



Greetings from Director Jan Pryor

Welcome to the first newsletter for 2004. This promises to be an exciting year for us at the RMCSF.

Winning the FRST grant 'Connectedness in Young New Zealanders' means that we are able to take up residence of the house at 6 Wai-te-ata Road and we are fortunate that it became available at the end of 2003 when the Institute for Policy Studies and the Centre for Strategic Studies moved to Rutherford House. Josie and I are settled in, and once the administrator and a project manager are appointed, the house will become a lively and interesting place to be. Others associated with the project will take up part-time residence here as well. There is space, too, for visitors who come to work with the centre from time to time.

We will know after Easter whether or not we have been successful in our bid to HRC and Department of Youth Development to carry out the 'Wellbeing for Young New Zealanders' study.

Aside from projects, we have also recently launched our website. Josie has worked hard to get that assembled and on air. Take a look on www.vuw.ac.nz/mckenzie-centre. We also have some seminars in the planning stages, including one on fatherhood probably in August, and also in August a presentation from Paul Murphy who runs the Columbus project in Western Australia, where professionals in the Family Court there work together to solve difficult cases.

Membership of our Advisory Board has changed somewhat. Viv Maidaborn resigned when she moved from Relationship Services and their new CEO, Jeff Sanders, will join the board. Judge Mahony will remain on the board

despite retiring as Principal Family Court Judge. At our most recent meeting on the 30th of March several initiatives were suggested for the centre, including forward-planning on a seminar series with possible topics listed on the website. Another suggestion is that we initiate an annual lecture series in the centre.

I have been released from teaching for this year, so am working nine-tenths on the project and for the centre. It is great to be able to focus more fully on our activities rather than being spread across several roles.

Overall, the opportunities and possibilities for the Centre to grow are enormous. It is a challenging time for families, and for family research. The task for us is to attract and involve people with skills and passion for work in this area.

Although we are not a 'drop in' centre for individual families, we would welcome your visit to 6 Wai-te-ata Road to see our new premises and meet our colleagues.

contents:

Families & Social Policy	2
Youth Connectedness	3
Children in Families & Research	3
Website Launch	3
Partnership & Parenting	4
Children's Rights Symposium	4

Families and Social Policy: Some Reflections on the Past Decade

By Advisory Board Member John Angus¹

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Families are seldom off the social policy agenda. This is not surprising. Families are such a fundamental social institution, and so important to individual wellbeing, that it would be remarkable if those concerned with policies which affect wellbeing did not have families on their radar screens. Recently family policy has been a particularly prominent feature. An emphasis on families was a politically effective plank of the United Futures Party in the last election. A new advocacy body is being set up - the Families Commission. The economic position of families with dependent children has been signalled as a focus of the forthcoming budget. And the Government has asked the Ministry of Social Development to set up a Family Services group to strengthen the effectiveness of family support services.

This brief note considers the focus which central government in New Zealand over the past decade has given to the position of families. It argues that while changes in public policy perspectives have been important, the degree of attention now being paid to the family reflects more fundamental issues about support for families in the face of considerable economic and social changes.

By the middle of the 1990's, the era in which economic rationalism dominated public policy was coming to an end. But its imprint on policies about families was still evident. There was a predisposition to give emphasis to the damage state provision could do, as reflected in concerns about welfare dependency. Fiscal constraints meant a very targeted approach to support for families, in both financial assistance and other social service programmes. There was also a focus on the individual responsibilities of family members such as parents, given its most public expression in the ill-fated attempt to put in place a *Code of Family and Social Responsibility*.

Current public policy perspectives on families have moved away from the positions of the mid 1990's. The government has put more emphasis on state provision, for example in public housing, and there is a greater willingness to adopt universal rather than targeted approaches, for example in the health sector through the new Primary Health Organisations.

The perspectives brought to public policy about families are important. But I suspect there are some significant underlying factors behind the new emphasis on families. Social and economic changes over the past three or four decades have impacted on families in ways which raise important questions about how families can be supported to carry out the important functions we expect of them. Amongst those changes are changes in family formation and size, the pace and extent of structural change within individual families, the movement of women into paid work, and increasing inequalities in income and wealth amongst families.

Many of the questions concern the role of families in raising children, a concern given added emphasis because of the importance of the next generation of adult workers in sustaining the economy so it can support an ageing population. Thus across the social policy fields of employment, education, health and social assistance there is now considerable attention being paid to family policy issues. This includes work life balance, the importance of the family in supporting a child's education, family processes as an influence on good health outcomes, and the relationship between economic circumstances and good outcomes for children.

The position of families, and in particular families with dependent children, is likely to remain a focus of social policy attention for the next few years.

¹ These reflections are mine, and should not be taken as the views of the current government, or of the Ministry of Social Development.



Connectedness in Young New Zealanders

In December 2003 we heard the exciting news that our project on youth connectedness had been successful in the FRST funding round. The project leader is our Director Jan Pryor and the research will be carried out by the Roy McKenzie Centre, Health Services Research Centre and New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

The project's two top-level research objectives are: to examine how connectedness supports youth in negotiating the challenges of adolescence; and to identify modifiable factors that foster and enhance connectedness. We will zoom in on young people's connectedness to their families and whānau, their communities and wider society, and their schools. Connectedness will be considered in relation to both meaningful participation and sense of belonging.

