

## A fairer future? Addressing education needs of children in care

NEALE G. MOLLOY SOCIAL JUSTICE LECTURE 2009  
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Education is central to the wellbeing of children and young people, affecting their quality of life and prospects in adulthood. The 2009 Neale Molloy Social Justice lecture, presented by Dr Sarah Wise, examines the state of human rights and social justice in relation to out-of-home care children's education. While acknowledging the complexity of children's needs, the gap in education outcomes between children in care and their peers suggests corporate parents are not living up to their responsibilities.

In addition to the tragic personal costs involved, new research shows society as a whole is negatively impacted by differentials in income and opportunity that result from education failure. It is argued that societal and systems change and the accumulation of risks explain why children in out-of-home care do so badly.

High expectations, compensatory action and applying a life course approach are suggested principles for guiding the development of tangible actions to reach optimal progress at school, enjoyment of life and a fairer future for all children and young people in care.

## The following presentation was delivered by Dr Sarah Wise on Wednesday 14 October 2009

When Ray Cleary invited me to give the Neale Molloy Social Justice Lecture I welcomed the opportunity. I started in the newly created role of General Manager Policy, Research and Innovation at Anglicare Victoria almost a year ago to help advocate for the children and families in our society who are unable to benefit from all that it has to offer, so I hope to say something worthwhile and meaningful on behalf of a strikingly vulnerable group with whom our agency works; and that is children and young people in out-of-home care.

Children who become looked after come from homes judged inadequate to care for them. They have had a challenging journey through childhood, and have almost certainly missed out on opportunities for optimal development.

I want to focus my remarks on the state of human rights and social justice in relation to out-of-home care children's education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Articles 28 and 29 states that every child has a right to an education that develops them to their *fullest potential*. Tonight I want to bring to light the imbalance in education outcomes between children in care and their peers and reflect on how well the various stakeholders involved in delivering care, which includes non-Government agencies, are living up to their responsibilities.

My other agenda is to give you an idea about the importance of education opportunities and outcomes for out-of-home care children as well as the society,

and to share my thoughts on how we need to be responding to this issue into the future.

### The gap in education outcomes between children in care and their peers

There are currently no established means to evaluate, monitor, benchmark and review achievement of education outcomes among children in care across Australia, and without dwelling on the importance of evidence-based policy and practice too much, I feel that data deficiencies bedevil progress in this area. However, there is a small body of Australian research that shows children and young people in care are at a greater risk of experiencing poor outcomes within all domains of education compared to children generally.

Studies that looked into learning outcomes show that children in out-of-home care perform academically below what is normal for their age. A recent analysis of national numeracy and literacy test records conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and welfare, for example, found that children in government schools on guardianship and custody orders were considerably *less likely* to reach national benchmarks for numeracy and literacy, compared with all children who participated in the tests ( $N = 895$ ) (AIHW, 2007).

Figures 1 and 2 show the results for the 188 children and young people who were from Victoria. The disparity in outcomes is evident in both numeracy and literacy

