

Book Review

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

There is a joke in which a stranger asks a local person for directions, only to be told, "Well, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here." And to me that feels uncomfortably close to the difficulties to be faced in rethinking residential child care, which is one of the trickier problems for social policy in the UK today. Looked-after children in residential care are among the most disadvantaged children in our society. Their disadvantage stems from personal, social and economic circumstances over which they have no control. But, importantly, their disadvantage is also brought about by major faults in the very system that seeks to protect and safeguard them.

How we reached this position is the result of a complex interaction of history, theoretical understandings, and social policies that have reacted - and often overreacted - to highly publicised scandals. Mark Smith's book lays out and critically discusses the territory to be considered: the history of residential care, the development of public policy towards it, the theories and practices that have been influential, and others such as those of social pedagogy, which may be so in the future.

At the same time, this is not a dry account. The book's great strength is that it is lit up by personal experience and comes from the heart: its values are very apparent. Smith draws on his own experience as an academic and a social work educator. He also speaks as a long-time residential care worker, who went into the work almost by accident but remained to enjoy it. He is not afraid of controversy. He confronts sensitive areas such as love, touch, sexuality and physical restraint in children's work, areas in which workers can feel uncomfortable and lack confidence, and identifies ways forward.

The reader may not agree with all his views. For example, he examines the tensions between professional practice based on notions of children's rights compared with practice rooted in valuing the personal relationship between carer and child. He comes down heavily on the side of a relational approach. This is a useful corrective to work based heavily in administrative procedures, including those that relate to rights. Nevertheless, while 'rights' sound cold, compared to the more human experiences suggested by 'relationship', I would have liked a discussion of the potential of apparently warm relationships to be abusive and manipulative, as well as supportive. The virtue of practice based on both children's rights and on personal relationships is that such practice acknowledges and alerts us to the unequal balance of power involved in adult-child relationships. A rights-based approach should not be written out of court; it is not a sufficient basis for child care, but it is a necessary part of the system.

That said, anyone seeking to understand the field would be well served by Rethinking Residential Care, not least because it provides a useful reference book, stimulates fresh thinking and successfully combines theoretical and practice knowledge.

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