

**Foster care Research in Australia: Can we count on making a difference to
Policy and Practice, for Families and Children.**

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In opening this paper, I'd like to acknowledge with respect the Gia clan, of the Birra Gubba nation, who are the traditional owners of the land at Airlie Beach.

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Introduction

"I've been fostering for 15 years. I've even won an award. Big Deal! All I see is things going downhill and getting worse. What good will come from this research? Will anything change?" [Foster Carer 2003]

"I've participated in heaps of surveys but seen no improvements. What difference will this survey make?" [Foster Carer 2003]

"It's really disheartening to think that you do all this work and nothing may come of it" [PhD Researcher 2003]

These opening comments have been made this year in respect of the collaborative research on Foster Care and Foster Carers being undertaken by the research partnership between the School of Social Work and Community Welfare at James Cook University and the Mackay/Whitsunday Region of the Queensland Department of Families. They reflect uncertainty shared by both researchers and research participants about whether and how research will make any positive difference to the lives of children in foster care.

This scepticism is not unusual according to a reviewer of the recently published collection *Making a Difference in Families* (Munford and Sanders 2003). “It’s not unusual for Social Researchers and research participants to feel frustrated and at times cynical about the potential for research to have a positive impact on policies that could improve the circumstances of the people studied” (Croker 2003).

The editors of *Making a Difference in Families*, Robyn Munford and Jackie Sanders, seek to dispel such dismay by providing hope and direction. Through ten accounts of actual research which has had a positive impact on social policy or practice in human services, they identify critical points in the research process when making a difference might be pursued.

Following their lead, I intend to address some of the ways in which there is potential for research to make a difference. None of them are assured without conscious and deliberate effort and, when all is said and done, the gains may be less than we might hope for. Nonetheless, I believe that there are at least four ways we might count on making a difference:

- Research as a Transformative Experience for participants
- Research as Impetus for improved practice with families
- Research as an influence for social policy change and development
- Research as an influence in shaping further research

I will address each of these in turn, using examples drawn from the JCU/QDOF Foster Care research partnership, the Munford and Sanders collection, and other recently published reviews and accounts of research, admittedly confined to the western world, though including research with Indigenous families and children.

Research as a Transformative Experience for participants.

Applied social research in the human services field is usually inspired not merely by a thirst for knowledge in and of itself, but also by a commitment to take some action or make change in our understanding of policy or practice (Alston and Bowles 1998). For many in the human services, a commitment to social justice is a core value which

permeates practice, including research. Thus empowerment-oriented research within the emancipatory tradition is an approach to doing research in ways which, in themselves, can make a positive difference.

While conventional research ethics requirements are founded on the premise “Do no harm”, by contrast transformative research ethics commit us to “Do some good” while doing research.

From this perspective, the International Human Development Framework proposed by George and van Oudenhoven in 2002, provides a valuable guide for research (and practice) in the child welfare field.

International Human Development Framework

- Empowerment
- Full participation of all stakeholders
- Rigorous implementation of human rights --in particular the rights of the child
- Commitment to working with people under stress
- Recognition and validation of local practices
- Partnerships based on equality and mutual respect

(George and van Oudenhoven, 2002).

In line with this framework, the aspects of transformative research that I intend to discuss are:

- Respect for the Voice
- Power of narratives
- Empowering processes
- Culturally appropriate research

Respect for the Voice

Hitherto, most research in child welfare has been designed by professional practitioners and researchers, with little attention to canvassing and considering the views of other stakeholders beyond the questions and responses pre-determined by the researchers.

With the emergence of feminist, anti-racist and anti-oppressive critiques of traditional practice and research, value is now increasingly being placed on hearing and respecting the voices of those who are the focus of research, be they children and young people in care, foster carers, natural parents, front-line workers and so forth. Moreover, with the influence of post-modern thinking, there is also a concern to identify multiple voices: to outreach for the views of alienated or marginalised service users (such as foster carers who have quit, or natural parents who are hard to like), and to seek out less obvious voices (such as those of grandparents who unexpectedly find themselves becoming foster carers of their grandchildren).

