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EDITORIAL

The Influence of Wolf Wolfensberger and His Ideas

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Wolf Wolfensberger, PhD, 1934–2011

Dr Wolf Wolfensberger was born in Mannheim, Germany in 1934 and died on 27 February 2011 in Syracuse, New York, USA. As Editor I thought it was fitting to write an Editorial reviewing some of Wolfensberger's ideas and how they have influenced ways of thinking, policy and practice in relation to individuals with disabilities. In doing so the Editorial acknowledges both the ideas and the criticisms of the ideas. I invited my colleague, Glenys Mann, to write the Editorial with me. Glenys has had a long-term interest in the concept of Social Role Valorization (SRV) and education. She is a member of Values in Action and other community organisations in Australia that promote and advocate Wolfensberger's ideas.

In 1950, at the age of 16, Wolfensberger and his family immigrated to the United States. He studied philosophy at Siena College in Memphis, Tennessee and earned a Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology from St Louis University in St Louis, Missouri. His PhD was earned at Peabody College, now part of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. His PhD was in psychology, specialising in intellectual disability and special education. During his career Wolfensberger held positions at various universities, including the Nebraska Psychiatric Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical School (1964–1971), and from 1973 was a Professor in the School of Education and Director of the Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency at Syracuse University. From 1971 to 1973 he was a Visiting Scholar at the National Institute of Mental Retardation in Toronto, Canada.

Wolfensberger published a number of books and articles in his career. Some of his most well-known books and articles are listed at the end of this Editorial in Appendix 1. Typical of his wish to apply his ideas in meaningful and practical ways, he developed the Program Analysis of Service Systems (PASS) (Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1969, 1973, 1975) and the Program Analysis of Service Systems' Implementation of Normal Goals (PASSING) (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1980, 1983, 2007). These service quality evaluation instruments incorporated the key concepts of Wolfensberger's theory of normalisation and then SRV. PASSING continues to serve as a means by which social devaluation (according to Wolfensberger) is appraised and as an instrument for teaching the concept of SRV.

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There are a number of concepts and ideas that Wolfensberger articulated and/or with which he has become associated. The most well known of these is the principle of normalisation (Wolfensberger, 1983). This term first received attention through the writing of Nirje (1999). Normalisation referred to making available to all persons with disabilities, “those patterns of life and everyday living that are as close as possible to, or indeed the same as, the regular circumstances or ways of life of their communities and their culture” (Nirje, 1999, p. 17). Wolfensberger was instrumental in extending the influence of normalisation to the United States, drawing attention to its key characteristics. These characteristics included: the exposure of the inhuman conditions in institutions at the time, the proposal of an alternative to accepted institutionalised practice and the notion that “normative” lifestyles, with rhythms, patterns and relationships similar to everyone else, were not only possible for people with a disability, but were desirable (Wolfensberger, 1999). Wolfensberger suggested that the principle of normalisation would have life-changing implications for the way in which individuals with disabilities were treated and provided for. However, he also elaborated the concept further, arguing that the original concept of normalisation, with its focus on simply making “better” institutions, was limited in its scope (Wolfensberger, 1999). Furthermore, he suggested that normalisation could be generalised to all socially devalued groups (Lemay, 1995).

However, Wolfensberger was concerned about the term “normalization” itself because, in his view, associations with the word led to misinterpretation of the principle. The desire to use clearer terminology and to tie the principles of normalisation more closely to empirical social research led Wolfensberger to reframe the concept as SRV (Wolfensberger, 1983). While the essence of his original thinking remained the same, the centrality of recognising that valued social roles are essential for being “accorded ‘the good things in life’” was given prominence by the new terminology (Thomas & Wolfensberger, 1999, p. 126). Wolfensberger continued to refine his thinking, and by 1998 the definition of SRV had been reshaped to: “the application of what science has to tell us about the establishment, enablement, enhancement, maintenance, and/or defence of valued social roles for people” (Thomas & Wolfensberger, 1999, p. 125).

In the section that follows we outline some of the domains in which Wolfensberger has been influential. For example, normalisation, and its subsequent reframing as SRV has been described as a “key theoretical position” in intellectual disabilities (Yates, Dyson, & Hiles, 2008, p. 247) and the “predicate for . . . meaningful inclusion of people with disabilities” (Ferreti & Eisenman, 2010, p. 380). We also refer to his influence on ways of thinking about disability, on policy for and about people with disabilities, and practice.