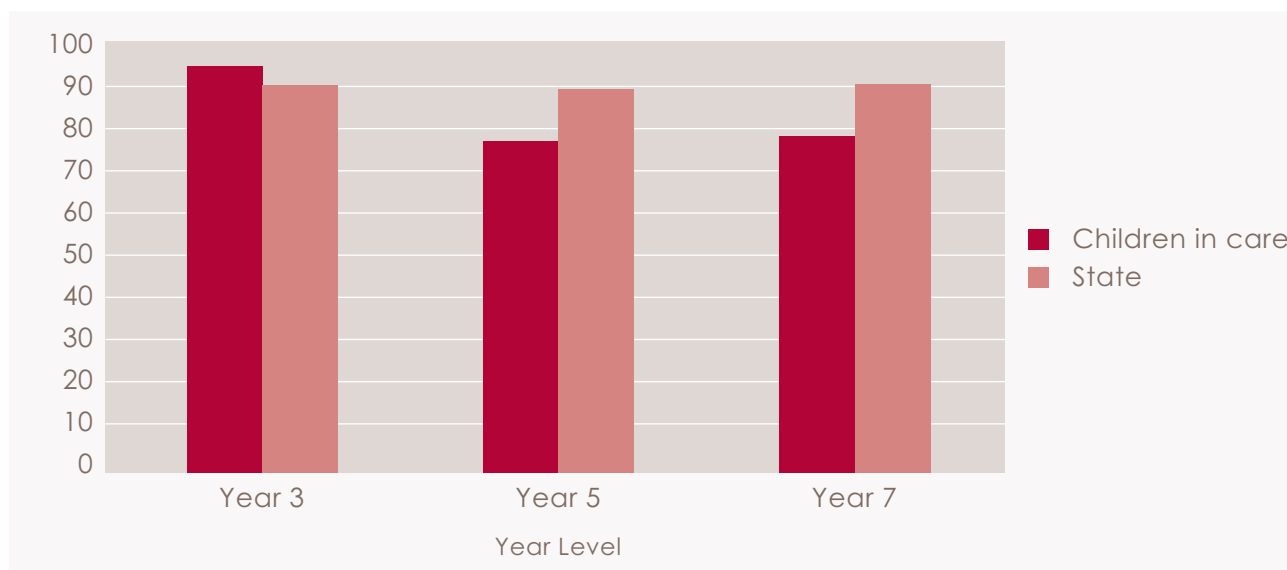
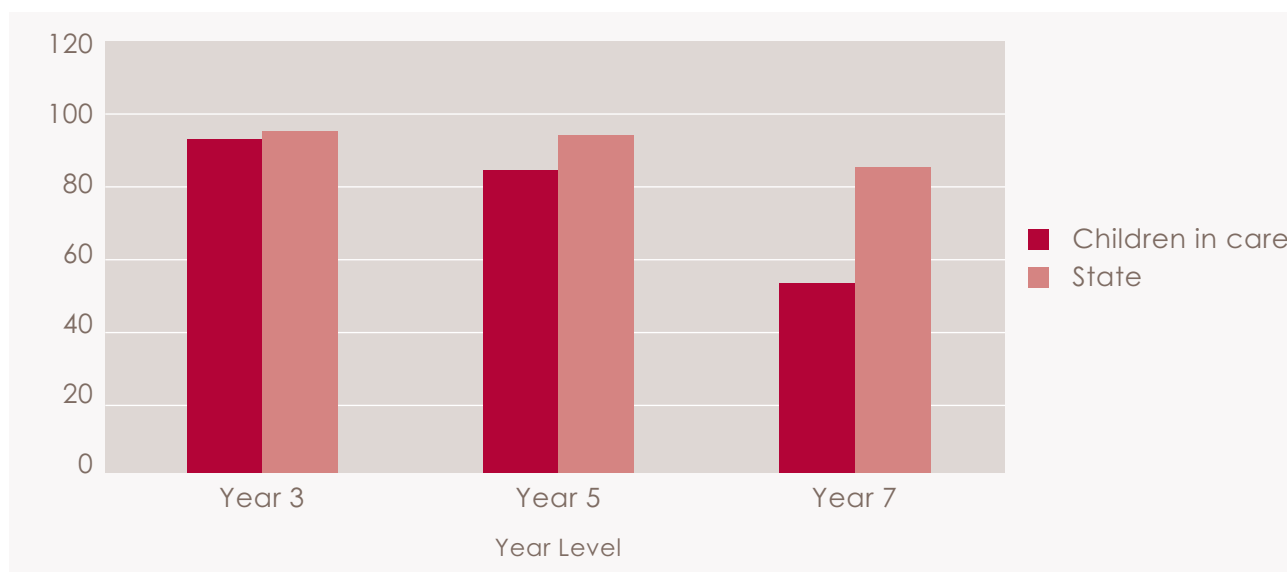


Figure 1. Proportion of children in Victoria on guardianship/custody orders achieving national benchmarks in reading compared to the proportion of children in the State.

Source: AIHW, 2007.



**Figure 2. Proportion of children in Victoria on guardianship/custody orders achieving national benchmarks in numeracy compared to the proportion of children in the State.**

Source: AIHW, 2007.

results. You can see quite clearly the gap in numeracy outcomes widening as children progress through their education.

