Transforming trajectories for disadvantaged young children: lessons from Tasmania's Child and Family Centres

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L1   Abstract

The early years influence children's learning, wellbeing and health and continue to do so into adulthood. As a result, they constitute an effective target for intervention seeking to transform the trajectories of children affected by disadvantage. The complex, multi-faceted nature of disadvantage makes it a 'wicked problem' – one that defies simple solutions delivered through isolated initiatives or organisations. As a result the need for integrated and place-based approaches across education, health and other domains is recognised. Tasmania's Child and Family Centres exemplify such initiatives. Interviews were conducted with parents, volunteers and staff in three Centres, each located in communities affected by high levels of disadvantage. Analysis draws on cultural-historical theory to explore transformation resulting from expanding ways of making sense of the world and acting in it – i.e. learning. Evidence of significant change was found across three planes: children's engagement in activities such as play; family practices, especially in interaction with children; and the communities in which children grow up. Integration and the place-based nature of the Child and Family Centres were found to be important in accomplishing these changes. However, these in themselves are not sufficient to address the wickedness of poor outcomes for disadvantaged children. Activities, practices and communities are shaped by, and shape one another, in dialectic relationships. Re-directing children's trajectories in the early years benefits from approaches that work across each of these planes, and foster mutually enabling connections between them. The Child and Family Centres are achieving precisely this.

L1   Introduction

The need for early intervention for children born in circumstances of disadvantage is clear. What is much less clear is how to do this effectively. The passing on of disadvantage from one generation to another remains a major problem. Giving all children the best possible start in life is incredibly difficult as so many factors are in play, many of which are beyond parents' immediate control, and out of reach of outcomes that particular services can deliver in isolation.

The concept of wicked problems captures the nature of this difficulty. Originally termed by Rittel and Webber (1973) in reference to urban planning, the idea is now widely used in reference to social problems including child abuse, domestic violence, obesity, and the effects of socio-economic disadvantage. Wicked problems are complex, open-ended and subject to complex inter-dependencies between multiple causes (Rittel & Webber, 1973). They are difficult to define, unstable, and do not sit conveniently within the responsibility of any one organization or sector (APCS, 2007). This has implications for service delivery: linear processes of working from problem to solution are not sufficient, as they fail to recognise uncertainties and complexities that arise from interacting factors:

> Tackling wicked problems is an evolving art. They require thinking that is capable of grasping the big picture, including the interrelationships among the full range of causal factors underlying them. They often require broader, more collaborative and innovative approaches. (APCS, 2007)

The long-term and wide-ranging effects of adversity in early childhood constitute a wicked problem. An integrated, place-based approach to service delivery is often called for, addressing the multifaceted and inter-connected factors that influence children's development (CCCH, 2018; Moore & Fry, 2011).

Collaboration between sectors and professions has been a central element of policy for children's services in the UK and USA for nearly 20 years (Forbes & Watson, 2012). In Australia, national and state policy advocate multidisciplinary support through integrated service delivery (COAG, 2009; Press, Sumison & Wong, 2010; DET, 2016). Tasmania's CFCs exemplify such approaches.

This chapter argues that the transformative power of education can be harnessed through the integration of formal (early years) educational services with a range of formal and informal support that spans education, health and other sectors. It does so by harnessing the mutually enabling potential of changes in children's engagement in activities, practices in families, and wider communities, addressing both the conditions that shape children's development, and children as active agents in their own development. The chapter analyses data from a study of Tasmania's Child and Family Centres (CFCs). The CFCs exemplify integrated, place-based approaches to early intervention targeting children whose development is at risk of being compromised by circumstances of disadvantage. The CFCs are demonstrably impacting children's early years and readiness for schooling, making headway in a context that is so complex it has been deemed a 'wicked problem'. Through a cultural-historical lens, the chapter shows the importance of working within and between multiple 'planes': person, family, and society. Here, 'person' refers to the children whose trajectories are an object of shared concern; 'family' refers to the child's parents, siblings and active care-givers; and 'society' refers most directly to the immediate community in which children grow up (the place to which the place-based approach is anchored), but reminds us that wider social norms and expectations around parenting and childhood are important.