Ways of Thinking

Wolfensberger (1999) has stated that, in the early days of normalisation, he was not the only one thinking about this idea and disability reform. The interplay of ideas amongst various writers and thinkers makes it difficult to ascribe exact links between Wolfensberger’s thinking and the thinking of others; however, it would be fair to say that the concepts upon which normalisation and SRV were founded generated much critical thinking, discussion, and debate about the nature and experience of disability.

One wave of thinking that can be traced to Wolfensberger’s ideas is that the lives of people with disabilities can be improved if they are led in the community; that is, in integrated, rather than in segregated settings. Wolfensberger’s ideas about normalisation

became “synonymous with the deinstitutionalization” of people with disabilities (Northway, 1997, p. 159) and normalisation itself has been described as the “most coherent ideology underpinning community care” (Smith & Brown, 1992, p. 686).

There have been challenges to Wolfensberger’s views on integration. The research of Klein, Gilman, and Zigler (1993), for example, reported a study where both parents and experts saw merit in segregated sport, such as the Special Olympics. Some researchers have questioned the imposition of integration on people who may choose otherwise (e.g., Smith & Brown, 1992); highlighted the lack of meaningful relationships when people with a disability have been integrated into the community (Northway, 1997); and criticised the notion that integration (referred to by some by the mid-1990s as inclusion) was appropriate for all individuals with disabilities (see, for example, Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995).

Others (e.g., Yates et al., 2008), while supporting an end to segregation, asserted that Wolfensberger’s view of integration was flawed. According to these authors, his focus on socially valued roles was limited because it relied on: “predetermined ideals of normality” (Yates et al., 2008, p. 256); an assumption that there was a homogeneous set of “valued” people and behaviours (Smith & Brown, 1992); and an expectation that the person with a disability must fit in with the terms that currently exist in society (Northway, 1997).

Historically in many developed countries, integration was the predecessor for another influential way of thinking supporting individuals with disabilities in the community—inclusion. Wolfensberger himself did not speak in terms of “mainstreaming” or “inclusion”; however, many of his principles—for example, community presence, social integration, and valued participation—may be considered to be elements of inclusion. It has been suggested that it was the dissatisfaction with an assimilationist view of integration, as outlined in the previous paragraph, that provided the impetus for the change in thinking (Northway, 1997) and that inclusion, with its focus on welcoming and accommodating difference, emerged more from criticism of normalisation and SRV than as a product of these concepts (Culham & Nind, 2003). Whether as the forerunner of inclusion or as the catalyst for a new direction, Wolfensberger’s work was influential in the movement from integration to inclusion in many countries.

Several authors have suggested that the social model of disability, with its focus on the disabling nature of society rather than on an individual’s impairment, has a greater claim as the seed of inclusion (e.g., Culham & Nind, 2003; Northway, 1997). This model appears to have been developed and disseminated alongside, and in challenge to, rather than as a result of Wolfensberger’s ideas. The link between the social model and normalisation seems to have been primarily one of debate. Proponents of the social model rejected the view that individuals with a disability need to change and suggested instead that social environments must change (Culham & Nind, 2003). They also maintained that the concept of normalisation was unable to move beyond ideas of impairment or difference, and continued to locate the problem of exclusion within the individual (Yates et al., 2008). A social model of disability, it has been argued, offers a more accurate representation of the experience of people with a disability than SRV, and a greater hope for an end to their exclusion (Oliver, 1999).

More recently, however, a growing mutual interest between the two domains of thought has emerged and been highlighted (Shakespeare, 2006). This connection, it is suggested, lies in a shared belief that: “most of the oppressive and discriminatory treatment experienced by people with learning difficulties is socially ascribed, and both would strive to fight oppression and achieve equality” (Race, Boxall, & Carson, 2005, p. 519).

Policy

Wolfensberger's work has influenced not only the broader ways of thinking about disability, but also the responses of governments through policy. Normalisation has been described, for example, as a "dominant force in social and educational policy" (Culham & Nind, 2003, p. 65). According to Culham and Nind (2003), as such it has been an important guiding principle in how services and education should be developed and provided to people with intellectual disabilities. Ferretti and Eisenman (2010), for example, refer to the principle of normalisation as the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Act, the legislation in the United States that mandates free, appropriate, public education for students with a disability. Similarly Race et al. (2005) note the impact of SRV theory on the development of the health policy in the United Kingdom in 2001. Although not explicit, they suggest that the influence of Wolfensberger's ideas can be seen in the UK Health Department's White Paper *Valuing People*, a document that speaks of improving the life-chances of people with intellectual disabilities, and of civil rights, independence, choice, and inclusion. It has also been argued that the philosophical framework that underpinned SRV was one of the factors that informed Australian Government policies of deinstitutionalisation in the 1990s (Young, Sigafos, Suttie, Ashman, & Grevell, 1998) and the Australian Federal Labor Party's *Social Justice Strategy* (Patterson, 2001).

