Special Issue – Child Neglect

The papers in this special issue provide evidence of neglect being more widespread than is commonly assumed. Despite this, practitioners and policy-makers seeking clarity on how to address neglect will have found few clear answers to guide their practice in the previous literature. This special edition provides a unique insight into what is meant by neglect, its effects on children and young people's development, behaviour and outcomes across a range of areas including education, employment, housing, crime and health. **Gardner and Cuthbert's** helpful review of current definitions clarify what is meant by neglect and **Devaney and McConville** bring a clearer understanding of the role of neglect in the lives of children in care and those in the wider child protection system in Northern Ireland. This will help practitioners and managers alike to better understand children's needs.

Most importantly, the papers review the strength of evidence about many of the strategic and operational interventions that have been used to address neglect and to improve the subsequent outcomes for children and young people who have experienced neglect. Those wishing to develop their services and practices can draw on these messages to inform their work. For example, **Taylor and colleagues** and **Pithouse and Crowley** review the efficacy of using the Graded Care Profile to improve consistency in recording about neglect.

Previous systematic reviews in children's social care (e.g. Liabo *et al.*, 2013[i]; Stevens *et al.*, 2009[ii]) note a number of serious shortcomings in the quality of the evidence base. These include the dominance of small scale studies, paucity of experimental or control designs, over-reliance on single sources of data and lack of long term follow-ups, limiting the capacity to generalize from their findings. The potential for robust evidence to inform the field of social care therefore remains limited. This collection of papers provides a stronger evidence base on what works in relation to neglect and thereby contributes to professionals and service managers' capacity to develop a culture of evidence-informed practice in the sector. This will, in turn, increase value for money by decreasing wasted resources on approaches that do not work.

Gray *et al.* (2013)[iii] have shown that in social work even when 'sound' evidence is available it is unlikely to be acted upon and thereby reflected in service provision. Practitioners and service providers will use research if it is perceived to tell them 'what works' and if it provides evidence relevant to their issues of concern. The strategies and interventions reviewed in these papers will 'speak' to practitioners, service managers and policy-makers as they address the current major areas of concern and provide evidence of efficacy of the approaches used.

Crucially, **Daniel and colleagues** remind us of the importance of listening to children and young people. They provide evidence of young people who are afraid to raise issues with adults but want teachers, for example, to make the first approach. Throughout our work with children and young people who have experienced neglect, it will be critical to create the space and time to actively listen and draw on these papers to help us to understand what we hear.

I commend these papers to the readers of *Research, Policy and Planning* as they provide a valuable source of evidence and guidance for practitioners, service managers and policy-makers in children's services across the UK.

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[i] Liabo, K., Gray, K. & Mulcahy, D. (2013) 'A systematic review of interventions to support looked-after children in school', *Child & Family Social Work*, **18**(3), pp. 341-353.

[ii] Stevens, M., Liabo, K., Witherspoon, S. & Roberts, H. (2009) 'What do practitioners want from research, what do funders fund and what needs to be done to know more about what works in the new world of children's services?', *Evidence & Policy,* **5**(3), pp. 281-294.

[iii] Gray, M., Joy, E., Plath, D. & Webb, S.A. (2013) 'Implementing evidence-based practice: a review of the empirical research literature', *Research on Social Work Practice*, **23**, pp. 157-166.