What Can We Do to Bring the Sparkle Back into this Child's Eyes? Child Rights/Community Development Principles: Key Elements for a Strengths-based Child Protection Practice

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Published online: 06 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Susan Young, Margaret McKenzie, Liv Schjelderup, Cecilie Omre & Shayne Walker (2014) What Can We Do to Bring the Sparkle Back into this Child's Eyes? Child Rights/Community Development Principles: Key Elements for a Strengths-based Child Protection Practice, Child Care in Practice, 20:1, 135-152, DOI: 10.1080/13575279.2013.847052

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2013.847052
What Can We Do to Bring the Sparkle Back into this Child’s Eyes? Child Rights/Community Development Principles: Key Elements for a Strengths-based Child Protection Practice

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Working from practice experiences, Social Work educators from Aotearoa/New Zealand, Norway and Western Australia have developed a framework for child welfare work. The framework brings together the Rights of the Child, Community Development and Child Protection. This article describes the principles and theoretical underpinnings of this framework, and illustrates its use through practice examples. The development of this approach draws from lengthy engagement in child welfare in our respective countries. Indigenous practices and community development principles, which embody strengths approaches, are complemented by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) articles and assist to move child protection from a uni-dimensional reliance on expert assessment of the “best interest” criterion to a multi-dimensional response of centring children’s participation and attending to cultural, family and identity considerations. We link Ife’s description of first-generation, second-generation and third-generation rights to Qvortrup’s categorisation of children’s rights: protection, provision and participation. We extend this link by examining key Articles of the UNCRC in relation to their generational protective, provisionary and participatory functions and propose a framework for practice that is informed by child rights and community development principles. The framework identifies key practice elements necessary to work with a strengths-based perspective at the third-generation and participation rights levels in child protection and welfare. We maintain that the use

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of this framework can provide Social Workers with additional knowledges and skills in their child welfare work.

Keywords: Child Protection; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; Children’s Rights; Community Development Practice; Child Welfare; Strengths-based Practice

Introduction

This paper begins with a story told by one of our group, Shayne Walker, as we gathered together at a working meeting to write a conference paper from which this article emerged.

We have found that sharing practice stories, describing elements of our work over time that have had significant meaning and learning for us, provides the foundations to anchor our theoretical talk across countries. This story-telling works to clarify the commonalities across our practices and experiences, and enables us to tease out and ground the concepts in developing the theoretical framework we propose.

What Can We Do to Bring the Sparkle Back into this Child’s Eyes?

Earlier on in my social/community work practice, I worked with a whanau (family) of a young woman who was a chronic sniffer of solvents. The whanau asked me to accompany them to a multi-disciplinary hui (meeting) at her local high school. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss her suspension and the school’s intention to kick her out. My role was whanau tautoko (family support) and advocacy. The whanau were sure she would not receive a fair hearing and believed she would be kicked out; as she was nearly 15 (in NZ [New Zealand] you can leave school at 15) that would be the end of her education. She would be like 50% of all other Maori female school leavers who had no qualifications and would end up on the “scrap heap”. I met with the whanau before the meeting to agree on a strategy and kawa (agreed ways of behaving towards others). No matter what happened no one was to lose their temper and say or do things they would regret later. A number of professionals also arrived at the meeting including the Police, Social Workers from Child Youth and Families (CYFS), Counsel for Child (court appointed), two teachers and the principal. The atmosphere was tense as the whanau had had a number of unpleasant interactions with most of those in the room. I was asked to open the meeting with a karakia (prayer) and the school principal who had called the hui welcomed us and asked us to introduce ourselves and explain our connection to the kaupapa (purpose for being there). Once formalities were completed the principal tipped her glasses forward, eyeballed everyone in the room and said:

“What can we do to put the sparkle back into this child’s eyes?”

