

Book Review

Burton, J. (2015). *Leading good care: the task, heart and art of managing social care*. Jessica Kingsley, 208pp. ISBN 978-1-84905-551-2, £25.00.

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Leading good care: the task, heart and art of managing social care (2015) by John Burton is an interesting read and one that I enjoyed. It is by no means a typical textbook and many readers may enjoy it all the more for that fact. There is little in the way of academic references or citations. Instead, integrated throughout the book are four fictional stories based around managers dealing with and responding to a series of management and leadership challenges. Whilst these stories are fictional, they very much draw from the current realities and challenges facing managers and leaders in the social care sector.

At this point it should also be made clear that none of these four stories focus on children's residential care, or even children's services for that matter. Instead, they deal with a care home for older people, a much smaller care home for adults with learning disabilities, a home care cooperative social enterprise and a multi-purpose resource centre run by a consortium of local voluntary organisations.

Given all this, many working in residential child care may at this point question the suitability or relevance of this book for their role. The answer would be that it is brimming with potential parallels and connections. There are a number of topics and issues central to the book, which will have a real resonance for those working in the residential child care sector. Indeed, considering some of these issues in a more removed fashion may be a useful exercise. At the end of each chapter is a set of exercises, discussion points, and group work exercises to aid this process.

The book is split into themes: being aware of the context of care; maintaining a clear focus on the core task, that being the provision of care; leading and managing needs and feelings that can often be located below the surface; boundaries with other services and how these are negotiated; the manager as leader; turning barriers into leadership opportunities; and leading with courage, vision and integrity. It will be impossible for anyone working in residential child care to read this text and not make connections of some sort with their own work setting and these themes. The book will most likely prove useful for those already in leadership and management positions. However, it will have meaning also for those preparing for the role and those newer to the sector.

Indeed, this last group are as likely to be engaged with one of the recurring messages that runs throughout the book, the need to rally against systems and drivers, which pull us further from our core task - the provision of high quality care tailored to the needs of our clients. It is this message which most engaged me. Parts of the text can read as a call to arms to challenge the bureaucracy and regulations which have engulfed many aspects of the child care sector in recent times.

Through his own personal experiences, as well as the four fictional stories which feature at various stages in the book, the author highlights issues rooted in the reality of the challenges facing the care sector today. In reflecting on his time working in and writing about the care sector in various guises Burton identifies how he has witnessed a growth in procedural, rule-bound compliance culture. When considering standards and quality he is keen to emphasise that these are not in themselves core tasks, but can easily become the main focus of our work. The author reflects on the failure of systems to respond effectively to scandal and instances of poor practice, stating that there is a tendency to respond with what he refers to as government 'sparkling policy rockets', pronouncements to learn and ensure that mistakes are not repeated, which regularly miss the root cause and lead to no meaningful change.

These themes and others which are prominent throughout the book have much relevance for and with residential child care. The critique offered by the author of thinking which prioritises procedures and compliance with standards above all else should cause us to question the direction of travel in residential child care. Here we have seen the role of registration and inspection elevated to a status where to challenge its validity can often be equated to an act of heresy. But as practitioners know only too well, the relationship based practice which often characterises good quality residential care will regularly not be picked up by inspection regimes where the monitoring of case files and recording systems are regularly prioritised over observing actual practice.

Like many books, this comes with some quotes on the back cover from advance reviewers. One states that the book is a 'timely inspiration for managers to return to humanity and core tasks with confidence and to lead their services to real and meaningful excellence'. In a climate of unremitting financial constraints and pressure to conform to regulation, this book certainly does emphasise that our service needs to be led in a manner which is underpinned by humanity and concentrates on the core task of providing quality care. If leaders and managers across the range of services associated with residential child care read and take heed of these messages we will move closer to the 'good care' mentioned in the title.

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