Supplement to Parker and Wilson (2016) Literature Review

It is noted from dialogue with reviewers of the Parker and Wilson (2016) literature review that there may be some confusion regarding the comparability of the prevalence data from the Netherland’s studies (Euser et al 2013, 2016) studies with New Zealand residential special school situations.

The Netherlands studies provides data on two types of out-of-home care;

1. Foster Care
2. Residential Care

The rates of sexual abuse in residential care situations for people with intellectual disabilities suggests that incidents of sexual abuse occurs at a rate of 11.7 per 1000 people. The rate for the general population (not in out-of-home care and without intellectual disability) is 0.7 per 1000 people. The victims of abuse were typically female (75% in all out-of-home situations), and the perpetrators in residential situations were generally males under the age of 21 years. The data was derived from 104 sentinel reports (staff members/professionals working in the settings) who were able to observe children over the course of a calendar year (2010). They reported 16 cases of sexual abuse from the total sample 1650 children from 18 residential care facilities and one large foster care agency. While this data appears startling it should be treated with considerable caution. In particular, the studies do not provide details with regard several aspects of residential care, notably:

- The size and quality of the residential environment (ie number of children, room sharing, general quality etc)
- The number of staff (and therefore the staffing ratios)
- The training staff have received
- The type of support (eg social welfare, youth justice, mental health, behavioural etc)
- The history of the children prior to placement, including family and/or school
- The association the residence has, if any, to schools and to special schools
- The degree of integration / community involvement the children have with people outside the residence
- The degree of contact with families, specialists etc

There are two specific issues related to the lack of explanatory information from the Netherlands papers.

1. The type of residential setting provided to children may be more institutional (custodial/congregate) than the New Zealand situation. This means the staffing ratios may be poor and there may be poor staff training, lack of individualised practice and poor policies and procedures around safety.

2. It is therefore unclear whether the situations where abuse was occurring were poor examples of residential support in the Netherlands in contrast to other residential situations where the support may have been better.

Of course, the argument then is ‘what constitutes better?’ The literature review by Parker and Wilson (2016) then turned primarily to the safety guidelines provided by the United Kingdom with regard to residential special schools, the majority of which are co-educational. The residential special schools in the UK are the closest approximation we have to the residential special schools in New Zealand. There is one paper in recent years that have focused on children and youth in special residential schools in England. This paper was missed from the original literature review by Parker
and Wilson (2016). It was conducted by the office of the Children’s Commissioner\(^3\) and focused on 17 residential special schools in England. The paper highlighted the range of children and young people supported in each school. They ranged from children with moderate to severe learning disabilities (the English equivalent to intellectual disability in New Zealand), behaviour and social disabilities, autism, speech and language impairment, vision impairment, profound and multiple disabilities and children with physical disabilities. The main groupings were children with learning disabilities, autism and behaviour issues. The researchers interviewed 83 children, including 33 girls, in these mostly coeducational schools using semi-structured interviews, focus groups and in some cases utilising augmented methods of communication. They also interviewed 114 staff, 32 family members and provided 31 hours of direct observation. The report is primarily qualitative although some quantitative information is provided. One section of the report focuses on safety, “feeling and keeping safe”. The main issue in the residential schools was the stress caused by peers who are in crisis. In their summary the authors state:

Many young people reported feeling concerned about other children’s often challenging behaviours, although they felt that school staff protected them from harm. (pp. 64).

The paper also indicates other research which suggests:

Young people with SEN[special educational needs] and disabilities are at greater risk of peer group difficulties — even in both mainstream and special educational settings. Previous reports have identified bullying as a significant concern in residential special schools. [However], bully was mentioned during several of the interviews but was rarely a major focus. (pp. 61).

In fact, most students report issues with needing more privacy since the school and residential staff were a constant presence. The issue of sexual safety was raised by only one student and this situation was dealt with by the school, albeit not at the needed pace. The authors note:

Despite being extremely troubling it is important to highlight here that this was the only incident of its kind to be raised by the students we worked with during this project. (pp. 60).

The feature of these schools was the need to provide intensive staff supervision of students at all times. Built into this was the need to treat the students with respect and dignity.

Young people generally reported feeling like their current school treats them well and keeps them safe, ensuring they had the privacy they needed... Young people also identified various members of staff who they could go and speak to if something was wrong.

The special residential schools in the United Kingdom are the best approximation we have in the literature to the special residential schools in New Zealand. The bulk of the safety guidelines provided in the Parker and Wilson (2016) review are

those considered best practice for special residential schools in the United
Kingdom. The 17 schools that participated in the Children’s Commissioner’s study
were typically coeducational and larger on average than their equivalents in New
Zealand. The number of issues raised in terms of student safety, were relatively
small and tended to focus on behavioural issues. Bullying was possibly the major
exception, but at rates considered lower than what the students had experienced
in mainstream school. Sexual abuse between peers was almost non-existent
with one exception. The report suggests that following the safety guidelines set
out in the United Kingdom and incorporating elements of practice, such as
developing trusting relationships with students and treating them with dignity and
respect were the foundations for best practice.

In this supplementary document to the Parker and Wilson (2016) review it is
noted that focusing too much on the prevalence figures from the Netherland’s
studies would be misguided without a balanced perspective of residential
situations that more closely approximate the New Zealand situation. It is the view
of the authors that it would be misguided to generalise the Netherland’s research
to the New Zealand situation. Rather the authors would urge reviewers to focus
instead on the British research into coeducational special residential schools.