This complements MacDonald and Wightman's (this volume) focus on collaboration as requiring commitment from multiple parties to a shared goal, rather than on individual benefits. The cultural-historical approach similarly values alignment around shared goals, but highlights connections across planes, rather than between collaborating individuals. While effective work between stakeholders is important, this chapter argues that links between person, family and society are also crucial if we are to redirect children's developmental trajectories for the better.

Children's start in life has lasting and significant consequences. Those whose early years are affected by adversity are far more likely to start behind and stay behind at school, and suffer poor health through childhood and beyond (Maggi, Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2010). Governments across Australia are committed to providing all children with the best possible start in life (DEEWR, 2009), aiming to promote equity and excellence by reducing the influence of socioeconomic disadvantage on educational outcomes (MCEETYA, 2008). However, 600,000 Australian children are affected by disadvantage; their educational and social opportunity are under immediate threat (ABS, 2012; ARACY, 2013). The result is that one in five Australian children is vulnerable on one or more developmental domains by the time they start school (AEDC, 2016); disadvantaged children are disproportionately represented in this group.

The social and environmental conditions in which children grow up profoundly impact their development, and include parents' and carers' behaviours, especially interactions with their children (Moore & McDonald, 2013). The early years (ages 0 to 5) are widely held to be an

appropriate focus for intervention, where developmental plasticity is greatest, economic returns are highest, and the opportunity remains to redirect problematic trajectories before their effects are realised (CCCH, 2018; Kilburn & Karoly, 2008; Heckman, 2006, 2012). Therefore, effective early intervention needs to go beyond a focus on children themselves, and consider the environments in which they grow up. This means strengthening parents' capacity to provide the care and nurture they wish for their children, despite adverse circumstances (this links with the 'family' plane). It also means ensuring children grow up in communities that are safe, respect childhood, and supportive (hence the 'society' plane). While parents are not to blame for the effects of disadvantage on their children, parenting is a powerful lever for transformation.

L1   Tasmania's Child and Family Centres

In 2009 the Tasmanian Government announced CFCs as a whole-of-government, integrated and place-based approach to delivering services for children and families (Tasmanian Government, 2017). They were designed as a single point of entry to a range of early childhood services including universal, targeted, and specialist approaches that offer support for children and their parents (Taylor, Jose, van de Lageweg, & Christensen, 2017).

The CFCs aim to improve the health, wellbeing, education, and care of Tasmania's children under five years of age by supporting families and improving access to quality services in the local community (DoE, 2015). The vision is for children to thrive as healthy, confident and curious learners, nurtured by their families in communities that support, respect and value childhood, with support services responding early in culturally appropriate ways (DoE, 2011). The guiding principles of CFCs are inclusiveness (engaging 'hard-to-reach' families), reaching out (changing ways government and community work together), mutual respect (listening, understanding), integrity (transparency and accountability), affirming diversity (incorporating diverse values), and adding value (by working together). Twelve CFCs opened across Tasmania from 2011 to 2014, located in areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, high proportions of young children, and community support for a CFC.

The CFCs reflect features identified as necessary to address wicked problems. They are mandated to offer an integrated suite of high-quality programs and services, meet the changing needs of the local community, and be a welcoming place for all children and their families. The integrated service model promotes a flexible mix of services based on local needs. They can include but are not limited to: Launching into Learning, Child Health and Parenting Services (CHaPS), playgroups, adjunct care, adult community education, alcohol and drug services, parenting programs, a coffee meeting place, mental health support, and pathways to employment programs. Community-building and creation opportunities for carers and community through volunteering are also part of the model.

