

Book Review

Rethinking residential child care: Positive perspectives Mark Smith Bristol, Policy Press, 2009. 209pp, ISBN 978-1-86134-908-8 £22.99

As a research fellow at SIRCC and a care leaver who spent eight years in children's homes in the 1990s (the period during which the author was a residential worker), I was both apprehensive and excited to review this book. As a care leaver my apprehension stemmed from the long and arduous wait for a rethinking of the current frameworks that are used to look after young people in residential care. My excitement from reading Smith's first book stemmed from his reputation as a challenging and provocative author, whose main aim has been to question dominant discourses and ideologies that overarch residential child care practice.

Smith's main premise throughout this book is that the discourses and ideologies of residential child care, which are largely grounded in child protection and children's rights, are overarching and in need of a radical overhaul. To that extent, I believe that he is right. This book, however, is a disappointment to me, as I felt that it did not provide my hoped-for radical new vision. I also failed to see much of my own experience in care or as a care leaver in the book. In addition, it failed to provide as many positive perspectives of residential child care or of young people in care as I had hoped. For me, the tone and style throughout often felt quite negative, with words such as 'alleged', 'questionable', 'bizarre ... stories', 'discredited' and 'scandals.'

I had expected more of a challenge to the status quo in residential child care. Instead, I felt that the theoretical concepts outlined in the first few chapters appeared somewhat disjointed and were not weaved into the text as a whole. Too many subheadings and the overuse of 'isms' interrupted my reading flow and I found that this prevented my engagement with quite substantive issues. For example, 'residential child care in the 1990s' has been afforded just one paragraph. Smith does raise some interesting and important questions about the dogmatic, bureaucratic and homogenous nature of residential child care. However, the way in which these questions are asked and potential answers contextualised are, in my opinion, lacking. They lack the depth or critical engagement of ideas that I would expect from texts at this level. I also felt that there was a lack of sensitivity (of young people in care, care leavers and residential child care staff) around many of the issues presented.

In Chapter Three, which is the most controversial section of this book, Smith disputes the evidence presented in a number of cases of historical abuse. In my view, however, he is unclear about the source of this 'questionable evidence.' As with other sections, my sense is that he fails to deeply contextualise his arguments. In relation to young people in care or care leavers, I felt that the book could have presented a deeper understanding of the immediate or long-term impact of abuse. I was disappointed most because I saw potential. As well as being academically more rigorous, I had hoped the author would have explored the discussions needed in more depth. For me this did not happen. In conclusion, while

the author presents the book as 'rethinking' residential child care, I am disappointed because, for me, the book falls short of this aim.

Zachari Duncalf

Research Fellow

SIRCC