

Editorial

Introduction to the special issue on place based research and intervention

Colleen Turner

Broadmeadows UnitingCare

Place based research and intervention

The purpose of this Special Issue is to present papers that contribute to the evidence on community collaboration and the complexities inherent in place-based interventions and research. The issue is divided into two complimentary segments: The first, showcases “Communities for Children” in Broadmeadows, Victoria as a case study into place-based intervention and research. The second, includes papers from Australian and international practitioners and researchers on practice and research that has a community or place based approach.

The special issue demonstrates a range of perspectives and is proudly multidisciplinary and multi layered. I have very much enjoyed the privilege of reading and putting together contributions from the US, Australia and the United Kingdom. These papers explicitly consider how poverty and lack of education can be overcome and how the social exclusion resulting from these community vulnerabilities can be prevented. Many recommend community development or action research approaches where the community, service providers, researchers and policy makers can work together as equal collaborators in providing services and in advocating for the development of more and more inclusive and community focussed services and programs.

As individuals our sense of ourselves is impacted on by our own sense of place in the world and our pride (or shame) in our community of origin. The first question both Indigenous and non Indigenous people often ask when meeting for the first time is ‘Where are you from?’ It is often in childhood that our sense of where we come from is most strongly felt and from where our sense of social connectedness begins. Therefore this special issue has a secondary theme which considers the question of what role neighbourhood and place play in the

development of children and what kinds of physical and social environments best support children and their families. This secondary theme relates to the genesis of this special issue in the Communities for Children project in Broadmeadows Australia. We who live and work in ‘Broady’ as it is known often consider the question of ‘*How do we grow a community for Children?*’ and we have given that theme to our conference – at which this special edition will be launched.

Theory, research, practice and participant wisdom all tell us that one of the key tasks of early parenting is for mothers and fathers and other primary carers to develop strong and close ties with children and then gradually expand that connection to family, to friends and to the community. The most obvious way to do this is through accessing local activities such as playgroups, preschools, and eventually neighbourhood schools. One of my favourite book titles is ‘From Neurons to Neighbourhoods’ which neatly defines the intersection between Developmental and Community Psychology. The policy and practice question then is: how do communities, community based organisations, local state and national governments ensure that these child, parent, and community friendly pathways are available to all communities, families and children in ways that suit their individual and collective needs? The next complexity is how researchers “capture” those understandings and measure progress along the path of growing communities for children? And finally how is that translated into policy and funding to support parents and communities in growing communities for children.

If the aim of research and intervention is to understand and improve – it is important that research and intervention does not increase community stigma and associated social exclusion. The aim of community psychology and community development in this context is to work with the community to gain those

understandings and to develop strategies for improvement in ways which fit within the strengths of the community and where appropriate to share those learnings with other communities, other researchers and policy makers who might be able to learn from our experience.

This special issue uses a particular community (Broadmeadows, Victoria-Australia) as a case study and digs deeper to consider the needs of young children and their families within that community. Broadmeadows is a small geographic corner of the City of Hume in the North West of Melbourne. Broadmeadows was established as an outer suburban housing estate in the post war era. The area continues to be subject to significant economic disadvantage and demonstrates vulnerabilities associated with poverty that can be easily measured using local demographics including income and education level. At the same time Broadmeadows is a vibrant multicultural centre with many strong, well-established community groups that are articulate, skilled and active in working for and with their communities. The special issue explores those community strengths and vulnerabilities particularly in the context of young children. It outlines the strategies being developed and used to ensure that children their carers and the community benefit from the strengths of their community including cultural and linguistic diversity while the vulnerabilities are simultaneously addressed.

Papers in this special issue have been ordered from the particular to the very general and so to begin the collection Cemile Yuksel and I report on some promising results of the Broadmeadows Communities for Children project that allow us to begin to quantify many of the conversations we have had with local parents over the last three years about what they want and need for children in the local area. Overall the results demonstrate Communities for Children projects have contributed to parents and children being more involved with their neighbours and feeling that they are able to access community and organisational supports when they need help. We interpret this as indicating a "Communities for Children effect" of increasing social

connectedness for families in Broadmeadows.