In searching for multiple voices, there is an emphasis on valuing difference as well as similarities; a commitment to not homogenising research findings nor privileging shared themes and thereby obscuring the differences which are shaped by multiple realities (Irwin 2003).

Respect for the voice also entails attention to language, and critical reflection on the discourses shaping the way researchers hear how people talk about their realities.

In a Canadian study reported in the Munford and Sanders book, families using a resource centre were initially depicted in the research report as impoverished, passive recipients of a service that helped them with their problems. In sharing the findings with participants, the researchers were aghast to realise that, despite their use of participatory action research techniques intended to be empowering, they had in fact added to the marginalisation of a disadvantaged population (Raven, Rivard, Samson and Vanderplaat 2003).

Reflecting critically on the language and discourse used in the research report, together the researchers and participants reconstructed the families as active agents making choices and managing challenges, and they reframed the outcomes in a language of empowerment (Croker 2003).

Thus, in transformative research, respect for voice is clearly aligned with a focus on strengths rather than deficits. This means that in our Foster Care research, we strive

to resist using the loaded language sometimes heard in the child protection field such as “demanding foster carer”; “abusive parent”; “disturbed child”; or “uncaring worker”.

Of course, there’s far more to making a difference than changing the language. But attention to language can alter the way we think and the way we behave. Moreover, it also may convey new and welcome messages in terms of respect, a concept which is identified as important, though often lacking, in almost every study with human service consumers (Thorpe 2002).

The Power of Narratives

By facilitating the telling of stories, research with people under stress can, in itself, make a positive difference in their lives. Many of the Foster Carers we have interviewed this year have clearly valued the opportunity to talk at length and in depth with someone who has the time to listen and who values what they have to say. Sadly, some of them feel this is in contrast to their experience of everyday contact with hard-pressed FSOs.

A number of the people we have interviewed have had distressing experiences which, because of issues of confidentiality, stigma, or conflicts of interest, they have been unable to offload and debrief. Research interviews can provide an opportunity for people to think through their experiences and begin to move on.

With regard to narratives, Gail Mason (2002) cautions that we cannot assume that the experiences people recount are an unmediated version of what took place but that they reflect politically situated subjectivities. The researcher, therefore, has an obligation to reflect critically on the power relations and values which shape narratives (Griffiths 1995). However, this attention to theorising, though important, does not in any way detract from the strength of narratives as a transformative research approach in itself.

Furthermore, narratives have the power to facilitate access to the voices of hidden and stigmatised people under stress in a way that they find constructive. For example, in a previous research project with men who had been violent at home, an unanticipated discovery was how men who had been unreachable by human service agencies were

willing to respond to an invitation to tell their stories, and they claimed to have found the experience helpful (Bainbridge, Braiding, Jones and Thorpe 1998).

Empowering Research Processes

The third aspect of transformative research is the use of empowering processes which are inclusive, participatory, capacity building, power sharing and action oriented.

Munford and Sanders include several examples of Participatory Action Research in their book. And in the JCU/QDOF foster care research partnership, Wayne Daly is using such an approach in canvassing the views of children and young people as to what makes a good foster carer. As Wayne will be talking in the symposium tomorrow about his approach, I'll say no more except to comment that, on reflection, we may have missed opportunities in other parts of our research program to extend the use of participatory processes.

One other exception, however, is the sub project on Indigenous and Australian South Sea Islander perspectives on foster care. Here, attempts are being made to use culturally appropriate research processes, the fourth aspect of transformative Research.

