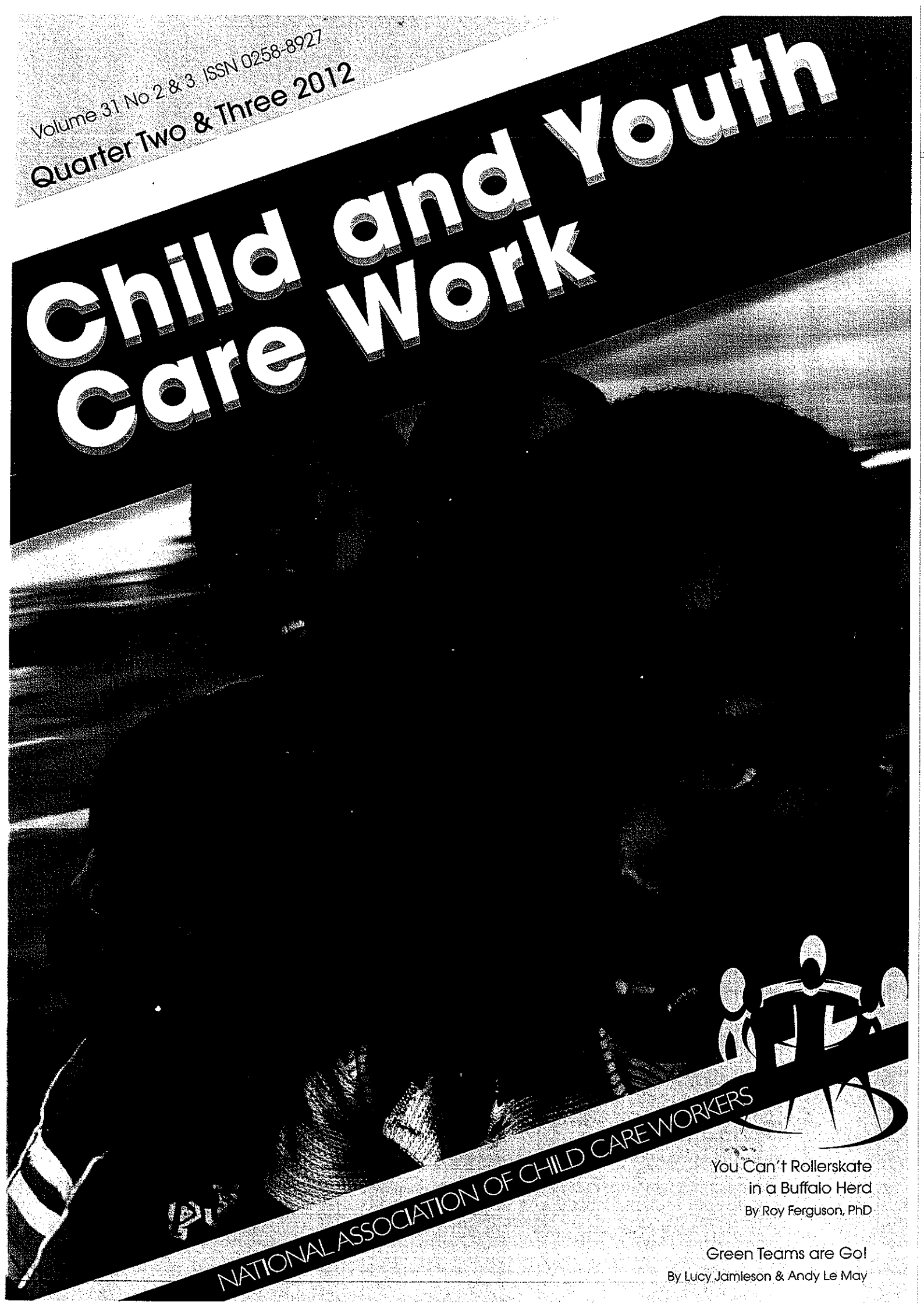


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By Roy Ferguson, PhD

Green Teams are Go!
By Lucy Jamieson & Andy Le May

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Acknowledging The Other . . .

By Jackie Winfield
Durban University of Technology

Thinking about "otherness" ...

Perhaps, my life would be simpler if I cut out certain people from it. Perhaps, it would be even simpler if I cut out entire groups of people. Or perhaps, I could just try to make certain of them, get rid of any parts I don't like or understand. Perhaps, I am so offended or confused by those parts that I think those aspects should be kept hidden or prohibited. Perhaps, I think that demonstrating your difference is a show of deviance or stupidity or immorality. Perhaps, I think that you should be persuaded or controlled or imprisoned. Perhaps, I feel so strongly that I wonder whether you are truly human, for certainly you are "other" to me ...

