

Book Reviews

Connelly, G. and Milligan, I.(2012). *Residential child care: Between home and family*. Dunedin: Academic Press.110pp, ISBN 978-1780460000, £16.95

Residential Child Care: Between Home and Family is Number 17 in the Policy and Practice in Health and Social Care series and gives us a thoughtful overview of residential child care in Scotland. Graham Connelly and Ian Milligan, write with a clear respect for the role of residential child care. While this book is aimed at students on social work/social care courses, it is also relevant for those practitioners who may not spend much time in residential services but need a more developed understanding. The length of the book itself will appeal to hard working residential staff with little time to commit to work-related reading.

The book makes good use of examples from current practice and, in Chapter 3, stories from young people themselves. It is an honest and hopeful outline of residential child care, connecting with the past, critiquing its current context and suggesting a way forward.

At the end of each chapter there is a helpful summary of the issues covered but there is also an invitation to the reader to 'think outside the box'. These prompts challenge the reader in different ways: At the end of Chapter 2 we are asked to consider the design and location of Children's Homes; in Chapter 4 the reader is asked to reflect on how to challenge the 'last resort' perception of residential child care; elsewhere the reader is directed to further reading or research. In this way readers are encouraged beyond the level of basic understanding.

Chapter 3 is notable for its focus on individual cases to illustrate the different experiences of children who live in residential care. The two case examples highlight the importance of empowering young people in decision making processes and the first case illustrates the role of residential child care in supporting families at times of crisis, with the consequence of promoting stability at home. The second example shows how residential care can promote a sense of belonging and provide a permanent home for a young person.

In addition to these case studies, messages from other contributors will not always be easy reading for those involved in policy development, but they are important for us all to hear. A good example of this is the comment from a retired worker at the end of

Chapter 4 who delivers a harsh assessment of the morale of front line staff and the lack of impact from aspirational policy.

Many residential child care workers I meet feel fearful, de-skilled, hopeless and worthless. What a message to give to the children in their care. The service seems driven by policies and procedures that have very little to do with the day-to-day life of children (p.65).

While the initial chapters effectively contextualise residential child care in Scotland, the latter parts of the book are much more forward facing and will help readers develop a fuller understanding of the potentials and possibilities of residential care - introducing key concepts like lifespace, safe care, use of activities and the common third. The writers speak in a language which is ambitious for the people working in these environments.

Residential workers inhabit, and are responsible for, a world that aims to combine homely, nurturing, non-institutional care and purposeful, planned interventions (p.81).

The ambition for the staff of children's homes and their way of working is further developed in Chapter 7, where the writers state the importance of being able and willing to work with the group. Chapter 7 also suggests that social pedagogy can provide a framework for training residential child care staff and help towards establishing a credible professional identity.

The book aims to leave the reader better informed and better placed to 'ask questions'. It also attempts to address the lazy, ideologically underpinned ambivalence to residential care perpetuated by the 'simplistic notions that unconditionally favour family settings'. It largely achieves these aims and further states its case for residential child care in the context of a concern at related reductions in size and range of residential provision for children. This book effectively challenges the view that this reduction should be applauded as evidence of better meeting the needs of young people.

There is a great danger that society sleepwalks into a situation in which the residential sector declines to an extent that it is not viable and the possibility of making a positive choice of group care for a child is not available (p.103).

As it is targeted at students who are perhaps coming to the subject for the first time, more experienced practitioners may find some parts may do little more than refresh their memory. There are also moments where I would have liked to read more and for there to be further practice examples. However, the writers are clear that this book is not supposed to be a handbook for practitioners and has both 'omissions' and 'idiosyncrasies'. The limitations of the book are not significantly important and are well addressed by the consistent encouragement to read and reflect further.

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Deucher, R. (2009). *Gangs, marginalised youth and social capital*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham. 156pp, ISBN number 978-1-85856-444-9

What follows is a review of the book 'Gangs, Marginalised Youth and Social Capital' by Ross Deucher (2009). The book examines the views of young people growing up in some of the toughest and most deprived areas in the West of Scotland, some of whom may also be either involved in gang culture or on the periphery.

Deucher's study focused on fifty respondents involved in the nine voluntary organisations and five secondary schools, with assistance from a variety of youth workers, community leaders, police officers and teachers. Open ended interviews were conducted, with the youths being advised that any disclosures of a criminal nature would have to be passed on to the relevant youth leaders.

Within the introduction, Deucher states that there is a perception that gang membership is on the rise. This is disputed, however, by respondents who advise that many of their youth groups are merely friendship groups and that the gang culture growth is a result of newspaper and media reports encouraging the current climate of fear and mistrust of young people.

Deucher's research is concentrated mainly in on Greater Glasgow and as such will be a valuable and relevant read to all practitioners working within this geographical area. The book does examine the uniqueness of Glasgow in relation to gang culture and identifies the role of the male, sectarianism, and social identity as contributory factors in young people deciding to engage in gang culture. There is also an appropriate depth of analysis where a number of common assumptions such as the culture of fear and anti-social behaviour strategies are challenged, not only by the writer but also the respondents. The fact that gang members are predominantly male is discussed in Chapter 1 where the current identity crisis facing young working class males is linked to the membership of street gangs. This sheds light on the comparatively large number of gang members in Glasgow, which is a largely working class city.