The whole nature of the hui changed. In one sentence it went from discipline and punishment to constructive engagement and restoration. It took everyone by surprise,
we were ready for a “bun fight” but instead with the scene set by this reconstruction of our role we worked through the issues in a manner that was truly empowering for the girl and her whanau and met the needs of professionals (to everyone’s relief). The issues attended to included school attendance, bullying of other students, altercations with two particular teachers, disappearing all weekend and abusing solvents amongst other things and hanging out with gang associates who were older than the girl. These issues were upsetting and were deeply felt and where possible were discussed without apportioning blame. One of my outstanding memories of the hui was the apology between one of the teachers and the girl. It was a two-way apology where both parties took responsibility for perceived attitudes and behaviours and only came about because the teacher started with what the girl was good at. The restoration of that relationship was critical as it affected all the other relationships in the room. The other shift was in the mind and heart of the family. They had a belief in themselves that I had not seen before. Rather than being defiant and defensive, education was seen as having real possibilities for turning their daughter around. They were not naïve and realised they needed the help of all of those who were gathered. One of the features of the management plan was that I would be responsible for ensuring that the relationships created remained intact and accountable to the plan. Making everyone accountable for this girl’s future was important as ultimately this was about this young woman and her whanau’s rangatiratanga (self-determination) and we were there to help. This process did not happen overnight and I was involved for 28 months (until she left school and no longer needed support). At the end of the hui together we sang a waiata (song of support) and I said a karakia. This young girl’s life wasn’t all plain sailing but in my view it was a turning point in her life. She eventually worked as a drug rehabilitation counsellor in a residential facility and then she trained as a primary school teacher.

This hui and the lessons learned have stayed with me forever. I often see the school principal in my local supermarket, she’s retired now but the mana (personal pride and prestige) of her mahi (work) lives on. She’s one of the wisest human beings I know. Here is a whakatauki (proverb) that illustrates this:

“Where knowledge is gathered wisdom should follow”

It’s not just about what we know, it’s about what we do with it.

This narrative contains elements for examining differing perspectives for doing child protection. Previous contact between the authorities and the family had been poor, with the potential for continuing punishing behaviour. In addition to suspending the child from school, other remedies could have included additional scrutiny of siblings, the possibility for protective methods to be used, including removal of the children, legal charges on the girl and family and other measures. The power in the room was heavily weighted in favour of the authorities, with the perception of failed parents, out-of-control and risk-taking behaviour on the part of the child, illegal activities; there may even have been suspicion of familial or other abuse. At the least the child and her family were about to experience the effects of authoritative decisions made
about them without involving them. The principal’s question had two effects: it invited a collaborative approach from all people in that room, and by inference the girl as well, and it offered a remedy of hope and potential rather than punishment and failure. It is these elements and their underlying premises that we explore in this paper.

Premises for action emerge from theoretical explanations of how and why a situation occurs with the concomitant intervention theory suggesting a course of action with a specific outcome. Practitioners locate these within their disciplinary framework. The CYFS social workers could have interpreted the girl’s risk-taking behaviour as warranting her, or at least her younger siblings’, removal from home to a place of safety. A school and police interpretation could use legal sanctions. While theoretical explanations within social work can differ, they can be traced back to common core understandings of the social world in which there are directives to variously change the individual for individual failings, society for societal failings, or not look for failings in either but examine the situation in its local context and marshal remedies, or supports, to suit the local circumstances. Here the context and the specific aim, the girl and the need for her to return to her “sparkling” self were paramount.

Social workers are often required to deal with complex and multi-faceted situations using simplistic directives to meet expectations of their agencies, policy makers and the public. A current example occurring in the United Kingdom, Western Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand is the policy directive for children in care to be adopted or permanently placed rather than remain in foster care (Butler-Sloss, 2013; DCP, 2012; Ministry for Social Development, 2012). Here, matters of retaining identity and ethnicity or race can become displaced by needs of newly constructed families or constructions of new families. Parental fault (not being able to provide proper care to children) is punished by the child’s removal. Societal economic needs are met through permanent placement of children, thus removing the long-term financial burden on the state and social needs in replacing “bad” families with “good” families. This is not the whole story, but it is increasingly the story of the welfare state and child protection. The child in the story above, or her siblings, could have been subject to one or more of those economic and societal efficiencies. In this construction, her Maori identity could have been weighed as less important than the need to remove her from a risk-laden environment. The rights of the child to birth family, identity and ethnic or racial belonging are relegated in favour of the right of a child to have a stable and caring family in which no harm is perpetrated on the child. The “best interests” of the child are decided by people outside the immediate family using information and understandings that emanate from the expert positioning of professionals, their theoretical understandings and policy and agency imperatives. This still begs the question that any state-mandated intervention should do the least harm. The whole whanau strategy above was to ensure a good outcome for the young woman with as little state intervention as possible. Maori whanau had started doing this in the early 1980s as a form of resistance because disproportionate numbers of Maori young people were in state-run child protection institutions. This was not an outcome they wanted for her.
The state later co-opted this strategy as part of the 1989 Children, Young Persons and their Families Act (New Zealand).