Discussion papers and guides were produced to support integrated service delivery (Prichard, Purdon, & Chaplyn, 2010, 2011), and a subsequent report highlighted a number of enablers of success in the CFCs, including partnership between stakeholders, working together agreements, flexibility, taking time, and deformalising service environments. An evaluation conducted by the Telethon Kids Institute and funded by the Tasmanian Early Years foundation focused on parents' use and experiences of CFCs. Overall it found evidence that CFCs are working well as an integrated, place-based model. CFC users felt they had closer links with school as parents, and that their children were better prepared for school (Taylor, Jose, Christensen, & van de Lageweg, 2015). CFC users rated their experiences of early childhood services more highly than those who do not use the CFCs, reporting: perception of commitment to help; accessibility; non-judgemental and supportive approaches; and feeling valued, respected and safe (Taylor *et al.*, 2017). The CFC

are not only engaging families who require parenting support, but are helping them to develop parenting skills, capabilities and competence (Jose, Christensen, & van de Lageweg, 2018), and contributing to community-level education, health and wellbeing outcomes (Tasmanian Government, 2017).

L1   Study details

This chapter draws on data from the Creating Better Futures Study, which looked in detail at interactions between parents and professionals in a range of parenting support services (Hopwood & Clerke, 2016, 2018; Hopwood, Clerke, & Nguyen, 2018; Hopwood & Edwards, 2017; Hopwood & Gottschalk, 2017), and then tracked transformations in families over time (Hopwood & Clerke, in press). The final phase involved data collection from professionals, parents and volunteers from a broad range of services in New South Wales, South Australia, and Tasmania, looking at distinctive service approaches and the impacts associated with them. The CFCs in Tasmania were different from other sites studied in their integrated, place-based approach.

Three CFCs were involved in the study, two from the south of Tasmania, and one from the north. While every CFC is in some ways unique, the analysis found consistent patterns across all three, and for ethical reasons, data can only be reported at a general level. Data collection was through interviews with, 20 staff, 16 parents/carers, and 12 volunteers across the three CFCs. Interviews lasted between 15 minutes and an hour and all participation was subject to informed consent. Interviews focused on soliciting narratives about what difference the CFCs have made, and how these impacts came about.

L1   Conceptual framework: cultural-historical theory

The idea of wicked problems is useful to understand why improving trajectories for children affected by disadvantage is so difficult. However, additional conceptual tools were needed to better understand the transformations unfolding through the CFCs, why they are significant, and how they come about. Cultural-historical theory[1] is particularly relevant to this chapter's focus on transformation, given its basis in the work of Vygotsky, who is widely known for studying children's development through examining how what is possible – what can be – emerges (Chaiklin, 2012). The study takes up aspects from the recent work of Edwards (2017) and Hedegaard (2018), in which broader transformations are understood as connected to changes in the way people make sense of the world and take action in it, in other words, to learning (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005; Edwards, 2017).

The kind of learning of interest here is expansive in nature (Engeström, 1999). Expansion refers to new meanings, especially increasingly complex understandings of a particular problem, and to opening up of new possibilities for action in relation to that problem. Through this lens, learning is not the acquisition of pre-existing knowledge, but a process through which people reposition themselves and their capacity to act in the world (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005). The learners of interest here are children, their parents, and people in the wider community.

The social situation of development (SSD) is a concept that featured in Vygotsky's (1998) original writing. It has been reinvigorated through Hedegaard's (2008, 2012, 2017, 2018; Hedegaard &

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[1] Vygotsky's studies of child development have a longstanding but diverse legacy, visible through distinctive but related theoretical traditions, including sociocultural research and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT; see Engeström, 1999). Edwards (2017) uses the term 'cultural-historical' in her work to describe research in a Vygotksian tradition that, drawing also on Leont'ev, aims at understanding the dialectical connections between person, activity, practice and society.

Fleer, 2008) work[2], which foregrounds connection between activities, practices and society as three dialectically connected planes. The SSD points to the child in the context of demands they place on and meet from those around them, as they participate in activities such as play. The developing child is viewed in a set of complex relations with others. These relations arise through institutional practices, such as family practices of interacting with children. 'Institutional' practices shape and are shaped by the activities that happen within them, but also wider social traditions and values. For the purposes of this analysis, the societal plane from Hedegaard's framework is addressed through a focus on the communities in which the CFCs were based. Activity settings in focus include free play, structured play in groups, group or paired reading with adults, and so on. Parents, carers and other adults around a child create conditions for activities in their everyday practices, but the child also shapes these conditions through her own interpretations and actions (Hedegaard, 2018).