Margaret Rawsthorne, from the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW, recently identified four key aspects of ethical research in Indigenous studies (Rawsthorne 2003). These are

- Partnership
- Capacity Building
- Ethics
- Community Development Benefit

While three of these are fairly self-explanatory, it's worth clarifying what is meant by culturally appropriate ethics. Rawsthorne asserts that most academic institutions insist on inappropriate ethical procedures, such as written consent forms, and overlook the need for community ethical approval. She argues that "face to face discussions are often best but time variations also need to be considered. Repeat visits to

communities are important to establish trust and obtain community ethical approval” (Rawsthorne 2003, p.6).

In the symposium, Cindy Reck will talk about the research which she and Tony McMahon are doing to explore Indigenous views on foster care and well being. What she says will indicate how they are ensuring the use of culturally appropriate approaches.

While transformative research is clearly desirable, inevitably there are constraints on the extent to which it is feasible. For example

- Time deadlines
- Time limitations
- Funders’ expectations
- Auspice organisation’s expectations
- Forces beyond your control
- Constraints of coding systems
- Language and discourse of research reporting

Some of these constraints have certainly applied to our foster care research partnership and have been unavoidable in the process of securing substantial external funding for the research; others, we are attempting to resist, particularly, for example, in terms of coding systems and the language and discourse of research reporting.

Preparing this paper has stimulated me to reflect on how far our research, in and of itself, is a transformative experience for participants. The scorecard in this regard is, I concede, modest and this is something we might strive to improve on in any subsequent research projects.

By contrast, one area in which the research partnership has plainly made gains in making a difference to families is that of research as an impetus for improved practice with families.

Research as an impetus for improved practice with Families

Locally

There are at least three significant aspects to the impact on practice at the local level that merit attention

- changes in awareness
- changes in organisational culture and practices
- changes in service delivery

Changes in Awareness

One of the advantages of “insider” research undertaken in a collaborative partnership between University researchers and a government Department is that the Department has identified a need to improve an aspect of service, in our instance foster care, and has initiated research as a way to provide an evidence base for the direction and nature of improvements. This means that within the Department (in this case, the Region) there is already a certain level of “research mindedness” – a willingness to ask questions, to reflect on assumptions, and to engage in critical thinking – encouraged by the Regional Director. Once the research was underway this awareness has deepened and it has had the potential to impact on practice through re-thinking, for example, individual versus structural explanations, or the impact of policy and practice on people’s lives.

Other benefits to flow from enhanced research mindedness in the Region are the ready engagement with the Learning Organisation drive within the Department as a whole (Bishop 2003). Similarly, there has been strong commitment to the “Future Directions Practice Trials” and an interest in Quality Improvement through evidence-based practice. This is in marked contrast to experience elsewhere which has found significant resistance amongst child welfare workers and managers to the implementation of evidence based practice (Barratt 2003).

Underpinning the consolidation of a research culture in the Region has been the development of research and evaluation skills, especially through the research training

of staff who are enrolled in post-graduate research degrees, and the ready inclusion of Academic Critical Friends in the Future Directions Action Learning Teams.

Changes in Organisational Culture and Practice.

Flowing from (and reinforcing) changes in awareness, are changes in organisational culture and practices. These include a shift away from a “blame culture” (Barratt 2003), to involving staff in decision-making, and devolving leadership. Similar processes have been identified by Michaux in relation to the development of a Learning Organisation in the Benevolent Society of NSW, where an increased level of ownership of research and consequent change was plainly evident (Michaux 2003).

One essential aspect of organisational change is the recognition of and allowance for time to read, reflect and study, for research skills development and for continuing professional education.

Specifically, in relation to the foster care research partnership, training in Case Planning has been introduced as a consequence of some concerning early findings from the Indigenous sub project. There is evidence also of a new valuing of service user perspectives and increased accountability to service users, be they foster carers, children and young people, or parents with children in care.

In a New Zealand study of statutory child welfare work, Worrall and McKenzie identified how the research resulted in increased awareness of the institutional use of power, and of contradictions between the rhetoric of partnership, empowerment and culturally appropriate practice, and the occurrence of dubious practices (Worrall and McKenzie 2003). Using a trialectic model of ethical research Worrall and McKenzie emphasise the need in research for strategic alliances between workers, researchers and service users to identify and confront the power structures which can increase the vulnerability of involuntary clients of the state.