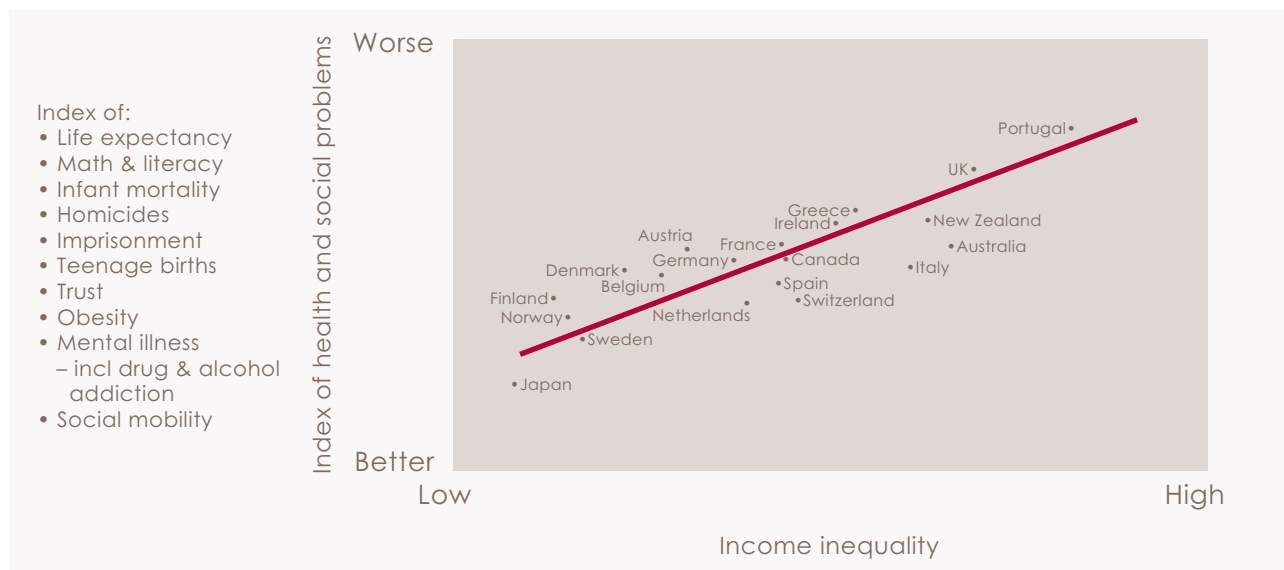
The education deficits of children in out-of-home care are also reflected by higher rates of being held back a year, as well as higher absenteeism and truancy than their peers (Lips, 2007; Zeltin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2003; Christian, 2003). The latest CREATE Foundation Report Card on Education showed that approximately *one-third* of children and young people aged 10 years and above missed more than 10% of total attendance days (CREATE Foundation, 2006). Studies have also revealed that in the early years, children in care may not attend any form of preschool or other early childhood care and education setting.

It is also clear that children in care complete fewer years of schooling and are much less likely to continue within mainstream education beyond the period of compulsory school attendance, which is 16 years. In Cashmore and Paxman's seminal study of wards leaving care (1996) only 6% of the study sample had completed secondary school. The CREATE Report Card on Education showed that less than half (44%) of 17-year-olds attended school, and in Queensland, the recent Views of Young People in Residential Care survey highlighted that almost half of the 221 young people who participated in the survey did not attend school, and of these two-thirds were not involved in any other training or education (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, 2009).

## Impact of education failure on individuals

I don't think I have to convince anyone here of the personal consequences of education failure. The 'exclusion' of young people in care from the mainstream system often leads to the entrenchment of wide-ranging social issues and self-harming behaviour and makes it extremely difficult for some of them to step back into education or training and, as a result, mainstream society.

The impact of early school leaving on income and employment is also obvious. Changes in labor markets have meant that qualifications are increasingly necessary for gaining employment. The latest Foundation for Young Australians National Report on the learning and work situation of young Australians (Lamb & Mason, 2009) highlights the fact that early school leavers who do not continue in education are less likely to be in full time work and more likely to be unemployed or not in the labor market and less able to support themselves in the future. The *How Young People are Faring '09* report showed that 40% of young people who left school before Year 10 in 2007 had no job at all 12 months later.



