

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY...GOODBYE!

**A Study Into
The Readiness and Preparedness
For Independent Living
Of Foster Care Adolescents
Facing Automatic Discharge
From The Custody Of The State
Upon Reaching The Age Of Seventeen Years**

**A research project presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirement of a Master of Social Work,
Turitea Campus, Massey University,
Palmerston North, Aotearoa/New Zealand.**

**TRISH WARD
2000**

ABSTRACT

Under the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act, 1989, a young person becomes an adult at seventeen. Young people in the statutory custody of the Chief Executive of Child, Youth and Family are automatically discharged on their seventeenth birthday.

The implications of mandatory discharge of custody at seventeen are unresearched in this country. Extensive studies overseas show that foster care adolescents tend to be unprepared for independent living, and that their transition to adult living most often requires, but does not receive, a major input of funding, services and support.

This study examines the nature, experiences and needs of adolescents encountering mandatory discharge in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It develops the understanding, through a theoretical framework which includes attachment, identity and ecological theories, that what happens before and throughout time in care affects individual readiness for discharge; and that preparation for discharge, coupled with a young person's unique ability to respond to preparation, affects the ability to manage independently after care.

Analysing perceptions of the 'child as a cost', the study considers the economic and political environment in which discharge from care is effected in this country. The study reveals a system of care that provides accommodation for, and, at times, treats the adolescent, but which generally places insufficient priority on preparation for discharge and independent living after care.

The study challenges the appropriateness of a chronologically determined definition of adulthood in the light of a population of young people who have major life skill deficiencies, who are sorely in need of ongoing intervention to enhance and increase social competence, and who, rather than 'achieving' independence, simply 'age out' of care, their dependency needs transferring to other social agencies. The thesis concludes with recommendations for policy, social work, and further research.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to those young people whose records I read -
young people who are reliant upon the state for their parenting,
their care and protection, their opportunities and,
most importantly, their preparation for adult life.

And to the social workers,
who work with these young people in goodwill and hope,
and with extremely limited options, resources and structural guidance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have assisted me in my study and I am very appreciative of their help.

In particular, I have been expertly guided through my journey by my academic supervisors, Dr. Mary Nash and Wendy Parker, of Massey University. They have taught me how to translate an interesting question into a researchable study and, more than once, rescued me from the trap of trying to do too much in too little time with too few resources. Most importantly, they have provided that difficult combination of support and constructive criticism.

My manager, Judy Larking, Invercargill Child, Youth and Family, has provided support and maintained an active interest in my research. She has also smoothed the way when bureaucratic processes have needed to be surmounted.

Rita Allan, my early mentor in the Department, instilled in me many of the basic foster care values and standards that still hold true two decades on. In particular, she demonstrated an unswerving commitment to the uniqueness of each child in care, and to the importance of maintaining family ties for them. She shared her knowledge willingly, gave me valuable opportunities and taught me much.

My friends and family - and especially Noeline, and Ann, Edith and Tiny - have been encouraging and supportive of me in all my academic endeavours. Over the past three years especially, they have certainly borne the day-to-day brunt of my all encompassing obsession with things foster care. I am very grateful to them for the strength and reassurance that they have given me in the dark days, and for their positivity and frequently expressed belief in me.

TITLES AND DESIGNATIONS

The Department of Social Welfare has undergone significant restructuring and name change over the past decade. On 1st May 1992 the New Zealand Children and Young Persons Service was established as one of three business units within the corporate body of the Department of Social Welfare. In July 1996 the Service was renamed the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service, in line with the Children, Young Persons and Their Families 1989 legislation.

Following an amalgamation of the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service and the New Zealand Community Funding Agency on 1st January 1999, the Children and Young Persons and Their Families Agency was formed. On 1st October 1999 the agency separated from the Department of Social Welfare to form the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services, commonly known as Child, Youth and Family. Until then guardianship and custody of children in statutory care had been vested with the Director-General of Social Welfare. With the establishment of Child, Youth and Family this responsibility transferred to the Chief Executive of Child, Youth and Family.

The young people whose circumstances are examined in this study were all under the custody and/or sole guardianship of the Director-General of Social Welfare at a time when the Department was known as the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service. The Department has had three name changes during the life of the study, however, and some licence is therefore necessary in order to provide continuity and clarity to the thesis.

The contemporary terms of Chief Executive, Child Youth and Family (CECYF) and Child Youth and Family (CYF) are used throughout the thesis, irrespective of former titles. The references and citations in the thesis are the original designations and titles.

PREFACE

The Researcher

I was born in Invercargill in 1952, the second child of four. My family is Pakeha, of working class origin. I was raised for the first six years of my life in an extended family, with my parents and my mother's unmarried adult siblings providing strong nurturing and security. My upbringing was fairly typical of the times. My father worked at two jobs for much of my childhood and my mother was home-based as the primary caregiver. I attended a local school until I was seven, and then travelled each day from our suburb into the city to receive a Catholic education.

I survived the humdrum of my first job with the Invercargill Inland Revenue Department by involving myself outside office hours with the telephone counselling service, Youthline. After eight years I left Inland Revenue to take up a *Bridge* travel scholarship which became available to me through my Youthline involvement. I lived on an Israeli kibbutz for six months, then travelled through Europe, Scandinavia and the Eastern Bloc countries. In 1979 I returned to New Zealand, did voluntary social work at Catholic Social Services in Dunedin, and began extra-mural study in the Massey Bachelor of Social Work programme.

