



Travels in the Trench Between Child Welfare Theory and Practice

***A Case Study of Failed Promises
and Prospects for Renewal***



George Thomas



The Haworth Press, Inc.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Thomas, PhD, is President of George Thomas & Associates, Ltd., a private consulting firm engaged in adapting state-of-the-art conceptual and machine technologies in order to expand the on-the-job production, transfer, and use of new knowledge in street-level practice in the field of children, youth, and family services. During his 30-year career, Dr. Thomas has served as a street gang worker, in public child welfare, professor in two graduate schools of social work, director and then president of a major social welfare research institute, and consultant to over 100 federal, state, and private child welfare organizations. He is internationally known through his numerous publications and speaking engagements and has acquired and completed over \$11 million in funded research and development work studying foster family and group residential care, child protection, child abuse, status offenders, and juvenile delinquency services. His testimony before major fact-finding commissions and legislative bodies has influenced child welfare legislation nationally and in several states. Dr. Thomas's recent work has centered on the development of computer-assisted, competency-oriented child behavior and program assessment systems, including COBRS 2.0 and the Community Living Assessment (CLA), which are now in agency use in the U.S. and in several countries overseas.

Preface

It is not a pretty picture out there in the trenches of public child welfare. Child welfare agencies in this country are suffering from over two decades of neglect and underfunding, which has eroded major sections of our country's social services infrastructure. These systems are showing signs of disorganization under the continuing strain of high caseloads that cuts or meager increases in funding have not addressed. Class action lawsuits are resulting in a growing number of states with consent decrees. Continuing high levels of reports of child maltreatment and increasing numbers of child placements are both indicators of poor societal well-being.

There is a growing realization that "business as usual" in many areas of child welfare is not adequate for strengthening families and protecting children. Yet it is ironic that at a time when both public and private agencies are being swamped with referrals, cost-effective treatment strategies are available but implemented only in some areas. Major system changes, involving networks of education, public health, child welfare, mental health, and other services are being organized to provide more neighborhood based services, and settlement houses are being praised for addressing family needs in creative ways. It is a national disgrace that many child welfare agencies lack the vision, mandate, expertise, and/or funds to help implement these service innovations.

George Thomas has served the field well by taking a hard-hitting look at policy, administration, practice, education, information technology, and research in child welfare. He calls for a renewed focus where "clients" are treated as important consumers, an emphasis

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upon service delivery outcomes over process, and adoption of child development as the major orienting framework for practice.

These analyses will be controversial and many readers may disagree with one or more of the observations or proposals put forth. From my perspective, however, this book provides a rare opportunity for people in the field to take a fresh look at major contributors to ineffective service delivery, what refinements are needed and what major overhauls should be instituted. If major reforms can continue to be implemented as a result of some federal, state, private foundation, and other initiatives, agencies may then be able to concentrate the resources that they have in a more focused, comprehensive manner. This book will inform such planning and service reform efforts.

*Peter J. Pecora
The Casey Family Program
and The University of Washington*

Acknowledgements

This work is an exposition of what I think now after having scrutinized the meaning in my travels in the child welfare field. *What* I think is of my own doing, but *how* I think I owe to many others I have met in my travels who firmly believed in cultivating an inquiring state of mind and who possessed the remarkable capacity to stimulate others to pursue the same goal.

I think first of Rita Comarda at Tulane University who permitted me the freedom to learn from my own boneheaded mistakes. This caused me some grief, but it probably caused her far more grief than the "pain in the tail" she occasionally complained about in my presence.

Then there were Martin Loeb and Alfred Kadushin at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Martin, forever cantankerous in posing alternative views, stretched the mind beyond the comforts of single-mindedness and made doing battle with one's thoughts and presumptions an ingrained habit, if not an always pleasurable one. Al Kadushin provided leavening for the exhilaration of free pursuit and cantankerous battle by epitomizing in his work the finest qualities a true scholar has to offer—reasoned fair play and thoroughness in sifting fact from fancy.

Finally there was Margaret Blenkner—my "boss"—a term I still use with affection to describe her. Small-mindedness was Margaret's foe, and in making it my own I found broader vistas and better ways to understand events by placing them into context.

Whether what I have said in this book is deemed the product of an open mind or not is open to questioning, but whether these

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outstanding people, and more like them beyond mention, did their level best to implant that frame of mind in me is not. For this I will remain permanently in their debt.

I am also indebted to a half-dozen contemporary colleagues whose work I deeply respect and whose kindness in taking time to review draft copies of parts or all of this work I deeply appreciate. I have thanked them all privately, and with respect for their privacy I will not name them here. I see no good reason to link them to a work that is entirely my responsibility, warts and all. They are, of course, free to publicly expose themselves to whatever acclaim or rebuff might come their way by declaring a connection with this work.

Thanks also go to Doug Magnuson, whose diligence and candor in editing the manuscript made an immense difference in its readability, and to Jerry Beker, who saw enough merit in it to see it through to publication.

In the end, I am indebted most to my wife Freida and three fine young men: Our sons Brian, Zack, and Dominic. My debt to them is not so much for their support while I was writing this, which amounted mostly to tolerant and bemused querying of a “what’s he doing now,” sort; rather, it is a debt beyond repaying for the love and fun of living and growing together all these years outside the Trench that made my travels within it seem worthwhile.

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