Practice

Practice is often entrenched in decisions made in the past, based on stereotyped views and prejudices, and ruled by convention. Thus, it is particularly difficult to change. Cummins, McCabe, Romeo, Reid, and Waters (1997) have said that Wolfensberger's ideas, including normalisation and SRV, achieved many lifestyle gains for people with intellectual disability. Indeed it may be true to say that Wolfensberger's early publications, such as *Changing Patterns in Residential Services for the Mentally Retarded* (Kugel & Wolfensberger, 1969) and *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services* (Wolfensberger, 1972a), along with Blatt and Kaplan's (1966) *Christmas in Purgatory*, were instrumental in raising the collective consciousness with regard to damaging practices and immoral treatment of people with a disability, particularly those with an intellectual disability. Those with intellectual disabilities have been seen and treated as less than human (Wolfensberger, 1998) through the use of such practices as confinement and segregation. The consequences of normalisation are evident in the reflections of Peter Park. He said about his personal experiences of disability:

I imagine that without Normalization, I might still be in the institution. It was due to this theory that they thought about deinstitutionalization. (Park with French, 1999, p. 476)

Wolfensberger's influence has primarily been recognised in the field of intellectual disability. In 1991, *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services* (Wolfensberger, 1972a) was named the most important "classic" work in the field (Heller, Spooner, Enright, Haney, & Schilit, 1991). Many practices in the provision of support of people with intellectual disabilities, such as age-appropriate routines and appearance, physical presence in the community and home-like residences, can be taken for granted today because of the impact of the dissemination of normalisation (Thomas, 1999).

Practices in education have also been changed by Wolfensberger's ideas. Many pre-service teachers in higher education institutions have been introduced to concepts such as normalisation, inclusion, inclusive education, social justice and equity and have then taken these ideas into practice. For example, in his article on SRV and teacher preparation, Neuville with Smith (2008, p. 18) reports: "one cannot underestimate the importance of having student teachers come to be motivated to understand and be inspired by the theory and themes of Social Role Valorization". Specifically, Neuville argues that in his experience exposure to the principles of SRV had many benefits for the pupils with whom the student teachers had contact.

In 2008, in recognition of the impact of Wolfensberger's ideas on the development and delivery of services to people with disabilities, *The Exceptional Parent*—a journal that describes itself as "the trusted resource for the special needs community across the lifespan"—chose Wolfensberger and his work as one of the "7 Wonders of the World of Disabilities" (Hollingsworth & Apel, 2008, p. 54). In honouring him in this way the authors argued that the work of Wolfensberger had historic significance in how the world of disabilities has been shaped.

Influences on Individuals, Families and Support Organisations

Wolfensberger's influence has also been felt by families and by organisations that support families. The following message, posted by the Australian organisation Family Advocacy in an online obituary guest-book following Wolfensberger's death, reflects that influence. The message reads:

Our advocacy work over the past 20 yrs has been shaped and guided by Wolf's writings on social advocacy and SRV. His teachings remain alive and well in our hearts, and in the mission of our organization. (Family Advocacy, 2011)

A parent of a young woman with disabilities paid homage to Wolfensberger in a tribute issue of *SRV in Action*, the periodical of an Australian community association, Values in Action:

As a parent, I knew the truth of his words very early on. No-one has named our experience so clearly before or since. (SRV in Action, 2011, p. 6)

Community Living Ontario (2011), a Canadian organisation that advocates for people who have an intellectual disability to be fully included in all aspects of community life, wrote about Wolfensberger on the Inclusion Network website:

His teachings had a profound influence on the core values and principles of Community Living associations across Canada. Through his work, he shaped our beliefs about how we should support people and their families ... No other body of work has been as influential in shaping the way that people think and act with respect to the inclusion of people who have an intellectual disability in our society. (<http://inclusionnetwork.ning.com/profiles/blogs/wolf-wolfensberger-memorial>)

