



Editorial

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This special issue is dedicated to the Xth EUSARF conference which was held at the University of Padua in Italy in March, 2008 in collaboration with the International Association for Outcome-Based Evaluation and Research on Family and Children's Services (iaOBERfcs). The theme of the conference 'Assessing the "Evidence-Base" of Intervention for Vulnerable Children and Their Families: Cross National Perspectives and Challenges for Research, Practice and Policy' attracted over 500 delegates from over 30 countries (Canali, Vecchiato, & Whitaker, 2008). Their enthusiasm and interest in this conference stresses the importance of sharing knowledge internationally and the role that cross cultural learning has to play in the pursuit of research excellence (Canali, Maluccio, Vecchiato, & Berry, 2009). The papers presented in the conference portrayed a wide array of attempts to elicit evidence through using different types of methodologies in different social and cultural contexts. This special issue presents a flavor of that variety.

Research focusing on identifying effective interventions with vulnerable children and families is especially challenging (Vecchiato, Maluccio, & Canali, 2002; Zeira et al., 2008). On the one hand, there are methodological limitations. For example, ethical issues can limit the application of rigorous research designs that are needed to demonstrate internal validity and research with small samples of participants can raise complex methodological issues. On the other hand, idiosyncratic characteristics of the population call for innovative and creative methods that will reveal important components of successful interventions.

The first article in this special issue by Hans Grietens reflects upon European perspectives on evidence-based work with vulnerable children and families. This article gives the reader an intellectual tour of culture, language and ethnicity within the context of vulnerable children and their families. Taking into account the changing history and boundaries, Grietens discusses its consequences for policy and practice in Europe. Finally, through reviewing the roots of evidence-based practice paradigm, the article provides a description of different organizations and groups in Europe and beyond. This description leads to the conclusion that Europe is too diverse and simply is too much of a mosaic to be considered as a whole. Some particles of this mosaic are explored throughout this special issue.

A different aspect of Europe is presented in the second article by Marco Ius and Paula Milani who take us on a journey with Holocaust survivors. Contextualized in what is almost certainly the darkest period in Europe's twentieth century history, this qualitative study describes the experiences of survivors and the resilience that enabled them to overcome their childhood trauma. This article illustrates the often astonishing capacity to overcome adversity among adults who were hidden in various situations as children during the Holocaust and who later experienced a

range of placements after World War Two. Careful exploration of life narratives reveals personal relationships and other significant experiences that appear to have contributed to participants' resilience. We can learn much from this study's findings, especially about how access to a shared and accurate reality about one's origins can facilitate empowerment and positive identity formation. The research also offers important insights into the impact of serial attachments and the development of self efficacy mentorship that might be applied to vulnerable children, especially those in out of home care.

Two articles deal with issues related to the effectiveness of placements. The article by June Thoburn presents findings from a study of administrative data on children in formal out of home care in different jurisdictions in 14 countries. It emphasizes the state of knowledge on outcomes for children in care, paying particular attention to children's needs for a sense of belonging and family membership. Moreover, the article stresses the importance of administrative data contributing to the understanding of evaluation research. Further, the author argues that despite the importance of learning from experiences of other jurisdictions, it is important to respond to the unique conditions of each welfare system, including the characteristics of the children served and the nature of the programs provided.

A more specific example of what is often neglected in the literature on residential services is presented by Erik Knorth and his colleagues. Building on evidence from the Netherlands, the article argues for a greater emphasis in research and practice on the status and personal characteristics of residential workers. Group workers are those who interact daily with children in residential care. Hence, the quality of their social interaction and the working relationship they develop with the child is a key factor in achieving a successful experience of residential care. They also stress the importance of involving the parents and family of the child. The article offers evidence about the important role that good cooperation between workers, parents and children has in improving the child's functioning and decreasing problems in the family. Lastly, the authors make a plea for more research on the relationships between group workers' qualifications and working styles and the outcomes of children in residential care.

Two articles present tools that aim at improving practice with vulnerable populations. The tools are not strict interventions, but rather serve as a systematic guidelines for practitioners who wish to improve their practice and its evidence base. The first, by Canali and Vecchiato describes an empirical way to comprehensively assess the life space of children living in multi-problem families. They first delineate the components of a holistic approach to assessing the child and family's life space. One clear advantage of this approach is that it graphically portrays the map of subjects and resources that are involved in working with a particular group of families and their children. This map can be used together with the clients to better share responsibilities and choices about interventions. The authors provide findings from research that tested this methodology and again show that by introducing this approach the numbers of systems involved in the situation can be increased. Finally, they conclude by encouraging the development of this model as a basis for better evaluation projects and for a better use of existing resources.

A more clinical perspective is presented by Jenny Dwyer and her colleagues. They describe an approach to prevent or reduce escalation of emotional and behavioural difficulties for young people who are facing or have faced threatening situations and other overwhelming events. Drawing upon practice experience and informed by theories regarding development, attachment and trauma, they developed PAIN which is part of "emotional first aid" for traumatised young people. The developers of PAIN argue that it is not an intervention approach in itself but rather a tool to support those at risk of becoming increasingly dysregulated as a result of ongoing trauma. It has had wide application in child protection, residential care, youth justice and pri-

mary health settings in Australia. PAIN would appear to hold considerable international interest for both researchers and practitioners.

Finally, the article by Bamblett, Harrison and Lewis explores culturally responsive work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia. It sheds light on the importance of learning from the experiences of others from a cultural differences perspective. The article underscores the significance of developing culturally sensitive practices and policies. The authors address the key issues involved in creating the evidence base for child and family services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia, which respects and utilises Aboriginal cultural knowledge and practices. The article discusses key concepts such as culture, voice and resilience, and the ongoing impact of colonisation. Further, it introduces a conceptual framework based on the themes of culture and voice. Finally the article suggests a research methodology that is based on a hybrid of Indigenous and western epistemologies.

This special issue showcases a wealth of investigative experience with vulnerable children and families from around the world. We are invited to explore culture, relationships, trauma and a wide range of care-giving contexts. The articles critically examine conceptual frameworks and methodologies with the aim of improving our evidence base for best practice. All have powerful clinical implications. The collection as a whole manifests the diversity and the commonality of challenges facing children, families, practitioners, managers and researchers in different parts of the world. Emerging from a strong commitment to international collaboration, this special issue reinforces our conviction that cross-national dialogue around research can greatly extend and enrich knowledge. In the early twenty-first century opportunities to capitalise on such global potentialities are increasing exponentially.

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