We suggest a different approach that takes as its starting point the multi-faceted and intertwined rights of the child. We add community development (CD) principles and practices believing that this can lead to broadly based strengths practice with child protection. We have previously proposed (Young, McKenzie, Schjelderup, & More, 2012) that joining the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and CD principles can be useful to examine the complexities of child protection practice to ensure attention is paid to identity, culture and family, all of which are crucial considerations alongside the child’s safety. We now take this a step further and link these ideas to Ife’s (2001) conceptualisations of the three generations of rights, and Qvortrup’s (1994) categorisation of children’s rights as protection, provision and participation.

Social work is acclaimed as being a human rights profession, but on a day-to-day basis deals expressly with human need. For Ife (2001) the way the social work profession contextualises human rights is through attending to needs. Yet this does not mean that social workers are automatically human rights workers. To be so, social workers must engage with the complexities contained within human rights articles and conventions and be able to manage in their practice the many potential contradictions these present, such as the tension between a parent’s rights and a child’s rights. Ife (2001, p. 133) exhorts social workers to realise their substantial contribution to human rights practice, by practising inductively as well as deductively. He suggests this is done by developing rights-based practices in their work. Moving from second-generation to third-generation rights practice (the collective and participatory practices that are the hallmark of CD), enables practices to be generalised to other such situations. Ife’s notion of the third generation of rights informs our examination of child welfare practice and how an understanding of UNCRC and CD principles may lead to rights practice in this field.

Table 1 articulates this conceptualisation, where Generation One offers legal remedies, Generation Two offers welfare or service remedies and Generation Three offers collaborative community remedies to ensuring human rights. This conceptualisation can be related to another tripartite categorisation (Qvortrup, 1994) describing children’s rights as a subset of human rights, as protective, provisionary and participatory. Taken together, these are shown in Table 1 alongside selected and relevant UNCRC Articles.

As can be seen from Table 1, protection is a legal act and when employed by social work in the western world uses investigations, removals, alternative placements of children and other statutory measures. This meets first-generation rights in trying to ensure safety for the child, and is supported particularly by Articles 3 and 9. Provisionary rights are those in which social workers advocate for resources for families and children, and design and implement support programmes such as parenting programmes, but have no legal imperatives. These can be described as second-generation rights and predominantly constitute a large proportion of social...
work practice. Importantly, many western countries meet some of these rights through the provision of free health and education services. Articles 7, 8, 18 and 19 are relevant here. The final category of participation is the least developed and arguably the most controversial. Articles 9 and 12 are intended to ensure that children and their families have a say in what actions are taken in order to protect them. These participatory rights are those that could be included within third-generation rights where collective rights are emphasised using CD as the practice of choice. While Ife does not explicitly discuss child protection practice within this category—referring only to the tensions resulting from competing values and rights, and indeed most child protection is discussed separately from CD—we believe that third-generation rights is a suitable location for a strengths-based, community approach to child rights practice, based on participation, and thus can contribute to child protection practice.

It is worth dwelling a little on participation, for, while most social work theory and codes of ethics emphasise participation, children’s participation becomes subject to the decisions of adults, usually under the interpretation of “best interests” of the child.

Interest in and understanding of children’s right to participation originates from the sociology of childhood in the 1970s and 1980s. Later Honneth (cited in James & Prout, 1997) maintained that in order to develop self-confidence, self-respect and self-worth, which contribute to resilience and coping, children’s views and competencies should be given attention, respect and value as the positive development of identity depends on the experiences and achievements of social recognition.