Changes in Service Delivery

The third way in which research can impact positively on families is in stimulating changes in service delivery in advance of the results of research being analysed and disseminated.

Examples of program development already occurring in the Mackay/Whitsunday Region of QDOF are the introduction of:

- A Certificate II for Indigenous carers
- Increased number of education and training workshops for foster carers
- A respite foster care service
- A relative carers' group

In addition to program developments, the research partnership has clearly also been a stimulus for new forms of practice, to break down power barriers. For example,

- Let's Talk forums for foster carers
- Yarning-up days with Indigenous communities
- SPLAT for children and young people in care
- Group for parents with children in care

Each of these examples illustrates the value now placed on service user perspectives, the importance of improved accountability to service users, and a move towards more genuine partnership and power sharing relations with service providers, such as foster carers.

There is no doubt that insider research can clearly have a positive impact on local practice with tangible improvements in local service delivery long before the research is concluded. The larger question remains, however, as to whether we can count on making a difference to children and families more widely, through improvements in practice elsewhere.

Influence of research on practice elsewhere.

While "insider" researchers are clearly well positioned to make an actual difference on practice locally, it is likely that collaborative efforts with University based researchers may best contribute to stimulating practice change elsewhere, be it outside the Region but within the study Department, or in other states nationally, or even in

other jurisdictions internationally. The obvious ways and means for achieving a wider impact are through dissemination of and publicity for research findings, through conference presentations, journal articles, seminars and workshops, radio and TV presentations, newspaper reports, web sites and so forth. Making personal contacts and developing networks is also crucially important in overcoming resistance to valuing research findings produced elsewhere and this applies particularly to findings from a non-metropolitan region of the state, from another state or another country. We are well aware of city/country biases, of interstate rivalries, and cross-national prejudices, including lingering colonial attitudes of superiority. Nonetheless, we are committed to promoting our research in a variety of forums. In doing so, in particular we are aware of the need to address resistance which may be veiled in methodological concerns.

Concerns about robust research evidence

Within commentaries on child welfare research, nationally and internationally, concerns are expressed about the quality of research evidence (Maluccio, Ainsworth and Thorburn 2000; Barber and Gilbertson 2001; McNeish, Newman and Roberts 2002). In particular, positivists lament the dearth of “hard” evidence about causation from experimental studies, and they call for controlled outcomes evaluations and randomised controlled trials. Barber and Gilbertson, for example, write “. . . there is insufficient empirical evidence on which to confidently base foster care services” (2001 p53). Most studies are descriptive rather than evaluative, have small, unrepresentative samples, and are merely correlational or associative. Thus, in their view, “controlled outcome evaluations are . . . urgently needed before the facts of best practice foster care can be separated from the fiction” (Barber and Gilbertson 2001 p54).

In similar vein Macdonald, in a recent UK overview of *What Works for Children?*, asserts that “randomised controlled trials are the most reliable source of evidence on the effectiveness of many social interventions” (Macdonald 2002 p207).

Despite these strong views, advocates of experimental research do, however, acknowledge that “increasing probabilities, not providing certainties, is the game we are in” (McNeish, Newman & Roberts. 2002, p xiv), and “indications and thresholds

should not be used as prescriptions for action, but rather as guides to action . . . As a way of prospectively identifying children at risk” (Delfabbro and Barber 2003, p 18).

Thus, it is recognised that in pursuing evidence based practice, there remains a vital place for professional judgement in assessing the relevance and application of research evidence. As Smith asserts, positivism can rarely answer “what is it about this program that works for whom in what specifiable conditions and given what contextual features?” (Smith 2000 in Berridge 2002, p 85).

Jan Fook reinforces these arguments in making the case for reflective research.

