Practicing Gentleness and Encouraging Hope

Social Work with Marginalized People who have a Mild or Borderline Intellectual Disability

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People with a Mild/Borderline Intellectual Disability

- In 2003 – approx 3% of Australian population had an ID (severe to mild range)
- Include people with borderline ID figure would be approximately 13% *(AIHW 2008)*
Life Experiences of People with a Mild/Borderline ID

- Disability often not recognised by service systems
- Usually actively present in their local communities
- Can have difficulties with:
  - understanding and retaining complex ideas,
  - social interaction
  - everyday problem solving

(Van der Molen et al 2010)
Common Issues Experienced

- Loneliness
- Poverty
- Homelessness
- Unemployment
- Criminal victimisation/offending
- Chronic health problems
- Mental illness
- Child protection issues
Challenges for Generic and Specialist Services

- People may not identify as having extra needs
- People need greater time and assistance to engage in everyday activities
- Generic services fail to recognise the disability
- Specialist disability services regard the disability as not severe enough to warrant intervention
About This Study

- **Aim:** To explore the practice framework of Community Living Association in their work with people with an intellectual disability at risk of social disadvantage.
Community Living Association (CLA)

• CLA is a small NGO located in Nundah – established in 1987
• Oversees a wide range of programs for:
  - people with a learning disability,
  - intellectual disability,
  - intellectual disability and mental illness
  - young people at risk of early school leaving
  - people at risk of homelessness
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Community Living Program (CLP)</th>
<th>ARROS</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Based in Nundah and surrounding suburbs</td>
<td>- An outreach program which supports people with ID who are homeless or at risk of homelessness</td>
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<td>- People with ID live locally and many have experiences of social disadvantage</td>
<td>- Covers north metropolitan Brisbane</td>
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Method

• Qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews with 11 CLA practitioners
• Discussed service and practice frameworks – issues, challenges, tools, approaches
• Supplemented by de-identified constituent (client) records, CLA policy documents, and CLA internal research
• Thematic analysis with NVivo 9 software
Representing the Key Issues

CLA Service Framework

- Being, Doing and Becoming
- Relationships at the Heart
- Safety and Security
- Resources
- Mental Well-Being
- Physical Well-Being
Relationships at the Heart

• Worker: “You can set a person up in a house… you can get food parcels, all those things… but then Dad will come in from Bundaberg and they’ll go off with him”

• Relationships as the core motivator in people’s lives
Resources

- Community agencies and government departments can provide fundamental needs
- Many people need assistance managing these resources
- Resources include a person’s gifts and contributions to others
Worker: “The neighbour preying on the person or offering “friendship” with something else attached; the person hocking their stuff; getting access to their bank account… In isolation you think that’s a horrible story…but what’s worse is seeing that time and time again…”
• Worker: “Understanding why you don’t have the same opportunities as other people… or even understanding what disability is. What is it?”
• Missing out on status symbols in society
• Fast paced social expectations
Assessing What is Important

• Finding a person’s core message

• Worker: This woman lives in a unit on her own and spends a lot of time on the computer. Really doesn’t venture out much... At times she has a real need to connect so she calls up and wants the workers to come around and visit, but if we say could we help her find something to do in the community? We’ve got volunteers that could get involved. She’s like, “No, no, I don’t need anyone else; I just want you guys.”
CLA Organisational Practice Framework

- Building Relationships
- Building Resources
- Building Knowledge
- Building Decision-Making
Building Relationships

• Working with people with ID and their significant others
• Work with 1 person = work with 20 people
• Extending the reach and range of people's relationship repertoire at a gentle pace
• Intentional groupings
Challenges in Relationship Work

- Holding relationships with a large number of people
- Who is the client?
- Addressing issues of safety and security
- Confidentiality as an ongoing negotiation
- Balancing need-need relationships against need-resource relationships
Building Resources

- Addressing poverty in its guises of debt, homelessness, inadequate income
- Not all reliance on CLA – people to have an imprint of their own decision making
- Paradox of supporting people to have more control over resources through relinquishing control
Types of Resources

Individual Access
- Underutilised Resources
  e.g. budget, empty garages
- External Resources
  e.g. funding, housing

Collective Access
- Underutilised Resources
  e.g. savings, group, workers' co-op
- External Resources
  e.g. fundraising, housing
Building Knowledge

- Incidental and intentional skill and knowledge development
- People developing their own agendas
- Concrete and experiential knowledge
Building Knowledge

- Worker: “We did an exercise where he described what physically changed when he was getting unwell…”
- Challenges include over assuming competency/inability
- Overwhelming presence of false knowledge
Building Decision Making

- Important to achieve autonomy and self-efficacy
- ‘Deep listening’ to a person’s real expressions
- Facilitate choice using various techniques – e.g. visual drawings
Challenges in Supporting Decision Making

- Be suspicious of agreement
- No doesn’t necessarily mean no
- Yes doesn’t necessarily mean yes
- Listening to the subtexts
Gentleness, Hope and Celebration