In 1980 I joined the Department of Social Welfare in Invercargill as a generic social worker. At that time the Department was introducing a Planning For Children programme to eliminate 'drift' for children in statutory foster care. Invercargill was selected as a pilot office for this new initiative. The induction that I received into foster care policy and practice was exceptionally well focused, thorough and relevant.

This factor, coupled with the professional development and ongoing mentoring that I was fortunate to receive from my supervisor in the first five years of my practice, and the learning that I had, and continue to have, from the children, young people, birth families and foster families that I encounter, has created in me an enduring commitment to the well-being of children in care. It springs from a belief that having been a part of a process which effects a child's coming into care, I have ethical and professional responsibilities to ensure that the child's total well-being is enhanced, rather than stunted, by the care experience.

This commitment is linked to an equally strong sense of accountability. For two decades I have been based in the same office, my home area, the community in which I was born, raised, educated and continue to live. The on-going ramifications of the decisions I contribute to in work hours continue to manifest themselves in even the most mundane of my out-of-work activities.

Often I encounter former foster children, their families, or their caregivers, who want to talk about how the Department impacted on their lives. In particular the children, now adults, ask about their care history, their birth or foster family connections and circumstances, or about earlier decisions or reasons for the Department's involvement in their lives. Some simply still feel the need to tell someone from the Department what or how they are doing. By far the most disturbing contacts are from those who had no words as children for their foster care experiences, but who return as adults to tell me what was 'done' to them whilst they were 'in care'.

All these experiences underpin my preoccupation with foster care. I continue to work with foster children and their birth and foster families, currently as a Practice Consultant. Many aspects of foster care practice continue to challenge me. Not least is the concern I feel at the relative 'invisibility' of foster children, and their 'ageing out'¹ of statutory custody at seventeen years of age, often with very little ability to operate independently. This thesis emerges from an increasing sense of unease about the wisdom of mandatory discharge, and a genuine interest in exploring the readiness of foster adolescents in this country to embark on what is essentially compulsory independence.

¹ Term coined by Jane Aldgate (1994:194).

CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Titles and Designations	v
Preface	vi
Contents	viii

Chapter 1: Siting The Study: An Introduction

Thesis Overview - the Research Questions	1
Research Assumption: In Care...In Visible?	4
Research Concepts	6
Organisation of the Thesis	10

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction	13
Shaping the Research	13
Data Sources	14
The Sampling Process	14
Data Collection	16
File Reviews	17
The Research Instrument	18
Data Analysis	19
Limitations of the Research	19
Quality of Statistical Data	20
Quality of Case Recording	21
Ethical Issues	23
Conflict of Roles/Interests	23
Free and Informed Consent	24
Cultural Concerns	25
Summary	25

Chapter 3: In The Care Of The State - An International Perspective: Themes From The Literature

Introduction	26
The Impact of Foster Care	27
Readiness for Leaving Care	29
Preparation for Life After Care	32
Summary	36

Chapter 4: Statutory Foster Care in Aotearoa/New Zealand: An Historical, Social, Cultural and Legal Context

Introduction	38
The Child As A Chattel - 1840-1899	38
The Child As Social Capital - 1900-1944	39
The Child As Psychological Being - 1945-1969	40
The Child As A Citizen - 1970-1988	41
The Child As Part Of A Whanau - 1989-1991	43
Legislating for Discharge	45
The Child As A Cost - 1992-2000	46
The Business of Welfare	47
The Business of Foster Care	48
The Business of Mandatory Discharge	50
Summary	52

Chapter 5: To Be or To Belong: A Theoretical Integration

Introduction	54
Attachment Theory	55
Attachment and Adolescence	55
Attachment Theory, Adolescence and Foster Care	57
Identity Theory	58
Identity and Adolescence	59
Identity, Adolescence and Foster Care	60
Ecological Theory	62
Ecological Theory and Foster Care	63
Ecological Theory and Mandatory Discharge	64
Summary	65

Chapter 6: Becoming Visible: The Impact of Foster Care - Themes From the Data

Introduction	68
The Sample	69
Care Placements	70
Number of Placements	71
Reason for Placement Breakdowns	72
Age at Entry to Care	73
Attachment and Behaviour	74
Unplanned Change	75
Family Relationships	76
Social Worker Relationships	77
Educational Progress	80
Educational Continuity	81
Educational Achievement	82
Summary	84

Chapter 7: Becoming Visible: Leaving Care - Themes From the Data

Introduction	86
Physical, Emotional and Behavioural Development	86
Physical Well-being	86
Psychological Well-being	87
Employment and Recreation	89
Preparation for Independence	91
Post-Discharge Support	92
Post Discharge Financial Support	92
Positive Contact with Family/Whanau	93
Satisfactory Accommodation/General Living Circumstances	94
The Quality of Preparation	94
Levels of Self Sufficiency	97
Summary	102

Chapter 8: The Tyranny of Independent Living: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction	105
Preparedness and Readiness	106
Lack of Continuity	107
Lack of Preparation	109
Policies and Programmes	110
The State and its Obligations	112
Priority of Statutory Care Services	113
Recommendations for Policy and Practice	116
Further Research	121
Conclusion	121

Bibliography	123
---------------------	-----

Appendices	
Appendix One: Population Census	141
Appendix Two: Deed of Confidentiality	146
Appendix Three: Research Instrument	150

Tables	161
---------------	-----