The research approach is a mixed-method, cross-lagged longitudinal design. This year we will establish project advisory boards, including youth advisory boards, review relevant literature, and facilitate focus groups with young people. Here measures of connectedness and wellbeing, which are sensitive to NZ's unique social and cultural context, will be developed with young people. As from 2005 we will quantitatively and qualitatively follow three cohorts of youth starting at ages 10, 12, and 14, for three years. We will provide snapshots of NZ youth each year, and analyse causal links across time among potential protective factors and positive outcomes.

The development of a body of local contemporary knowledge about youth in their social context, and the identification of specific areas where practice and policy can be changed in order to enhance optimal development, will be the basis for informing end-users of this research.

Website Launch

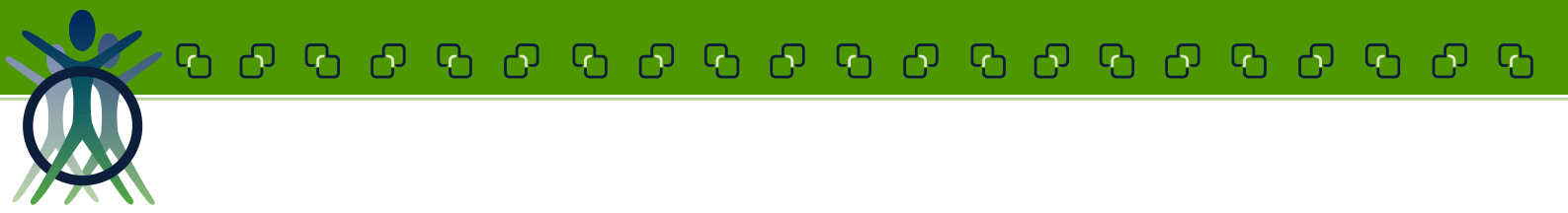
We are pleased to announce the launch of the Centre's new website. You can now find us at www.vuw.ac.nz/Mckenzie-Centre. The site has been designed to introduce the Centre to those who have not heard of us before, plus keep those already-in-the-know updated and informed about our research opportunities, current projects and upcoming events. Past newsletters are available to download from the site and, where appropriate, specific newsletter articles will also be featured on relevant web pages. We would like to thank both Serahn Henry (contract website developer) and Craig Anslow (Website support, VUW) for assisting us with the development of the site. Josie Roberts will maintain and regularly update the site.

Children as Experts on Families and Research

In January Professor Julia Brannen (University of London) spoke at the RMCSF about her recent study about children's family experiences. A primary message emerging from the research is that children are active co-participants and co-constructors of family life. Overall children had an extremely open view of what a family might look like, with children and love being common elements.

Julia discussed the use of video as a medium for the dissemination of research findings to children. Interestingly, Julia did not simply video research participants involved in the study; nor did she ask child actors to re-enact participants' responses on camera. Instead she developed key findings from the initial study into statements, and asked groups of children of a similar age to reflect on the statements. It was these group feedback sessions that were recorded. The process provided an opportunity to feedback research results directly to children so that they could comment on the ways researchers had interpreted data concerning children's views and experiences. The research moved from taking children as subjects of research, to seeing them as experts on research.

Julia produced an excellent video from the 'feedback' footage. The video presented key statements, which were further illustrated by a range of children's responses to the statement. The findings could therefore be widely disseminated to younger and older audiences alike - including attendees at the seminar.



Partnership and Parenting

Our study on heterosexual couples with children is almost complete. Fifty couples were interviewed; thirty couples were married and twenty couples were in a de facto relationship. Each participant was interviewed alone and asked a range of open-ended questions before filling out a short survey.

The results show us that parenting, partnership and commitment are understood to be important, complex and interrelated facets in people's lives. All three are seen to influence children's development in two-parent households. Overall, marriage itself is considered less important than commitment, for both partnership and parenting. A range of factors, both internal and external to a partnership itself, contribute to relationship stability. It appears that children are the most pertinent barrier to leaving a partnership.

Interviewees believed that partnership is influenced by becoming a parent; while parenting is influenced by the level of commitment in a partnership. Parenting changes couples' relationships, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Working together as co-parents

is seen as an important task that requires relationship commitment.

Many, but not all, of what interviewees saw as key ingredients for successful parenting reflect what psychologists have identified as the most effective style of parenting. Most parents see the ultimate goal of successful parenting as raising children who are socially and psychologically well-balanced. However, parents felt that they faced a range of challenges, both in terms of being able to be good parents themselves and being able to deal with the external influences on children, which can be hard to control. Most people understand parenting to be the most important influence on children's development, especially in their first few years of life. Still many acknowledge non-parental influences, such as siblings, peers and teachers. Some also perceive a two-way relationship between parenting and other influences.

A five-page summary of the findings has been sent to all participants. This can be downloaded from our website. From here we hope to make a full report available and write articles for academic audiences.

Children's Rights Symposium

Two researchers on our new Youth Connectedness project, Josie Roberts from RMCSF and Karen Vaughan from NZCER, attended a Children's Rights Symposium organised by the Office of the Commissioner for Children in February. The Symposium involved an initial full day forum for young people. The following day, the young people were joined by as many adults. Throughout the day there was a balance between adult and youth presenters. Topic-based working groups were also formed to brainstorm key difficulties facing young people and potential strategies to overcome them. Young people were centrally involved in the development of the Symposium, took leadership roles on the day, and retained a strong youth voice throughout. Overall the Symposium appeared to provide a high level of respect, encouragement and support for young people's meaningful participation. We hope the same will be said of the Youth Connectedness project.

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