“Situations are often unpredictable, complex, changing and uncontrollable . . . in a way that formal theory and research tend to underplay. Any useful (research) needs to be modified and responsive to the uncertainties of practice” (Fook. 1996, pp 4, xiii).

Fook then proceeds to mount a compelling argument in favour of interpretivist rather than positivist approaches to research. What is required, in her view, are deeper, more nuanced understandings, with an awareness of standpoint, process and context (Fook 1996).

With regard to **standpoint**, the criticism is that positivist research “privileges one kind of knowledge over the views of service users” and that “the more remote the end-user becomes in any enterprise, the less likely it will be that their needs will remain paramount” (McNeish, Newman & Roberts. 2002, p 3).

Increasingly this standpoint perspective is acknowledged by experimental researchers and, indeed, many concede that “studies that examine foster care from the perspective of children and young people themselves are particularly lacking” (Barber and Gilbertson 2001, p 54). From this perspective, therefore, our current Foster Care research program is poised to make a substantial contribution, with its major focus on the views of children and young people.

In terms of **process**, the second of Fook’s concerns, a number of researchers, while sympathetic to quantitative approaches, nonetheless recognise that some things can’t be measured and not everything that counts can be counted. As Sinclair claims, an

excessive emphasis on outcomes may diminish the importance of process (Sinclair 1998).

Berridge reinforces this view when he highlights the need to broaden the definition of “evidence” in pursuing evidence-based practice. “Children’s views on good ‘quality’ care often focus on the personal attributes of the staff who care for them – reliability, a capacity and willingness to listen, respectful, informal but challenging. Recruiting and retaining staff with these qualities . . . is as big a challenge as the more technocratic aspects of accumulating an evidence base” (Berridge 2002 p 6).

Again, with our inclusion of in-depth interpretivist methods, it is highly likely that our Foster Care research will make a significant contribution to understanding process issues in foster care.

Turning to **context**, Berridge further casts doubt on claims from experimental research to superior external validity. To illustrate this point he argues succinctly that “an aspirin taken in Luton or New York has a similar effect, but a stay in a Children’s Home will be a quite different experience” (Berridge. 2002 p 99). Clearly, in Berridge’s view, random controlled trials may miss crucial contextual factors of what makes an intervention work in one area, but not when replicated in another.

The conclusion that I draw from this reflection on the robustness of research evidence is that the same considerations should apply in assessing the *generalisability* of research findings from quantitative studies as are recommended in relation to *transferability* from qualitative studies. In this regard, Lincoln and Guba argue that “the establishment of external validity must be determined by those who wish to apply the findings somewhere else. Potential audiences must themselves determine whether the context in which they are interested is sufficiently similar . . . To make transfer (of findings) possible and reasonable” (Lincoln and Guba 1985 p 298).

Building on this view, Berridge asserts in relation to research on residential care, that in fact “the conclusions from research frequently resonate with accepted good practice” (2002 p 99).

Despite this, Berridge concedes that “results sometimes emerge that are unexpected or challenge the orthodoxy” (2002 p99). In such instances Berridge suggests that in each local context evidence-based practice will entail consideration of complex “research findings alongside received professional wisdom and reflective practice experience” (Berridge 2002 pp 98-99).

Thus, in considering the application of research findings to practice beyond the local context, we need to facilitate and encourage practitioners elsewhere to consider whether and how our findings resonate with their local context, and to reflect critically on the potential relevance of any unorthodox, more challenging findings.

Research as an Influence for Social Policy Change and Development

I’d like to now turn our attention from direct practice to consideration of the influence of research on policy.

In a chapter in the Munford and Sanders book, Canavan, Dolan and Pinkerton (2003) differentiate between 3 models of thought about research and policy.

- The Limestone model
- The Engineering model
- The Social System model

(Canavan, Dolan and Pinkerton 2003 pp37-38)

In the **limestone model**, researchers accept, fatalistically, that the influence of research on policy may be long term and indirect, like water entering and gradually percolating through limestone without it being clear where or when it will emerge as a trickle or a flood (Pinkerton 1998). This is frustrating for researchers who want to see change and want their work to have been worthwhile. It’s also often unacceptable for research funders who want value for their money and want to see positive effects of the research.