**Figure 3. Relation between income inequality and health and social problems**

Source: Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009.

## Impact of education failure on the society

The failure of State agencies to ensure children and young people in care graduate to post-secondary education and employment adds to the unfairness they experience. There is also new evidence to suggest that income polarisation between those who stay on at school and those who leave at the earliest opportunity is at the root of a wide range of population health and social problems. Put simply, the negative consequences of education failure are not quarantined to those who fail or drop out. Education failure creates inequality in long-term earning capacity and income and this inequality affects everyone in the society.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have looked at data from respected international sources and found eleven different health and social problems are substantially worse in unequal societies.

Figure 3 represents the relationship between income inequality and an index of health and social problems, and it shows quite dramatically that health and social problems are worse in unequal societies (such as the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand) and better in societies with low income inequality (such as Japan, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands).

Wilkinson and Pickett suggest that income inequality damages the social fabric and quality of life for everyone. So there is a very clear policy message here about the link between social justice, equity in

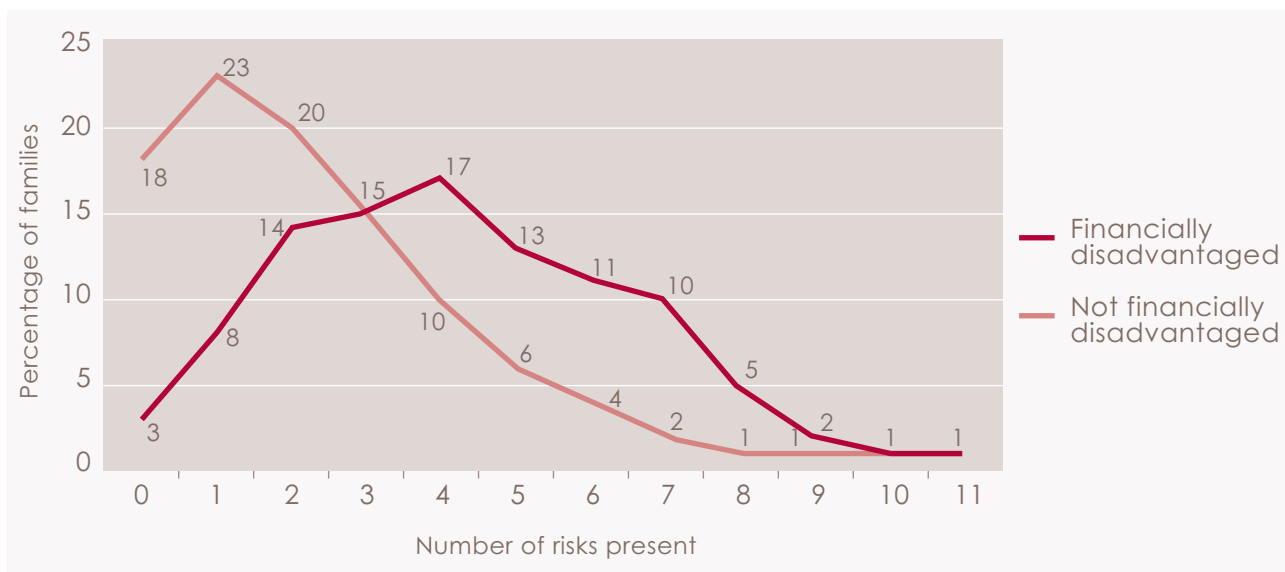
education, and the wellbeing of the society and that message is simple; *more equal societies work better for everyone.*

## Why do children in care do so badly?

Hopefully, Wilkinson and Pickett's research will act as an important driver for tackling education disadvantage, although there already does appear to be an increasing *commitment* to improving education opportunity and outcomes across all tiers of government and within the community sector as well.

Yet, while equity in education has become a priority issue, we don't know all the policy levers of 'better outcomes'; in fact complexities abound. We therefore need to continue seeking a better understanding of why children in care perform so badly, and to develop more effective solutions, goals, and strategies.