### Table 1 Human Rights and Social Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>First generation: protection</th>
<th>Second generation: provision</th>
<th>Third generation: participation</th>
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<td>Examples.</td>
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<td>Rights to:</td>
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<td>Social work</td>
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<td>Child rights</td>
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<td>Articles (selected)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child protection</td>
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Note: Adapted from Ife (2001, p. 42).
in intersubjective relationships. This sociology established that, from very early childhood, children were already equipped with an active attitude to social participation and had views about the outside world they were ready to communicate. Such thinking contrasted significantly with previous studies that characterised children as inadequate, irrational and under-developed, and contributed to an understanding of children as competent actors, capable of forming and expressing their own opinions (Sommer, 2004; Trevarthen, 1998). Subsequently the UNCRC has contributed to put children’s rights on the political and social work agenda. Despite this, social work practice tends not to work directly with children as participants, but rather as subjects. Treating children with dignity, as capable agents in their lives, is consistent with international social work ethical principles for practice.

The UNCRC Articles mentioned above in relation to CD principles and implications for strengths-based social work practice are set out in Table 2. We have examined the connection between CD and children’s rights previously (Young et al., 2012) with a more detailed discussion of CD principles, which are here summarised in Table 2. We maintained in that article that strengths-based practice was a natural outcome of merging the two.

Some of the practice considerations emerging from the UNCRC Articles that are central to the work of social workers in most child protection work involving the home and family environment demonstrate an overlap between CD and strengths practice; for example, looking for capabilities. While strengths work often is enacted at an individual level, it is also a principle of CD work that working with and involving individuals is the necessary starting place. Collaborative work is founded on the concerns of individuals who are able to enter into working relationships with each other and agree on the work to be done together. This is engendered through hearing the concerns of each person; enabling them to hear each other’s concerns; developing places for genuine dialogue in which disagreement and difference is a strength to be used not a weakness to be avoided; exploring possibilities of common concerns or interests towards which several people may work; identifying the abilities and skills of each person and encouraging their use; and the list goes on. In working with individuals, the developmental worker remains alert to the potential for linking some of the individual concerns and activities with those of other people with whom she/he is working and exploring with each the opportunities that might provide. This forms part of the process towards generating Bridging Capital (Putnam, 1993). All of these practices are identifiably strengths based and are exemplified in the narrative that began this article.

CD work and strengths-based practice are change work; they both seek to create or enable circumstances, behaviour or systems to change to produce situations in which people can better manage adverse events in their lives. Much social work child protection change practice results in negative impacts on the long-term relationships of children and families. While in some cases this is necessary for the survival of children, in some countries fewer resources (Bromfield, 2012) are allocated to prevent the removal of children because parents are unable to care for them adequately (and often this is correlated with poverty) than those used to relocate children away from
<table>
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<th>Table 2 Child Rights, Community Development and Child Protection</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Child rights Articles</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Protective rights</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Article 3 requires authorities to act in the best interests of the child</td>
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<td>Article 9 broadly relates to the safety of children within the home, specifically children shall not be separated from their parents against their will, except with reference to Article 3. Additionally all parties involved shall be given an opportunity to have their views known</td>
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<td><strong>Provision rights</strong></td>
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<td>Article 7 refers to the child’s relationship with his/her parents as predominant carers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Article 8, the right to preserve identity. This article should also be read in conjunction with the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples where the family and children are Indigenous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Articles 18 and 19 require state support and programmes to assist parents/guardians in their care for children. Also refers to joint care by both parents</td>
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<td><strong>Participation rights</strong></td>
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<td>Article 12 gives children the right to voice their wishes and to be heard. See also a provision of Article 9 (above)</td>
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their families. Adding a CD human rights perspective to social work practice ensures that systemic and not only individual change is the target for the work: social work and CD return to their political roots (Ife, 2001, 2010). Child protection from a children’s rights perspective with a participative and strengths-based focus insists on systemic and practice change.

We extend this argument by identifying more specifically some key elements that comprise such a practice. In order to do so, we will first examine in more detail the relevant UNCRC Articles in relation to their protective, provisionary and participatory functions.