L1   Transformations made possible by CFCs

Prior studies have pointed to positive impacts of CFCs (see above), and there were indeed many statements from participants that affirmed significant changes. One parent commented 'I actually don't think my life would be very good right now if I didn't discover this Centre', and a staff member noted 'A lot of parents say to me that this place has saved them in one way or another, even if we've not been aware of it'. The analysis proceeded by looking for evidence of changes on three planes and relationships between them, mapping to relevant aspects of Hedegaard's (2017, 2018) framework, and as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1   Evidence of change on different planes

Plane	Example of change
Child in activities	Being able to meet the demands of play and transition to school
Family practices	Parent-child interactions based on hearing, understanding and empathising with children; supporting children to meet the demands placed on them and meeting the demands children place on their parents and carers
Society (local community)	Families' social and economic participation, shifting community values

Hedegaard's third plane refers to a broad notion of society, including societal traditions and values, and societal conditions. In what follows, this plane is considered primarily in terms of the local community. This is both broader than the family, and where wider values around childhood and parenting play out with most immediate and direct effects on the children CFCs aim to support.

L2   Changes in children's activities

Children's development is closely associated with the activities they take part in and the support they receive in those activities. The CFCs have made a tangible difference to this for many children, with effects being clearly visible to children's parents and carers. This mother contrasted the development of her two girls, who had grown up with the CFC, with that of her older boys:

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[2] The concept of SSD is being used somewhat loosely for the purposes of the present analysis. More fully, it focuses on taking the child's perspective, in particular attending to children's motives and competences as they engage in activities (Hedegaard & Edwards, 2014). For the analysis presented here, it suffices to note the concept as placing the child as an agentic actor, placing demands on others around them, and meeting demands from those others.

> I've noticed a big difference between the two girls and how they've grown up being integrated into here than how my boys did, not having any of it. The girls will play by themselves, they're really good with imaginative play. Whereas the boys just can't imagine they've got socks on.

Here we see that the mother's awareness of how play can be demanding for children – requiring their imagination – and how the CFC had helped her children learn to meet those demands. Indeed, play may seem natural, but is not equally or automatically available to children as a means to engage with the world. One parent who had come to Australia as a refugee described how coming to the CFC had changed his son's capacity to play:

> When we first came here he used to kick all the kids around; when they come and try to play with him, he doesn't understand play, so he just pushed them away and stuff like that. But now he's learning to share, find friends, playing with other kids. Before I had to be in his sight all the time. I couldn't be out of his sight otherwise he just goes ballistic. But now he's really good, I can leave him.

Again, we see evidence that the child has become able to meet the demands of play – starting with understanding what it means to play, and then the demands of collective play (including sharing), and of separating from a parent. There has been expansive learning as the child's possibilities for action in play have multiplied.

Free play was not the only activity setting in which evidence of significant change for children was apparent. A key aspect of a child's readiness for school involves a capacity to participate in more institutionally regulated activities in groups, with particular foci and durations (see Hedegaard & Edwards, 2014). One parent described how her daughter had initially struggled to sit with others and complete even short activities, and had been worried how she would cope with kindergarten. The CFC ran a 'Little Talkers' group and helped figure out how to engage the child and sustain this without 'pushing her to a point that she'd have a meltdown'. Another child struggled with anxiety around meeting others, but thanks to the CFC had been able to meet the social demands of the transition to kindergarten.

In these examples, it was features of the CFCs that focused on early years learning, particularly through structured play and group activities as well as informal support around free play that were in focus. However, the very possibility of this was often due to the place-based approach, not just in terms of convenient location, but in terms of the CFC being an accepting and non-judgemental place. However, staff, families and volunteers were clear that participation in these learning-focused activities was often only possible because of experiences with and support from other features of the CFC, as when initial contact with a CHaPS nurse spread to wider engagement in what the CFC had to offer. Integration was thus also key.