A recent study commissioned by the Smith Family using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) provides some very useful insight into the causes of poor home-to-school transitions among young children raised in financially disadvantaged (FD) families (Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards, & Hayes, 2008). Just like studies that have gone before (eg. OECD, 2009), it found evidence of a strong relationship between social background and educational achievement in Australia. The *interesting* finding was that the risk factors for poor outcomes were the same for children from FD families and non-FD families. The



**Figure 4. Number of risk factors for poor education outcomes among children from financially disadvantaged and non-financially disadvantaged families.**

**Source: Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards, & Hayes (2008)**

gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' was explained by fact that the number of risk factors present among children from FD families was higher.

In Figure 4 you can see quite clearly that financially disadvantaged children, represented in the red line, accumulate more risk than children who are not financially disadvantaged.

As I've already mentioned, the evidence-base on education outcomes among children in out-of-home care is scant, but if the data were available and you could plot a line on this graph to represent children in care, you might expect the mass of the distribution of risk scores to be concentrated on the right hand side of the figure representing an even greater risk burden than disadvantaged children generally.

You would expect that the risk factors identified in the Smith Family study, which included things like emotional and behaviour problems, maternal factors, family educational climate, parenting style and preschool experience, would also be operating for children in out-of-home care. However, we know that the problems faced by children before they come into care have become more extreme, and these negative life experiences do carry consequences. Abuse and neglect, for example, leads to a delay of development and causes emotional and cognitive problems, reducing children's capacity to concentrate and to learn (Cairns & Stanway, 2004).

In addition to these multitude of risks, some children who enter care may suffer a double whammy to their education because of risks operating within the out-of-home care system. Research has highlighted children in out-of-home care experience high rates of absenteeism, relating to court appearances, visitation, and duration of travel in order to maintain the child in the same school (CREATE Foundation, 2004), changes in schools as the result of moves to new placements (Jackson, 1994; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski & Howing, 1993; Wulczyn, Kogan & Harden, 2003), lack of participation in school-based opportunities and extra-curricula activities as the result of difficulties obtaining parental consent and because of the cost involved (CREATE Foundation, 2004), lack of co-ordination and communication between significant stakeholders responsible for children's care (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003), and inadequate support (Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge & Sinclair, 2003).

Children's complex behaviours also pose a significant challenge for the individual caregivers, social workers and teachers who have to support and nurture children with complex needs, yet the out-of-home care system, with its massive shortage of foster carers and pressures on social workers, is struggling to meet the demands placed upon it by our broken society.

## What should our direction be?

So that leads me to the question 'What solution do we adopt?' and 'What should our direction be?' The quality and suitability of the school environment is clearly critical in regard to improving educational engagement and outcomes among children in out-of-home care. While Victorian schools already have good resources to improve the planning and supports available to children and young people in care (eg. Victorian Department of Education and Training & the Department of Human Services, 2003), diversity in curriculum choices and teaching and learning strategies should be a priority if mainstream schools are to enhance participation and performance, and this is one area where I think investment and support from the Community Sector is vital.

As well as helping to enhance the responsiveness of schools to the needs of children in out-of-home care, there are particular opportunities and barriers within the care system that child welfare agencies and other stakeholders need to turn their attention to.

I am currently directing a study of Care-System Impacts of Academic Outcomes with researchers from Wesley Mission Melbourne (known as the CIAO project). The overarching aim of the study is to give child welfare agencies some guidance on where they may effectively intervene to support education outcomes among children in care. While I'm very excited about the possibilities of this partnership study to generate some important new insight, our research is not quite at the point of being able to deliver specific findings and messages. However, a framework for an effective response has crystallised in my mind, and it's core elements are reflected in the views of a youth in care – let's call him Toby – who wrote about his experience with one of the Children's Aid Societies in Ontario, Canada (Downton & Lemay, 1999). This is what Toby had to say:

I am not the same person as I was before I came into care. A lot of that change had to do with what was going on in my life, and part of it was the lack of opportunity and expectation of my new parent. Within months of coming into care...I stopped going to school. I knew I wouldn't be missed. I missed one-third of my last two years of high school. I knew the opportunity wasn't there so it didn't matter what I did... There was a total lack of opportunity and more importantly of expectation. I had little motivation to live and even less motivation to succeed. If all a teacher gives a child is a crayon, then he can't expect that child to produce a Picasso. You do what you can with what you are given. I didn't feel that the Children's