**Protection**

The UNCRC is designed to provide children with security, safety and the resources with which to develop their full potential. Necessarily the Articles refer to how others, predominantly adults as parents/carers, professionals and officials, enable children’s positive growth and development. The Article most often used in social work is Article 3, which enjoins officials and authorities to act in the best interests of the child. This is problematic when taken alongside Article 12, which requires children’s wishes to be taken into account, but possibly more challenging is the issue of who decides as to what the best interests are and what constitute the criteria on which those decisions are made. The inference is that experts and professionals are the most appropriate people to assess what might be the “best interests” of a child in any given circumstances. Yet a CD or even an individual approach using strengths-based perspectives would acknowledge that other non-professional or “lay” people have both expertise in and knowledge of what might be in the child’s best interests. The Family Group Conference process and the legislation in Aotearoa/New Zealand were predicated on those beliefs. Principles of diversity and equity, amongst others, are invoked here. The “best interests” of the child might include participation in cultural practices, but those practices are very different in different cultural contexts. For example, Australian Indigenous children in the desert need to be able to accompany adults on food-gathering trips that take them journeying in quite harsh terrains which might be considered unsafe by “authorities”. Children’s attendance at lengthy funerals that take them away from school are another point of contention for authorities in both Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand.

“Best interests” also relate to decisions about where to place children at risk or in need of care from others than the immediate parental system. The cultural context is an important consideration to ensure that the “best interests” do not infringe the principle of the right of the child to his/her identity (Article 8) and that of Article 7, which refers to the child’s relationship with his/her parents as predominant carers. Current “permanency” debates refer to “best interests” (DCP, 2012) when deciding that children should be permanently removed from their parents, an act that severs this relationship. Taking the principles of CD—of genuine cooperative partnerships between relevant people and agencies, respect for human dignity, diversity and equity alongside self-determination—provides opportunities for specific, contextual,
inclusive, albeit complex actions to be pursued rather than merely making a decision to place a child in an ethnically connected (but possibly not appropriate) or totally separate situation. Here social work as a profession has a responsibility to advocate to policy-makers for more nuanced deliberations in the formulation of the “permanency” policy decision process.

Shayne tells of his and his wife’s experience in fostering children:

In a previous practice life my wife and I fostered over 200 children for varying periods. We would take young people from any ethnic background and be as culturally nuanced as we could to meet their needs. It soon became apparent that a number of them would be better off in culturally specific placements (i.e. Pacifica: Samoan, Tongan, Niuean, Cook Islander and Fijian etc.). This proved difficult as we were seen as specialists who were good at working with troubled teenagers and as long as they were with someone “brown” this met their needs. We developed strong relationships with Pacifica communities and would refer on to them. Their system took a while to set up but we made a point of seeking their mandate and advice in a way that we were accountable to them. We also trained Pacifica caregivers for placement of Pacifica children until they were ready to undertake the work themselves.

Similar examinations of some of the other Articles are warranted, which may lead to creative and productive practice. For example, Article 9 refers to the safety of children in the home. One of the concerns invoked here is the notion of privacy or private relations that are not the proper business of government. The CD principle of the collaborative work of development being public directly challenges this idea of privacy—not that all family matters should be open to public scrutiny, but that developmental work by its nature is performed in the public arena. It is, after all, collaborative and intended to be productive of social rather than private relations. This provides a point for practice consideration when thinking about how to ensure safety in the home for children. It immediately suggests that the work to create safety takes place outside the home. What public and collaborative strategies, then, can be used to engage supports to create Family Capital as compared with removal of children and severing of family ties? A case study from Norway (Young et al., 2012) illustrates how the Family Group Conference process enabled a child to stay with her mother despite opposition from authorities, because of the public and external supports the mother was able to engage. This is close to the Social Capital idea of generating and maintaining Bridging Capital and not only relying on Bonding Capital. For all people involved in the process to be very clear about and in their agreement to contribute to the purposes and practices makes safety in this home a public but supportive matter. An illustration from practice in Western Australia of social workers preparing for the long-term placement of siblings two years after the mother had sought assistance (but was refused because the children were not deemed sufficiently at risk) suggests both a lost opportunity to contribute to family capital development (the mother who voluntarily recognised the need for help and sought it) and an avoidable financial burden (long-term foster placement of several children). We maintain that supporting and generating Family Capital through combining
public, external funding and existing family strengths and capacity to enable family continuity is likely to be more productive in general than funding alternate care.

Provision

Articles 18 and 19 of the UNCRC require authorities to ensure that children have the wherewithal for safe, healthy and productive lives. Yet in many welfare states there is ongoing debate about the need to reduce social expenditure (Reynolds, Healy, & Collins, 2010), and this is accompanied by increasing public antipathy towards certain family types and behaviours, which often attract the attention of child protection authorities (Mooney & Neal, 2010). Children, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, are targeted by policy-makers as being both in need of supports from and of protection by the state. This brings into question how to balance the provision and protection functions of state intervention.

