**So what is a Juvenist, really?**

Rest assured that a juvenist isn’t a perfect model of action for children, but rather someone who would like to be and strives to be. A juvenist is someone who, in retaining a clear awareness of marginalised children and their plight, does their best to act for them, despite the many constraints and pressures they themselves face.

Over the decades we’ve used different terms - from ‘disadvantaged’ to ‘at risk’ and more recently ‘vulnerable’ and ‘under-served’ – to little effect. I’ll stick with marginalised for now as I’m thinking of children who are left out in the cold in terms of getting their basic needs met, whether adequate food and shelter, love, care, trust, education and safety or a receptive ear to tell their woes to.

We seem to have, as a society, drawn a line between those satisfying children, like our own, whose needs are met and who meet our needs and those others who remain invisible and silent, attracting only negative attention when they display anti-social behaviour.

A quarter of a million children live in poverty in New Zealand - one quarter of our children! And in the last financial year 12,000 were found by Child Youth and Family to have been emotionally abused, mainly through family violence. And these represent only the tip of the triangle or iceberg – there are many more. These aren’t usually articulate, loved and resourced children. They are victims of neo-liberal short-sightedness and adult dysfunction, through no fault of their own.

As professionals, we can help these children become victors[[1]](#footnote-1) – to not only make them safe, but to meet their needs in terms of relationship, recovery, resilience and eventual mastery of their lives - not just through doing better casework, but by being their advocates (having consulted them), and by being prepared to wage battles on their behalf and on behalf of others, like them.

How else has change ever happened in our society? It’s thanks to those who stood up and spoke out for the marginalised that women in the West have become free to be themselves, that civil rights were established in the southern states of America, that apartheid was abolished in South Africa, that gay people now have equal rights. Those that stood by passively are now seen as having condoned and therefore contributed to the injustices.

Social services and schools can be very conflicted between tight policy and contract demands and the needs of children. Services are obliged to turn away cases that don’t meet high thresholds. Those working with adults can tend to prioritise their clients’ needs over their children’s. Schools’ obligation to get the majority of children educated means that unless a child voluntarily tells them clearly about family violence, they can and do overlook it. All these examples will condemn a child to a continued existence of loneliness and fear. And can send a worthy worker into a crisis of conscience.

The good news is that I’ve met some real heroes, prepared to push the boundaries and their own limits, risking personal burnout. Social workers and SENCOs who go the extra mile for a child, who give them the attention they need, make a time-consuming referral and follow it up, speak out at meetings, at the risk of marginalising themselves in the eyes of managers or colleagues, to argue against the accepted ways of doing things and advocate for children who will otherwise miss out. That's what it is to be child-focused – a juvenist!

The Waitakere Children and Family Violence project recognises that agencies and schools are not readily in a position to lobby upwards to policy makers and funders, with time constraints and the risk of losing funding. At WAVES we are therefore happy to do this on your behalf, but we need to feel you are behind us, to hear your outrage on behalf of marginalised children, particularly but not exclusively those exposed to family violence. Show us you care! Express your juvenism!

Deborah Yates

deborah@waves.org.nz

1. A nice play on words used by a young adult at the recent UNICEF-Auckland Council organized Child-Friendly Forum. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)