The origins of our beliefs

Each one of us is born into a pre-existing system in which particular values, beliefs and norms are promoted through social institutions including families, communities, schools, religious organisations, government systems and the media. Our families have taught us about human relationships, caring, and dealing with conflict. Our schools have taught us concepts of education, maybe narrow understandings which promote absorption of facts instead of holistic human growth and learning. Our religious organisations have taught us of gods and prescribed ways of being and doing, deemed to be pleasing to the divine.

The power of socialisation

The process of socialisation is powerful in the development of human beings especially during early formative years. A newborn baby has received none of the social messages which create shared realities. Yet the process of development ensures that babies quickly and easily learn the thought systems which surround them. Consistent experiences provide guidelines about how to live in terms of dress, food, work, play, friendships, hygiene ... We are influenced by the people who enter our lives and show us how they do life and how they would like us to live ours. We are praised and accepted when we do that which they deem worthy and evaluate to be "good", and receive their disapproval and anger when we do those things which they consider "bad". Our wordless acceptance of these messages ensures that we will not "rock the boat" by daring to suggest that there might be other ways of living which, though different, could be equally valid and healthy and "good".

The risk of challenging prevailing thought systems

Our behaviour is based on our beliefs, beliefs which we have received from the people and experiences in our environments. But throughout history, belief systems have changed, often slowly, sometimes suddenly. People

who have threatened the prevailing thought systems of the day have often faced scorn, anger and vile punishments including public humiliation, pain and death. When Jesus stated that the ways of the biblical Old Testament included many human misinterpretations of God, he was imprisoned and eventually, crucified. When freedom fighters rebelled against apartheid in South Africa, they were banned and tortured and executed. In modern Europe, some countries have made it illegal for Muslim women to wear the veil. Throughout much of Africa, gays and lesbians are raped and murdered on a regular basis. In many families and communities, women and girls sacrifice their dreams and continue to be mistreated because "that's just the way it is". Ideas and beliefs which challenge the status quo are squashed, and those who hold such ideas and beliefs are identified as rebellious or evil and certainly "not one of us".

As we grow, we are exposed to new beliefs, perhaps ones which are in direct opposition to those we have been taught are "right" or "good", and these new beliefs make more sense to us ... But we resist the possibility that "other" can be "good", as if such acceptance makes our original beliefs "wrong". So we disagree about how to pray, whom to love, what to wear, when to eat ... and then invest our energies in competing to be "right" and make our way of being the universal which should be followed by all.

Perhaps, in ancient times, such compliance was necessary or perceived to be necessary for the survival of the individual, the family or village. Perhaps, new ideas were frightening as they represented a change or a challenge too different to understand. Perhaps, the fear became anger and intensified into hate, the kind of hate that ignites violence and perpetuates discrimination. Perhaps, some of us still live with belief systems that belong to those ancient times ...

Celebrating diversity

The modern world is a place where we are exposed to different belief systems and therefore, to different patterns of behaviour. In South Africa, we are united by a Constitution which recognises the

humanity of every person. It encourages us to include "the other" and see otherness not as a threat to be feared or a curse to be destroyed, but rather as a difference to be enjoyed and celebrated. Just as a garden is made more beautiful by the differently-coloured flowers of various shape and size, and the senses are blessed by the array of tastes and aromas at a magnificent feast, so too our humanity is strengthened by our acknowledgement and appreciation of the other. Each one of us has the choice to remain in our comfort zones or to participate in the creation of a society in which all members are valued, to accept without question the beliefs we have been given or to explore the possibility that there might be a multitude of perspectives as to what is good or right or worthy.

The choice is yours

Perhaps, in thinking about this choice, we would realise the incredible loss of cutting out groups of people from our lives. Perhaps, we would stop trying to make certain of them get rid of the parts we don't like. Perhaps, we would be delighted by those parts which are unusual or novel or even challenging. Perhaps, we would realise that the demonstration of otherness is a show of uniqueness, of courage, of the diversity of humanity. Perhaps, we would allow people to be who they are and feel secure in the knowledge that each one of us will be afforded that same opportunity. Perhaps, we would acknowledge the other and recognise the humanity of each one irrespective of their beliefs ... ▲