An additional tension exists in relation to Article 19, which, along with state provision of support, deals with state-authorised protection from violence and abuse. This tension often enables authorities to take removal action and defend it with the “best interests” criterion. A combination of Articles, especially Article 20, which requires the state to ensure that the placement enables the child to have access to his/her cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic background, would provide the opportunity for authorities to examine how best to meet all the provisions rather than take removal and separation action as the only strategy. Taking Shayne’s example of supporting children within ethnic/cultural specific settings, for example within Pacifica communities, is one possible strategy.

In Generation Two practice, the most common styles of social work are advocacy and direct service provision as well as developing services and including service users in the implementation of programmes (Ife, 2001). Sure Start and its counterpart Communities for Children in Australia are good examples. Participatory practice—that is, having service users as full and equal partners in the entire process—is less common, but this is not to say that such instances do not occur. There are obvious opportunities for practitioners to extend their practice with child welfare to include the people who are of concern to collaborate in the measures used to address those concerns. As a method of work, this is sponsored by several non-governmental organisations, such as St Lukes in Australia founded by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in the early 1970s, and Barnados, Open Homes Foundation, and latterly tribal groups such as Iwi social services in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The Full Service School model operating in a school in Western Australia (Young, 2010) uses parent engagement underpinned by a strengths perspective in conjunction with social work services with families and children to deal with some fairly complex situations. The potential for family violence is present in some families along with poverty, overcrowding and substance abuse. Children and parents fearful of violence, together and separately, have the opportunity to work with a social worker. The social worker also works with parents who have formed supportive activities and specific children’s groups to which these parents and children are invited. Some of these parents have
become leaders in activity groups and children have gone on to participate in school leadership activities. Reporting “suspicion of risk” is often used as the first response in these types of circumstances. An alternate response, with a participation reward system to pay for uniforms, excursions and the canteen, as used here along with the provision of services such as the food bank, and the linking of support parents together has enabled children and parents to go on to live productive lives.

**Participation**

The participation Articles 12 and 19 were possibly the more forward-thinking articles in the UNCRC as they broke new ground. Significantly, children are given a central position, not as objects for decisions but as subjects, as expert in relation to precise knowledge of their lives. There is consequently a re-positioning of role and agency, with children needing to be acknowledged and treated as experts with their own interpretations of their circumstances. Not all professionals agree with giving children full participation rights; they want age limits to be specified. Melton (2011) summarised the debate by identifying child savers who see children as vulnerable, incomplete beings who must be enveloped within the care and protection provided by adults. According to this position, participation in decision-making can create anxious and insecure children, who do not always know their own best interests and can be overly influenced by adults. Child liberationists, on the other hand, recognise children as active participants and experts in their own lives who have rights that should enable them to develop as individuals and be independent beings.

The Nordic countries are perhaps among the forerunners in children’s rights legislation. However, studies (Ankestyrelsen, 2011, 2012) find that there is still reluctance to involve children, revealing a general and widespread lack of children’s participation in consultations. Statements in one report are instructive:

> [there is] a lack of routines for dialogues with children. Some have routines, but do not follow these. Dialogues are conducted, but not documented. Management [within the child protection system] do not demand dialogues with children. Professionals lack knowledge about the right of children to participate. (Helsetilsynet/Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, 2011, pp. 11–13)

Debates continue about the age at which children are competent to make their own decisions and participate in plans about their future despite the UNCRC including all children under the age of 18 with no set minimum age. This requires professionals to find new ways of working with the youngest children to fulfil the UNCRC intentions. A constraint, however, is the specification that the views of the child must be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child, and it is here that professionals retain definitional power. It is clear that, although the legislation recognises the rights of the child to participate, changing the attitudes and beliefs of professionals in the child’s capacity is a concomitant necessity.

CD principles require that all people involved in an action or issue are included in the processes used. This is one of the features that sometimes make the choice of CD unattractive to policy-makers or agency administrators as it is necessarily a lengthy
process. Furthermore, inclusion is more than consultation; it necessitates taking into account the wishes and concerns of the people and designing actions accordingly. This also makes it an unpredictable process. But at the end of these deliberations are likely to occur actions that, even if they do not meet the expectations at the outset, are decisions which are understood by all, can be accommodated by all and can provide some of what all people would like to have happen. The participation of children should not be foreign to a CD practitioner.