Aid Society expected much of anything from me: All I was given was a crayon. The bare minimum required to draw out a life for myself...Growing up witnessing your friends' lives awash with colour as they paint with their thick acrylic paint and skilled hands, you wonder how you got stuck colouring in a faded image in an old colouring book... Youth in care, like mainstream youth, have the desire to succeed, they have the imagination, the drive, the dream, but I don't suppose it matters how much potential you have, if you are never provided with paint and the lessons required to bring the paint brush to life then you have nothing but a crayon, a colouring book and a wobbly hand. I would challenge anyone to paint a Picasso with those tools... Before I came into care I had the outline of a Picasso painted out. Ever since I have been colouring it in with a crayon. Along with the loss of my paints, my motivation began to sink, my imagination faded and my dreams were dashed because I came to realise the limitations of a crayon. That is why it is important that these children and youth are provided with these tools early in their experiences in care, they need to be given the expectations and opportunity to learn, to be involved in the community, athletics or the arts and be part of the family before they get so discouraged that they lose their drive, their ambition, their hope and their dreams. They also need the opportunity and the expectation to redeem themselves in the face of failure.

The key messages that I took away from Toby's story, which I believe should help inform action in this area, relate to expectations, opportunity and intervening early.

The first feature of a response aimed at enhancing education outcomes for children in care involves *implementing high standards and expectations*. A lack of commitment to education by a child's carer is a major factor leading to low achievement at school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research has highlighted a lack of engagement and involvement among social workers and caregivers in children's education experiences, such as contact with schools and carer encouragement, support and direction (CREATE Foundation, 2006: 16). As Toby's story suggests, corporate parents often do not expect children in care to achieve much, as so they often don't.

The second element is the principle of *positive compensation*, and what I am suggesting here goes beyond equality of opportunity; it is about equality of outcomes. As Toby's story suggests, for children and young people in care to achieve on par with their peers - to overcome past and present disadvantages

and progress further if they are achieving well – requires additional resources, opportunities and different treatment. We already have in place good mechanisms to identify those children and young people who require additional and specialist assistance so the real challenge is to deliver a level of support that is matched to their needs and compensatory actions.

As the population of children and young people in out-of-home care display a wide range of needs, so we need a variety of initiatives to try and improve education outcomes, which includes mechanisms that would allow children and young people the possibility of post-secondary education.

*Applying a life-course approach* is also necessary if we are to improve education outcomes for children in care, and by this I mean use of prevention and early intervention strategies, and often the best approach to promoting good education outcomes can be ordinary, everyday actions. Although a number of children enter out-of-home care with complex needs, our responses shouldn't only be targeted at those who struggle to stay engaged in education or who may be stranded outside the education system. For example, literacy is the basic foundation for all learning, and it is one of the strongest predictors for children's future academic achievements. Introducing literacy early in a child's life, through reading stories or showing pictures to babies, playing with pencils doing real or pretend writing, reading aloud to children and visiting libraries, are simple yet effective strategies that should be considered and highlighted within the out-of-home care system.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the goal of education equality is unquestioningly important. Education failure has drastic consequences for individuals and the society, and access to education that enables children to reach their full potential is a basic right that no-one should be denied. Yet, the imbalance in outcomes between children in care and their peers is a complex, long-term issue. There are no easy answers and finding a solution to the problem will require good data and analysis and the active co-operation of a range of stakeholders.

However, I do believe that there are some key ingredients for an effective approach, and as I've just mentioned these are essentially about how we see children in care and how we act out our parental responsibilities.

Michelangelo (1475-1564), the great Master of Renaissance sculpture is quoted as saying '*I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free*'. In a very real sense I think children in care need us to see them through these eyes; as what they potentially can be, and then they need us to shape them with encouragement, high expectations and real opportunity, until their brilliance and potential is set free.

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Dr Sarah Wise is the General Manager Policy, Research and Innovation at Anglicare Victoria. Dr Wise has a background in developmental psychology, and is an experienced and extensively published researcher in the areas of parent-child attachment, early childhood services, and the family, and community and service contexts of vulnerable and disadvantaged children.