Deborah Warr considers one early childhood program operating in Broadmeadows, placing it firmly in the context of economic disadvantage and examining from an insider's perspective how and why a particular community program (the Meadowbank Early Learning Centre) contributes to enhancing community connectedness for local children and their parents and carers. This article demonstrates the value of very close observation and engagement with community members and agencies in working collaboratively to understand what community members want for their children and how everyone can best participate.

Mathew Barth talked with eight sole parents of children under five who are facing the extremes of poverty, to the extent they need to regularly access emergency relief in order to feed and clothe their young children. This paper provides a sense of how it feels to be struggling with the bare essentials and how that leads directly to a sense of social exclusion not only for parents but for their children who are less able to access the expanding social and environmental worlds that allow for their intellectual social and emotional development. The paper demonstrates how social exclusion and poverty are related and how they can adversely affect even very young children. The parents Matthew talked with provide some very practical suggestions to policy makers on changes that would assist them to better care for their children.

Liz Curran's paper considers research relating to connections between economic disadvantage and access to legal services and other community based services. This research was not conducted in Broadmeadows but in nearby West Heidelberg which has similar demographics especially in relation to economic capacity. As in the first two papers, Liz finds that accessing the appropriate services is not straightforward and that people are more likely to access trusted local community based services even when those services do not have the expertise to solve or even in some cases identify problems that might have legal solutions. This research found that many people

did not believe there was anything they could do about issues as basic and important as social security payments and that formal complaints would not make any difference. Other participants avoided doing any thing about legal issues because of high levels of anxiety and shame about their problems. The paper recommends holistic working relationships between community and health based services and legal and para legal services such as financial counselling to improve access, to intervene earlier, to provide better solutions and to minimise the stress and anxiety caused by legal problems.

Anne Pederson tells the story of Wassim, a refugee without rights in Australia. This very particular case study 'Working with Wassim' effectively demonstrates the power of government and legal structures. The study also shows how important individual and community support is for people and groups in a situation of structural disadvantage or oppression.

Leonard Jason, Dan Schober and Bradley Olson specifically introduce the concept of social liberation which is implicit in many of the other papers. Contributing to your neighbourhood and to your community is theorised as a strategy for recovery from addiction and as a way of building long term social support. Ironically it is the only place based paper in this issue that has been faced with the intersection of advantage and disadvantage. Oxford house, the program described in the paper, had to face at least one legal battle where the local community did not wish to have a recovery program housed in their area because of the possible negative impact on real estate values.

The paper by Donald. Unger, Tara Woolfolk, Vanessa Harper, & Teresita Cuevas draws together the themes and issues explored in this special issue. It outlines, the internal, historical and structural reasons that lead people living in disadvantaged areas to access services that are local, trusted and culturally competent. It also notes the diversity between communities that may appear from the outside to policy makers and to large scale service providers as demographically very similar. The article

describes a multipronged education and early intervention program to improve understanding to assist families and professionals to work together as equal collaborators in providing services and in advocating for the development of more and more inclusive and community focussed services and programs.

Ann Dadich poses some difficult questions around how to best understand and support the value of community generated activities without imposing too many restrictions on the important work of building social connections and *growing up* children that is the essential purpose of playgroups. She concludes that while it is generally agreed that playgroups are a valuable social glue and a vehicle for change and development of children and parents; there is very little empirical knowledge about how and why those positive changes take place. She suggests that a range of methods can be used to research and evaluate playgroups. Action research in particular is seen to be an appropriate and indeed empowering methodology for investigating, instigating and sustaining positive social change at a local level.

The final article in this edition by Georgina Davis and Alexa Morgan is locally based but in many ways a contrast to other papers in the collection in that it uses traditional survey methodology and a more 'rational' theoretical framework to consider how people act in their local community. The article employs the theory of planned behaviour to investigate how householders decide to recycle. It should come as no surprise to community psychologists that planned behaviour accounts for very little actual behaviour. The results from this study can be used by Local Authorities to highlight the importance of keeping a recycling system convenient and easily accessible to residents.

Address correspondence to
Colleen Turner
Project Manager
Communities for Children
Broadmeadows UnitingCare
Ph: 03 9351 3640
Fax: 03 9309 9319
Mob: 0419 596 795
email: bcarecfc@vicnet.net.au