The skills necessary for this work are routinely learnt by community practitioners and workers using strengths approaches. Foundational skills of engagement as equal partners and forming productive relationships are recognised as the necessary building blocks. In CD work, relationships extend to linking support people or resource people (who are not necessarily agency workers) together that share much with the ideas of the creation of social capital. Through listening intently to the interpretations of the people of their circumstances and lives, demonstrating they have been heard and understood through genuine active communication, and enabling people to use their own abilities in developing and implementing actions which meet the needs of the people, community and strengths workers can contribute to people’s productive engagement with change. This can occur even with difficult risk-laden situations.

Good Practice

The complexity of child protection practice is not in question. However, our argument is underpinned by two main considerations: the risk-averse nature of much social work child protection practice, and the difficult relationship between a practice that acknowledges diversity but retains mono-cultural policy and some practice responses. Others (Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2008) have also argued that child protection policy and practice in many western countries has become overly risk-averse, leading to increasing reliance on policies that subject families to the most extreme end of protective strategies at the expense of prevention. They maintain, and we agree, that risk aversion does not and cannot “save” all children and that preventive measures are, in the long run, more likely to protect children than the very expensive option of taking children into care as the first preference.

It is only relatively recently that diversity of family and identity have been included as necessary considerations for practice. Despite this there continues to be a debate relegating identity, culture, race and ethnicity to subordinate status, as Selwyn (2010) notes. Additionally and conversely, an unintended consequence of highlighting difference has been to place ethnic and racial minorities in the spotlight of excessive surveillance and attention. This has been particularly so in child protection where specific family structure and type, behaviour and beliefs are routinely linked with child abuse. So, family structure and size, family behaviour, living conditions and other features of “different” ways of living become minutely scrutinised. Any infractions are magnified and exceptional events, such as the death of a minority group child, used as reason for additional surveillance (Young, 2003). Even though
the surveillance is seen as being for the “good of” those under scrutiny, this continues the “othering” (Said, 1978) process of those groups. It can be done at a policy level in the name of protecting children, at an organisational level by policies such as mandatory reporting and at a personal level merely with a look.

Good practice, then, is one that infuses the complexities of child protection work with knowledge and application of and critical engagement with CD principles and the inter-relationships between key articles of the UNCRC. We propose this as a multi-dimensional approach to child protection to centralise issues of culture, identity and family.

The Elements for Practice

As can be seen from Table 2, much of the challenge exists in differing views of what constitutes some fundamental concepts such as “best interests”, identity, collaborative partnerships, and so forth. Additionally, much of social work practice emanates from a programmatic approach (Young et al., 2012) in which programme designs tend to dominate service provision. On the other hand, CD takes specific contexts and circumstances as the starting point and develops actions and implementations according to the concerns and the perspectives of the people involved. This is a participatory and collaborative approach, which is in the public rather than private domain. Questions asked of the people are: what would work here?, what can people contribute?, what is known?, what is important to you to include?, and many more. The practice implications, then, of taking a strengths-based community approach to child protection can use the UNCRC effectively to inform the work. From this debate some key elements and implications for practice emerge (Table 3).

Our beginning narrative and the Full Service School example illustrate these key elements. Practitioners can and do engage with these elements. Developing Family Capital is one of the prime measures in child protection practice. Rights work requires that families also participate in decision-making, and for that to occur families need to be recognised as theorists (Walker, 2012). Full Service School parent volunteers (who have some interpersonal helping training) have been able to identify and assist potentially vulnerable parents and children; for example, inviting parents who attend for a service, such as the food bank, to participate in unstructured group activities, such as sewing, or allowing the space for them to talk has encouraged parents to discuss their concerns in ways that permit the offering of help that might otherwise be treated with suspicion or not be accepted. This listening to parents’ ways of defining their worlds, issues and potential solutions, as well as identifying with them their abilities acknowledges families as theorists and contributes to the development of Family Capital. Peers assist each other, meeting the collaborative and public aspect of the work. Teachers’ concerns about children in the classroom are able to be brought to the inter-professional services meetings at which professional workers such as occupational therapists, social workers and the parent helpers discuss what supports might be offered. Some of these children are vulnerable and could arguably be at risk, but are not in sufficient danger to be accepted by the authorities
Children also contribute understandings of their world through participation with parent helpers and social workers in group activities and more structured individual reflection in the specially designed room for quiet interaction in child-centred ways. These each contribute to a more collaborative and in-depth understanding of needs and concerns that can form the basis for ongoing individual and collective support.

