhaps others (neighbours, friends) have to say regarding family life.

We are sure you will be enlightened, provoked and stimulated by this collection of papers. We would like to commend all the authors for their contributions. To provide context for this Special Issue, the dates of key policies and reports are listed below.

Key policies and reports relating to child protection and welfare

1970

The Kennedy Report (Reformatory and industrial schools system report)

1980

Task Force on Child Care Services: Final report

1991

Child Care Act

1993

Kilkenny Incest Investigation

1995

Child Care Regulations (1995 and 1996)

1996

Report on the Inquiry into the Operation of Madonna House
Kelly - A Child is Dead report of a Committee of Inquiry

1998

West of Ireland Farmer Case (McColgan case)
Protection of Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act
Report on child sexual abuse in swimming

1999

Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children

2000

The National Children's Strategy 2000-2010
Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act

2001

First and second interim reports of the commission to inquire into child abuse
Children Act
Report of the Working Group on Foster Care: A child-centred partnership
Youth Homelessness Strategy
National Standards for Children's Residential Centres

2002

Our Duty to Care: The principles of good practice for the protection of children and
young people

2003

National Standards for Foster Care
National Standards for Special Care Units
National Guidelines on the Use of Single Separation in Special Care Units

2004

Third interim report of the Commission to inquire into child abuse
National Standards for Children Detention Schools

2005

Ferns report

2006

Youth Justice Review

2007

The Agenda for Children's Services

2008

National Youth Justice Strategy 2008-2010

Review Inquiry on any matter pertaining to child protection issues touching on or concerning Dr. A

2009

Report of the Commission of Investigation, Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin (Murphy report)

The Dunne Family Inquiry Monageer

Report of the Commission to inquire into child abuse (Ryan Report)

National Quality Standards for Residential Services for People with Disabilities (2009)

Policy Statement on under-12s in Residential Care Settings (2009)

2010

Report by Commission of Investigation into Catholic Diocese of Cloyne (Cloyne report)

Roscommon Child Care Case

2011

Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children

Task Force Report on the Child and Family Support Agency

2012

Report of the Independent Child Death Review Group

Audits reviewing Child Protection Practices in four dioceses (Cork and Ross; Clonfert; Limerick; Kildare and Leighlin)

Audits of Religious Congregations (Missionaries of the Sacred Heart; Dominicans; Congregation of the Holy Spirit)

The Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies aims to present original ideas and provoke discussion. IJASS welcomes reactions to the papers and looks forward to receiving ideas and articles for future issues.

Áine de Róiste & Fred Powell