Finally, through his concept of Citizen Advocacy, Wolfensberger envisioned a way of protecting the well-being of people with disabilities through building intentional, voluntary relationships with people without disabilities. A citizen advocate has been defined as:

a mature, competent citizen volunteer representing, as if they were his [*sic*] own, the interests of another citizen who is impaired in his instrumental competency, or who has major expressive needs which are unmet and which are likely to remain unmet without special intervention. (Wolfensberger, 1972b, p. 12)

Citizen Advocacy has been implemented by community organisations throughout the world, albeit with varying degrees of success (FaHCSIA, 2010). Jackson (1999) has also argued that some elements of Citizen Advocacy are unworkable. For example, he has suggested that the principle of volunteering is a weakness in that it leaves advocacy efforts reliant on the willingness, availability, knowledge, experience and time of community members. In contrast, Wolfensberger's (2001) account of the experience of advocates provides some evidence of the positive difference that Citizen Advocacy has made in the lives of both community members and the people with disabilities for whom there has been advocacy. The potential of advocacy for positive outcomes for individuals with intellectual disabilities remains for many families and individuals.

Conclusion

Wolfensberger's ideas have impacted on many aspects of the lives of people with disabilities and their families as well as on service providers, governments and agencies. His ideas can be seen in the historical contexts of rights, normalisation, integration and inclusion as well as in the more contemporary contexts of participation, engagement and advocacy. Their influence has been on the ways of thinking about disability and community, on policies related to housing, services and education, and to practices in these domains. In tributes to Wolf Wolfensberger following his death, many individuals and parent and community organisations have reflected upon the influences that his ideas have had on them. This Editorial has identified some of these influences. Furthermore, an examination of the back issues of the *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* has demonstrated how the research we have published has examined some of his ideas and the practices associated with these ideas. Thus, Wolfensberger's ideas have contributed to debate and been the impetus for scholarly work. As such the field of research related to disability has been strengthened.

In this Issue

At the time of Wolf Wolfensberger's death, a manuscript that had been authored by Joe Osburn, Guy Curuso, and Wolf Wolfensberger had been blind peer-reviewed and was "in revision". I invited Osburn and Curuso to honour their colleague Dr Wolfensberger's memory and to further revise the manuscript and it is included as the first article in this issue. In "The Concept of 'Best Practice': A brief overview of its meanings, scope, uses, and shortcomings", the authors examine the term and concept of "best practice" and critique its use. The article illustrates Wolfensberger's legacy of challenging our ways of thinking, understanding and reasoning.

In the second article in this issue, Michelle Rowbotham, Annemaree Carroll, and Monica Cuskelly report on an investigation that examined the care-giving and other role demands of middle-aged parents of adults with intellectual disabilities in Australia. The outcomes of the investigation "Mothers' and Fathers' Roles in Caring for an Adult Child with an Intellectual Disability", are elaborated by the researchers' exploration of their findings in terms of the study participants' satisfaction with care-giving and their other roles.

Yona Leyser, Tali Zeiger, and Shlomo Romi examine self-efficacy in general and special education preservice teachers who were engaged in teacher certification programmes in institutions of higher education. The findings reported in “Changes in Self-efficacy of Prospective Special and General Education Teachers: Implication for inclusive education” challenge the roles of field-based experiences on self-efficacy and attitudes towards inclusion in institutions that train teachers in Israel.

Meree Reynolds, Kevin Wheldall, and Alison Madelaine examine some of the published reviews of research that are related to the reading acquisition of learners with reading problems in the early years of schooling. This review, entitled “What Recent Reviews Tell Us About the Efficacy of Reading Interventions for Struggling Readers in the Early Years of Schooling”, examines reviews of research that provide information about the main components of early reading programmes and refers to research about the effectiveness of interventions for young struggling readers.

The final article in this issue by Vinati Pachigar, Jois Stansfield, and Juliet Goldbart is entitled: “Beliefs and Attitudes of Primary School Teachers in Mumbai, India Towards Children who Stutter”. The authors examined the influence on the beliefs and attitudes of variables such as the teachers’ teaching experience and their reported experience of children who stutter. The authors point to the challenges of providing for students who stutter in India.

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Appendix 1. Selected list of Wolfensberger's publications in chronological order

- Kugel, R. B., & Wolfensberger, W. (1969). *Changing patterns in residential services for the mentally retarded*. Washington, DC: President's Committee on Mental Retardation.
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