Editorial: Resisting fragmentation

In these post-modern times, we are familiar with notions of specialisation, fragmentation, individualization and decontextualisation (Dominelli 2002), and we seem to have become inured to the possibility that they produce outcomes often inconsistent with the values we regard as critical to authentic social welfare work.

Bureaucracies that fund most of our programs now operate with a dual focus, or is it a forked tongue? They emphasise whole of government approaches, integration, coordination and social inclusion. More than ever our professional task and our civic responsibility is defined as building social connectedness and facilitating social cohesion, through policies, programs and practices. Governments have rediscovered community development and early intervention.

But they continue to operate highly specialised funding programs, and in order to target another excluded group or ‘new’ need, they develop yet another specialised program. Because of the way they are funded, agencies can’t afford to spread funds too thinly so they apply for new money for a new program, even if it is doing similar things to half a dozen old programs. Fragmentation of services is a response to fragmentation of funding, which in turn is an ideological choice, unrelated to the rhetoric of integration and the holistic meeting of needs. While the majority of resources go into individual and family services, in response to the growing complexity of social life, the degree of their separateness and lack of coordination can be questioned.

So it is reassuring to note that the papers in this issue of Practice Reflexions all challenge in some way the pressures that create and maintain fragmentation, that paradoxically reinforce social exclusion, and value self-sufficiency over social connectedness and collaboration. Deborah West, Gretchen Ennis and David Heath stress the importance of learning together. They create a learning context where all ‘stakeholders’ in social welfare work can engage together for the benefit of community, and thereby share the ownership of issues requiring intervention and redress. Joan Heron and Sandy Taylor recognise the destructiveness of denying the sexuality of older people in care, partialising their individuality. Their paper and Barbara Carter’s raise important implications for us about the public-private divide, and the role of the state in protecting and advocating for the rights of vulnerable individuals. Philip Mendes examines the policy context to analyse whether the current Federal Government is meeting its own objectives to increase and facilitate social inclusion.

John Rule’s provocative paper reverses this responsibility and asks: what are the obligations of individuals to challenge their peer group and the fundamental social disconnection that allows them to behave in violent ways towards others? His group of social activists are adopting impressive educational strategies to pursue their aims to reverse the fragmenting and inner-directed patterns of youth socialising. Chris Laming’s review of the book Holding Men offers insights into working with Indigenous men who are ‘wounded’ but resilient, with the ‘hope of building that resilience in others, both individually and in community’. John Rule’s group can’t tackle it all and we as a society and as practitioners need to work on the resilience of some young people and the structures that limit it.

Finally, both Melissa Lindeman’s and Sue Beattie-Johnson’s papers address methodological ways in which holism, genericism, connectedness and subjectivity are expressed in preference
to more limiting, objective and decontextualised approaches – Melissa in regard to assessment tools, Sue regarding program planning.

With such endorsement of the importance of context and social connectedness, we should feel hopeful that the profession’s commitment to resisting fragmentation is real and active.

Reference


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