An alternative to the limestone model is an **engineering model** in which it is assumed that there is a rational linear process from recognising a problem, commissioning

research, completion of the research and production of a report, leading to the uncomplicated adoption and implementation of the findings and recommendations.

Unfortunately, reality is rarely this simple and, indeed, we all may know examples where commissioning research has in fact been a means of avoiding or delaying taking action to deal with a problem.

In light of this, Canavan and his Irish colleagues propose a **social system model** in which it is recognised that “research is only one of a number of competing influences on the direction of policy and practice” (Canavan, Dolan and Pinkerton 2003, p 38).

George and Wilding encapsulate this “truth” in their definition of social policy. “Social policy is the result of constant attempts by various groups in society to improve or re-define their situation vis-à-vis that of other groups” (1985 p19).

And Dalton, Draper, Weeks and Wilson elaborate by conceptualising social policy as “ a contest, a debate . . . a process that continually involves the negotiation of values about what becomes defined as a social issue, what social directions will be taken, what interests will be served” (1996 p 6).

Davies and colleagues put it yet more bluntly when they write “society appears to be guided more by politics than science, and politics is more about the art of the possible or generally acceptable than what is rational or might work best” (Davies, Nutley and Smith 2000 p 14).

Clearly then, if researchers wish their findings to influence social policy, the key question is how can they influence other key players? Canavan et al conclude that in their social system model it is important to form strategic alliances and participate with a dynamic system, which they capture in the following Figure.

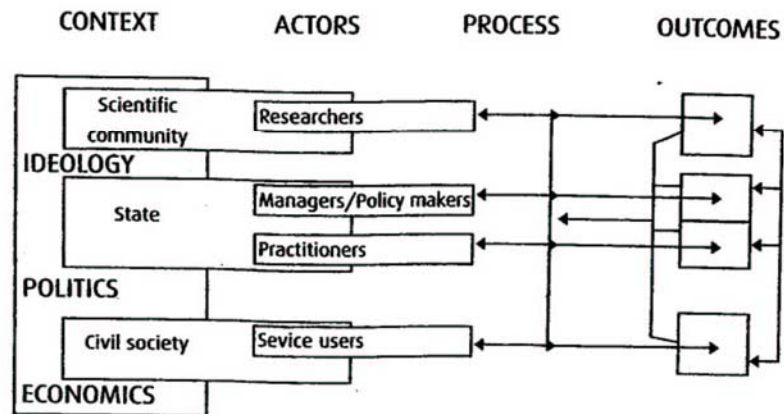


Figure 2.1 The applied research system

(Canavan, Dolan and Pinkerton 2003 p39)

In their model of the Applied Research System, Canavan et al depict the multiple contexts, actors, processes and outcomes associated with policy related research and the impact on each of ideology, politics and economics. While each group advances its own concerns through a process particular to itself, all outcomes are related and reinforce each other to a greater or lesser extent. Each of the groups takes what it

requires from feedback but does it in a manner that is affected by and affects the others.

The impact of research on the activities and concerns of each group is not, therefore, a matter of time and chance, as in the limestone model, nor the result of directly managed inputs as in the engineering model. Rather, in a social systems model the impact depends on forging and sustaining social alliances within the context of a dynamic system. Thus, if we as researchers wish to have an influence on social policy, we have to engage in the social policy context. It's not enough merely to do the research, disseminate it, and rest on our laurels. Research won't necessarily stand alone. There is need for policy activism on the part of applied social researchers.

In pondering this challenge, I have been drawn back to reflect on tried and tested strategies used in community work or in attempts to effect organisational change from within. It's important to remember that there are collaborative strategies, and adversary strategies (as listed below), and that, by and large it's less wearing for all concerned to exhaust all possible collaborative strategies before embarking on more adversarial actions (Patti and Resnick 1972).

