

## *Editorial and Opinion : July 2010, Volume 3, Number 10*

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I welcome readers to the 10th issue of IQJ – an issue coming at a very significant time in the UK. Yet another bloodless revolution in the UK has ousted one administration and brought in another. The new Conservative Lib Dem Coalition warns us of a very hard road ahead as they bring the country back to solvency – a warning rightly interpreted by those of us linked to public services as very bad news indeed for vulnerable people.

The Coalition also heralds a new way of doing things, moving away from the heavy hand of distant central government towards a society of people and communities empowered to take more responsibility for what happens to them. If they are sincere, we can expect a significant shift in power from government ministries to local organisations and from politicians to people. Logically, this shift will permeate all systems within public services so that people working at any organisational level will be handed more power from the levels above and will be required to hand some of their own power down to people in the level below.

In the field of childhood disability, IQJ's domain, this is not a new phenomenon. In pursuit of effective partnerships, practitioners have been asked to hand over more decision-making powers to disabled young adults and to the parents of disabled children and infants. I can speak with some experience about the latter, partnerships in early childhood intervention, from my work with practitioners and managers in health and council services for disabled babies and pre-school children.

I am invited to many multi-agency service development meetings, some large some small, in my capacity as independent consultant and the issue of power, in terms of who holds the resources and who makes the key decisions, always comes up. Unless parents are present I do not meet much enthusiasm for any change in the status quo. I always interpret any absence of parents at these planning meetings as

symptomatic of this lack of enthusiasm. If parents are not invited, or if insufficient care is taken in helping them attend, then they are automatically disenfranchised so that new plans will be made for them and not with them. Perhaps the same applies to disabled people of all ages.

I often respond by telling the people present that I typically encounter three attitudes in staff when power is discussed. These can be characterised as:

1. 'I am very happy to share my power with parents.'
2. 'I am not at all happy to share my power with parents.'
3. 'I am not happy to share my power with parents – but I will pretend I am.'

I do not ask anyone to say which fits them best (and, in fact, the answer might only come with some introspection) but in my observation of services around the UK, I feel the third option is the most common in both practitioners and managers. This fits with the lesson history teaches that people never willingly give up power. It has to be taken from them.

But there are good examples we can learn from. I have seen many practitioners well able work collaboratively with parents and being willing to share decision-making with them on an equal basis – though probably wanting to draw the line at allowing any parent the lead voice. This is not the only limitation; while parents and practitioners can make wise decisions together about a child, they are all subject to crucial decisions about resources made at higher levels.

While we can expect yet more radical changes in how public services are organised (a process that never ceases), I take comfort from knowing that the practitioners in the new configurations in health, education and social care services will be the same ones who are doing the work now. They will still be doing the essential work at the grassroots with children and

families no matter what the new systems are. And now there is a perfect opportunity for these workers, following the philosophical trend set by the new government, to flex their muscles and get their voices heard by those creating the new systems. They know more than anyone else about what children and families need so the power to influence provision must lie with them. Even better, if they join forces with local parents!

I am grateful, as ever, to the people who have taken the time to write for IQJ. Caroline Bagnall has created IQJ's first photo feature, *Alive and Visual*. In *First Movement adventures with digital arts*, Gerry German anticipates the coming Learners' Charter and argues for children and young people to be powerful in the creation of more imaginative education provision, and Katrina McNamara-Goodger introduces us to ACT's new guide to best practice in the last hours and days of a child or young person's life.

Professor Hilton Davis describes the evolution of the Centre for Parents and Child support in the third part of his continuing interview, Deborah Berkeley, in the 10th instalment of her Diary, reports on the imminent house move and Alice's new shoes, and my Alphabet of Helpful Hints offers *J for Joint working*.

Justine Devenney describes a new web service for parents who are struggling with their relationship – in which families with disabled children are very much included, and Anita Epple tells us of the many benefits of baby massage and how it helps parent understand their baby better. This issue of IQJ finishes with my article about how a child's TAC can be the family-owned organisational nucleus in early childhood intervention, focusing on parents having a central and powerful role in designing services for their child and family – which brings us back to the Coalition's stated ambitions for people power.