L2   Changes in institutional practices of the family

The social environments in which children grow up massively affect their development, and interactions with parents and carers are foremost among these influences in the early years. Many parents who attend the CFCs did not benefit from experience of warm, nurturing interactions as children themselves, and thus have few models of caregiving to build on. The CFCs can change this radically, as evident in accounts of shifts in the way parents interact with their children. Parents' understandings of why some interactions with children matter (their interpretations of parenting), and the possible forms of interaction at their disposal (their actions as parents) expanded through contact with the CFCs. Many staff noticed changes in the way parents interacted with their children, from volatile and often angry exchanges to ways of being together that were warm, positive and fostering children's wellbeing:

> Just the way they talk– rather than their kid is a little shit, to this is why they're behaving like that. They are learning that there's reasons behind why and that there's triggers. Even just the child's behaviour rather than being the child themselves that's naughty.

> She listens to her son more, she has a different connection with him.

These quotes illustrate profound changes in parent-child interactions, as a result of parents' expansive learning. Participants did not attribute such changes to isolated events or groups, but rather to a constellation of formal activities (such as parenting courses and playgroups), informal support from staff and volunteers (from a range of professions), and contact with peers that came through regularly being in a place they felt they belonged and were valued as parents.

Such changes at the institutional plane of the family were significant in themselves, and enablers of changes in children's participation in activities. Children's social situations of development were transformed not only by children themselves becoming able to meet the demands of activities such as play, but by the adults around them expanding their understandings of those demands and the actions they can take to assist their children in meeting them, as well as how they can meet the demands children place on them as parents or carers.

L2   Societal changes: communities around CFCs

The CFCs were built in places characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. While this does not make them 'bad communities', these were typically places that had negative reputations among outsiders, and had not generally been experienced as safe, nurturing places in which to raise children. The CFCs are demonstrably making a difference, not just to how communities feel to those in them, but to the ways these communities shape the early years of their youngest citizens: 'I actually didn't want to move here because of all the talk about what happens here. But I'm actually glad I did, because I found this Centre'.

Parents often talked generally of CFCs providing a sense of connection or belonging that had not previously existed. Many had been isolated, with few social contacts or friends, but had developed trusting relationships with other parents through their CFC. Many women also talked about the safety net that was now in place because they had friends they trusted and could talk to. The CFC buildings themselves had come to represent safe spaces where parents could find help when feeling vulnerable. In one Centre, a new outdoor play area remained un-vandalised for a long period, much to many community members' surprise. Many participants described a shift in the community culture, which began within the CFC itself, but had spread out more widely. What families had previously experienced as judgemental and unaccepting communities had changed drastically:

> Everyone gets treated the same. It's good. You might not like something that someone does, but you accept them because everyone does things different. It's helping outside the community as well. It's helping people to not judge people as much outside, and to accept people how they live differently outside of the Centre as well.

Changing community values, for example around children with disabilities, coupled with an increased sense of openness and trust among adults in the community, helped parents feel comfortable joining in social aspects of community life. Many parents who had previously been reclusive due to fears of being judged, had become active participants and even leaders in driving change in their communities. As with changes on other planes, these outcomes reflected both the CFCs as particular kinds of places (welcoming, flexible, non-judgemental) and the CFCs as parts of the (changing) place in which they were embedded. These wider ripples of impacts were

clearly understood by participants to be an effect of the integrated nature of CFCs, they would not have been possible through delivery of a suite of separate services. They were also clearly connected with flexible approaches that attuned to community needs, different ways of government and community working together, especially the degree of say community members had about multiple aspects of the CFC. Here we see the guiding principles of the CFCs (inclusiveness, reaching out etc.) in action, and further evidence of partnership with community and deformalised service environments as enablers of change (Prichard *et al.*, 2010, 2011).

CFCs also change communities by helping adults participate in aspects of life that had previously been inaccessible. Many parents described transitions from largely socially inactive lives into taking on roles with responsibility as volunteers, completing further study, or finding employment. One refugee described how his shyness and struggles with English had been barriers work, but his experiences in the CFC had developed both his language and confidence, benefitting not just him in terms of his work, but his whole family. The CFC also provided a context for this father to visibly contribute to the community by assisting with gardening and maintaining outdoor spaces around the Centre.