The provision of resources to enable professionals, lay experts, families and children to come together to produce positive outcomes, somewhat akin to the intent of the Family Group Conference, is an organisational and policy imperative and would meet the element of reciprocity, but in this example occurs only because of the

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**Table 3 Key Elements for Practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key elements</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Theoretical perspective</th>
<th>Practice implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child centred</td>
<td>Seeking, listening to and acting on the child's definition of his/her daily life</td>
<td>Children as competent agents</td>
<td>Accepting the competence of the child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>Situatedness (time, place, history, culture)</td>
<td>Social constructivism</td>
<td>Using local and specific designs generated from the local context rather than programmes designed elsewhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective action</td>
<td>The whole is more than the sum of its parts</td>
<td>Community development</td>
<td>Learning the practice of “together” and “alongside”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>The family as theorist</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Working with diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Capital</td>
<td>Shared responsibility</td>
<td>Anti-oppression</td>
<td>Listening to the experience of the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Cross-cultural</td>
<td>Developing equal partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family knowledge, history, capability, contacts</td>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Considering the potential of third-generation practices to inform the work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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as needing investigatory attention. Children also contribute understandings of their world through participation with parent helpers and social workers in group activities and more structured individual reflection in the specially designed room for quiet interaction in child-centred ways. These each contribute to a more collaborative and in-depth understanding of needs and concerns that can form the basis for ongoing individual and collective support.

The provision of resources to enable professionals, lay experts, families and children to come together to produce positive outcomes, somewhat akin to the intent of the Family Group Conference, is an organisational and policy imperative and would meet the element of reciprocity, but in this example occurs only because of the
vision of the school principal and the support of university researchers and student placement managers.

Another example is the design of a cultural variation of Protective Behaviours (a programme for teaching school children about safe and unsafe behaviours) for use in schools in remote Australia, as presented during the Social Worker of the Year Awards 2012. Children, families, local community members, teachers and other agency personnel were involved. During this process children were able to explore their experiences and concerns as well as contribute to the design. Understanding the worlds as described by children enabled professionals to engage in different ways with the children and their families and include them in other activities. Some disclosures were made during this process, and actions needed to be taken to address them, reminding us that outcomes are not always what families and children want. But having a working knowledge of the context and existing working relationships with other agency personnel and families, including the children, enabled these practitioners to collaboratively determine the best alternative care for these children. Working with children and families in developing activities or strategies, such as Protective Behaviours in schools, provides opportunities for peer support akin to the recovery model (Repper & Perkins, 2003) to be developed, promotes skill and knowledge development in other professionals and encourages collaborative relationships.

Conclusion

The key elements derive from our experiences of working directly with families and children as community practitioners and strengths workers or as educators working alongside workers who use these skills and understandings. As educators we are concerned with theoretical underpinnings to such work, hence our inclusion of the theories that inform these practices. From these experiences we maintain that many practitioners need to change the way they think about elements of their work and add new skills to their repertoire for successful rights-based and participatory practices. These are the implications for practice. Where practitioners have been accustomed to making decisions for others, they need to be able to include others in those decisions; they need to be able to accept that others, including children, do have the competence to make decisions. These ideas are not new, but they are still little used. Often it is not the worker who is not willing, but the agency and political environment, especially in situations of risk. We acknowledge that protective work that operates within a legislative framework is necessary, but this should not be the only or preferred mode of work. We suggest that practitioners, in their work of enhancing children’s well-being and freedom from harm, must seek to build complex practice responses that interweave all three of Ifes’s (2001) generations in their practice work, rather than focus on the legal and welfare remedies of Generations One and Two, and include participation alongside their protective and provisionary work (Qvortrup, 1994). Listening to people’s stories and hopes, accepting people’s capacities and expertise, employing developmental engagement and participatory skills, building capital
(family, community and social), and practicing a multi-dimensional response are five necessities for third-generation work within child welfare.

Note


References