The book is an engaging read with the views of the young people throughout being its main strength. Many respondents expressed an interest in becoming involved in civic participation, but felt marginalised and criminalised mainly as a result of media pressure and the current political obsession with tackling perceived anti-social behaviours. Others in the study felt that gang culture replaced the bonding social capital that was missing from their family lives and provided them with a channel for their aggression.

Deucher in this particular study, focuses on four main aspects of social capital: perceptions of community structures and characteristics; civic participation; social interaction, networks and support; and trust and social cohesion. For many young people both in this study (p.95) and across Scotland who do not have a supportive home life, involvement in street gangs can be an important part of their social development. It can offer identity, promote social bonding and allow the young person a sense of

empowerment and protection, just in the way that employment or a supportive family can. The study (p.96) refers to Bourdieu (1986) who defined social capital as a 'resource made up of social obligations which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital'. Applying this theory to our own practice we could argue that by encouraging a young person to become involved in a football team, for example, could help that person develop a knowledge of the sport (cultural capital) take pride in the colours and strip of the club (symbolic capital) and develop a new network of friends with similar likes and dislikes (social capital). This can be one of the strengths of residential child care; for many young people in the community, the football team or the boxing club may be an unrealistic aspiration, mainly (as in this study) due to constraints around territoriality and social mobility. It may be that the only realistic resource that could meet these needs is the street gang.

It is significant that the findings and the views of the young people in this study are similar to Patrick's study in 1973 (cited by Deucher). Youth gangs have always been here and as Deucher states 'We must question whether the rising fear about street gangs in communities is based on real evidence or whether it is based on sensational news reporting and current political obsession with anti-social behaviour' (p.17).

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Smith, M. Fulcher, L. & Doran, P. (2013). *Residential child care in practice: Making a difference*. Bristol: The Policy Press, ISBN 1847423108

This highly readable text explores and explains the parameters of compassionate, growth-promoting child care, essential to making 'residential care the first and best placement of choice for those children whose needs it serves'¹. It certainly could and should make a difference to the way people go about the job of looking after children and young people in residential homes and schools. The book is imbued with the principles of, thinking about, and advice on practices which characterise high quality services which lead to positive experiences and opportunities for children, their families and those contributing to their well-being and development.

Residential child care in practice fills a gap in making the case for residential child care and in explaining clearly and directly what high quality care entails. The statement that residential care workers are 'charged with operationalising the corporate parenting agenda' with all its clichéd and pretentious nuances is turned into human speak in every page thereafter. In an unsentimental way, the authors address the emotional and

¹ NRCCI (2009) *Higher Aspirations, Brighter Futures: Overview Report* NRCCI, University of Strathclyde

relational foundations of caring for children and on upholding the right of children to enjoy their childhood and to be looked after by caring and loving adults with the capacity to set respectful, safe and wise boundaries. The concept of 'kindness' which seems to have been lost for so long is recognised and fully re-established.

At one level the book is an easy read, because of the clarity of the language and arguments, the clever construction, and the authentic voice of practitioners, children and young people. It is evident that it has been written by people steeped in thinking about and working with children and young people who are troubled and disadvantaged. Academic research and practice-based evidence are cleverly integrated in the text. The authors very skilfully present complex ideas and then explain them in straightforward ways before going on to elaborate and demonstrate their application. The treatment of life space, attachment based approaches and social pedagogy are all very successful examples of this approach. While the book is eminently readable, each page requires close attention and reflection at professional and personal levels. This text has great potential for use in initial professional training as well as continuing professional development, as each chapter offers opportunities for readers alone or in a group to discuss the main messages and tease out their meaning for themselves personally and the implications for their professional practice.

While relevant to practitioners in residential child care in many countries, this book is of particular interest to those who work in the context of the Scottish Government's policy of 'Getting it Right for Every Child'² with its key outcomes for children, known affectionately as Shanarri (safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included). The writers have done practitioners a huge service by elaborating on the outcomes and giving them a child-centred meaning with the additional titles, such as 'a sense of belonging', a 'sense of care' and 'developing generosity'. They have even rescued the term, inclusion, from its too general definition and rooted it in personal relationships and interactions. The grounded, down to earth advice on using the rhythms and rituals of daily living to foster positive and caring relationships and support the rounded development of each child or young person is wonderfully elaborated. These arguments should help those with responsibility for providing and paying for child care understand how resource intensive high quality residential care must be.

It is somewhat ironic that the writers are less than complimentary about aspects of external quality assurance and quality indicators, when this book is likely to be used to set a standard against which quality of residential care is judged. The book is very strong on residential care for children and young people with difficulties arising from social disadvantage and emotional difficulties. While many of the concepts and practice guidance in the text relate to children and young people with other needs that are being met in a residential situation, there are aspects relevant to them that are not covered, such as addressing specific disabilities, working with the particular needs of parents and carers, counselling for disabilities and supporting individuals facing death and supporting their families.

² The Scottish Government (2012) *A guide to Getting it right for every child*
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0041/00411151.pdf>

This book is one in the *Social Work in Practice* series designed to 'set new standards in introducing social workers to the ideas, values and knowledge base necessary for professional practice'. As such, the focus is on the residential care worker, but this text has a great deal to offer practitioners in education and health who also play a vital role in helping children and young people facing adversity to improve their life chances. The next step would be for a companion text to assist practitioners with differing perspectives and expertise work together in constructive and sustainable partnerships to address the holistic needs of children and young people who require residential care and to support their return to families and communities.

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