Again, there is expansive learning, here at a more collective level as shared understandings of community, parenting and childhood expanded, and with this, the possibilities for acting together to make a difference to children, families and the wider social environments in which they grow up. Shifts in communities are linked with changes in family practices (from being confined to the home to engaging in community-based groups and events, or from being jobless to finding employment), which in turn shape the activities that children have opportunities to engage with, and the capacity of adults to support children in those activities.

The analysis here has focused on changes within the communities as the 'place' in which CFCs were embedded as part of a place-based approach. While evidence of societal changes more widely was not sought, there are pointers that the impacts were not confined within a boundary of the geographical place. For example, parents' growing confidence enabled participation in wider social and economic life through employment, and publicly celebrated stories around support for children with disabilities carry over much larger distances. Furthermore, there was evidence that in some cases these places were becoming places for people from other communities to come to – a significant change given their longstanding reputations among such others as places to avoid. The evidence from this study is strong in showing changes at person, family and community levels, and is suggestive of wider impacts. The latter would be important to explore more deliberately, as addressing the wickedness of the problem will require impacts that are not contained within specific areas.

L1   Conclusion

When referring to the CFCs as a site of education, this chapter is not confined to their aspects that are recognised institutionally as educational. In includes these but also other aspects that facilitates expansive learning: changing understandings and possibilities for action among children and the adults around them. When asking about the power of education to transform lives on these terms, attention is directed to a wide array of features of CFCs, and in particular the connections between them.

What does this reveal about transforming children's early years by redirecting trajectories shaped by disadvantage? A cultural-historical approach sensitises the analysis to changes on a range of planes. Thus, we come to see transformations as rooted in changes such as a child's ability to share during play or to separate from her parents. But we also see transformation in ongoing practices relating to the way parents and carers interact with their children, and in changes in communities more generally. This perspective enables us to understand

transformation in terms of reshaping the conditions that shape children's early years, and boosting children as active agents in their own lives in play.

A cultural-historical approach goes further by foregrounding dialectic relationships between activities, practices and wider communities. From this perspective, transformation resists being tied to a particular plane. While changes within particular planes are crucial, the transformative impacts of the CFCs lie in the ways these inter-relate. Fig. X.1 highlights how changes in activities, practices and communities mutually support and enable one another. The dialectic sensibility reveals how changes on one plane are enabled by and enable changes on other planes.

[PLACE FIG X1. HERE; CAPTION: Dialectic relationships between activity, practice and community]

Tackling wicked problems is viewed as an 'evolving art', involving non-linear processes that respect to uncertainties and address complex inter-relations between multiple factors (APCS, 2007). Fig X.1 represents this, as the dialectic (mutually shaping) relationships resist linear tracing from a particular problem to a solution. Rather, struggles and opportunities across multiple planes are tackled together, exploiting their inter-dependencies as a means to achieve transformation, rather than barriers to it. The evolution of the CFCs' work and impacts in each community is similar not a linear journey, but rather one that follows multiple tracks as community needs and strengths emerge in connection with one another. As such, Fig X.1 provides a means to conceptualise, holistically, many of the features found in prior work (Prichard *et al.*, 2010, 2011; Taylor *et al.,,* 2015, 2017; Jose *et al.*, 2018), without obfuscating the complexity of the issues at hand.

The effects of disadvantage on children's early years reflects many interdependent factors. Understanding how children's trajectories can be transformed requires us to grasp these interdependencies, in other words to tackle the wickedness of the problem. A cultural-historical approach is useful in pinpointing how integrated, place-based approaches can make headway in such complex terrain. Just as wicked problems cannot be attributed to any one factor, so the success of the CFCs in redirecting children's trajectories requires a complex understanding. This analysis shows how transformation results from work that unfolds not just across planes, but between them. Integrated and place-based approaches are most likely enablers but not guarantors of this possibility. While the analysis repeatedly found integration and place to be important, it can be argued that tackling wickedness also requires addressing dialectic relations and harnessing mutually enabling and reinforcing connections between activities, practices and communities. In other words, the transformative power of education in such settings concerns the capacity to work with children, families and communities in ways expand possibilities within and across planes that shape and are shaped by one another.

L1   Acknowledgements

L1   References

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