Collaborative Strategies

- Providing research information about the nature of a problem
- Presenting alternative courses of action (programs, procedures etc.)
- Proposing support for experimentation with new approaches to the problem
- Seeking to establish a committee to study and make recommendations
- Creating new opportunities for interaction to express ideas and develop better ways to work
- Making appeals to conscience, professional ethics and values
- Persuading by logical argument, selective presentation of data
- Pointing out the negative consequences of continuing a specific policy

Adversary Strategies

- Submitting petitions that set forth demands
- Confronting the organisation/government in meetings and public forums
- Bringing sanctions against the agency through external standard setting and professional agencies
- Engaging in public criticism and exposing organisational practices
- Encouraging deliberate non-compliance with agency policy or interference with agency procedures
- Calling strikes
- Picketing
- Engaging in litigation
- Bargaining for the purpose of negotiating differences and developing compromise solutions

Patti and Resnick 1972

When all is said and done, McNeish, Newman and Roberts inject a note of optimism when they write that “a robust scientific approach combined with an ethical vision about possible futures of children (and more than half an eye on cost-effectiveness) is a powerful engine for social change” (2002 p 5).

In saying this, we are reminded gently, but very clearly, of the neo-liberal, economic rationalist current context of low government expenditure. It may well be that action aimed at changing the political context is indicated if we aspire to effect expensive policy changes.

Research as an Influence in shaping further Research

The fourth and final aspect of research that can make difference to children and families, concerns the identified need for further research, given Berridge’s view that “the extent of empirical research (in out-of-home care) is still very limited and we

have barely begun to scratch the surface of some highly complex problems” (2002 p98).

In this regard, the following issues have been identified

- Studies are seldom replicated and findings tend not to be reconsidered even though services evolve and earlier findings may no longer be applicable
- Funders’ preference to cover a wide spectrum of topics and satisfy competing interests
- Few national studies (let alone international studies)
- conceptual tools restricted
- few before/after outcome evaluations
- few randomized control trials
- few studies with large samples
- little attention to specific populations and sub groups, *e.g.*
 - out-of-home care for girls
 - Indigenous perspectives on effectiveness
 - parents with children in care

In a recent special edition of *Children Australia*, Cashmore and Ainsworth identify four key needs in relation to child welfare research in Australia.

- Commitment to research
- Adequate funding
- Access to reliable data
- Transfer of research findings into practice

(Cashmore and Ainsworth. 2003 p5).

More specifically, in relation to the Foster Care Research partnership between JCU and QDOF, there are pointers to how we disseminate our findings in order to influence the shape of further research in out-of-home care. For example, we should be able to

- facilitate identification of gaps in knowledge
- document and demonstrate the utility of strategic research partnerships between University researchers and human service organisations

- Indicate the potential of research to strengthen practice for the benefit of children and families
- ensure research findings are readily understood by practitioners and easy to access, thereby enhancing the spread of evidence-based reflective practice
- document and demonstrate the value and benefits of transformative research processes for children and families

Conclusion

Towards Evidence-based reflective practice: a synthesis of Science Art and Ethics

By way of conclusion, I'd like to emphasise a key theme that I've canvassed in thinking about whether we can count on making a difference to policy and practice, for children and families.

Much talk is heard these days of the need for evidence-based practice. I'd like to reframe the agenda just a little and instead talk about evidence-based reflective practice. In this way, I believe it should be possible to aim for a fusion which transcends the gulf between science and art:

- A **scientific** approach to research
- An **ethical** vision about goals and processes
- A **reflective** approach to practice

In support of this stance, I'll close with a quote from what I consider some very wise UK researchers, Ian Sinclair and colleagues at the University of York. They write in the Report of their study of Foster Care:

“There are no substitutes for listening carefully to what those involved want and weighing up the factors in each case”. “There are no rules of thumb that apply in all circumstances” Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs (2000 p. 193).

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