

Book reviews

**Working with children in care: European perspectives.**

Pat Petrie, Janet Boddy, Claire Cameron, Valerie Wigfall  
and Antonia Simon.

Berkshire, Open University Press, 2006. 177pp,  
ISBN 0-335-21634-X  
£22.99.

As a result of the continuing high levels of disadvantage, social exclusion and poor outcomes experienced by children and young people who are looked after and accommodated in the UK, the authors of this book undertook studies of residential care provision in other countries across Europe.

Working with children in care: European perspectives is a book which offers a comparison between residential care provision in England and that provided in five European countries; Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands. The book provides an in-depth discussion and analysis on policy, practice and training offered in all six countries and has a particular emphasis on the role of social pedagogues. Social Pedagogy is the recognised training model adopted in most European countries for workers in residential care settings, as well as other areas of work related to children and young people’s needs and development. Social pedagogues can work with children and young people in many settings within health, education or social care. Adopting a relational, child-centred and reflexive approach, Social Pedagogy involves working with the ‘whole child’ to support their ‘all-round’ development through using theory, creative and practical skills and professional knowledge.

There are five authors involved in writing this book who have experience in psychology, child development and social work and have carried out extensive research in many areas of service provision for children and young people in the UK. In the book, they have provided a good mix of policy and practical issues relating to the validity of the Social Pedagogy framework being introduced into residential care in England.

The book is made up of an introduction followed by three parts. The writers make consistent reference to books, journals and research reports, maintaining a clear evidence base for their discussion. The introduction offers a good insight into the theoretical aspects of Social Pedagogy from a European perspective and its relationship to social work in England. This is followed by a brief historical background of residential care, incorporating the role of policy, theories of

social work, parenting and the influence of attachment theory.

Part One provides an excellent discussion on describing a social pedagogue, and the values and principles (relational, holistic, reflective, creative, fun) which underpin the pedagogic approach. It goes on to discuss the impact of national and welfare policies, and the various levels of training and qualifications available in each country, highlighting where there are similarities and differences.

Part Two examines the data from research carried out by the authors, focussing on both policy and practice. This section provides comparisons in areas such as staff training, recruitment, retention and job satisfaction as well as health, education and employment outcomes for looked-after young people. The section then turns its attention to young people’s experiences of residential care. Based on interviews and questionnaires, it explores the views of both staff and young people and offers an evidenced-based comparison on the outcomes and life chances for young people in residential child care.

Part Three contains a discussion on the research findings and potential benefits that the application of Social Pedagogy would bring to residential child care in England. It also draws attention to the ethical considerations and value base of a pedagogic approach, and how these can be seen to promote the dominant values for each country and culture. The book ends with an appendix which explains the design, methods and samples which were used in the research undertaken.

The authors have provided a strong and well-researched argument on the benefits that Social Pedagogy would bring. It focuses detailed attention on the value of pedagogic training and how this can prepare the workforce with the necessary skills and qualities required for effective residential child care practice. This book has added benefits in that it not only discusses wider structural issues relating to residential child care, but also gives a realistic view on practical issues by giving consideration to the views of some of the key stakeholders in residential child care. These include front-line staff and managers who provide services, and the children and young people who experience everyday life in residential settings. The inclusion of parents and carers, whose views are often overlooked, would have strengthened this section.

As a fourth year degree student, I really enjoyed reading this book; however I am aware that it would have been inaccessible to me before undertaking my studies. Whilst the research contents are very comprehensive and relevant, they may be less engaging to those who are not used to reading research findings. I know that my colleagues in residential child care would understand and relate to most of the information within the book. A condensed version aimed at front-line practitioners would be welcomed.

The book is clearly written and well structured. While it is aimed at graduate-level students within social work, health and educational professions, it would also benefit any professional with an interest in residential child care or children’s needs and development. It brings together theory, policy and research and is discussed in such a straight-forward way that it can be easily understood and related to practice.

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**Managing children’s homes: Developing effective leadership in small organisations.**

Leslie Hicks, Ian Gibbs, Helen Weatherly and Sarah Byford.

London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007. 224pp,  
ISBN 978-1-84310-542-8.  
£25.00.

This book details research which aimed to identify the ways in which the managers of effective residential homes work. The research involved the collection of quantitative data from 45 homes in England and Wales, 30 homes from the local authority and 15 homes based in the independent sector. It looked at managers’ roles, as well as providing a consideration of resource use and leadership style. The research was motivated in part by the fact that previous research into this area, whilst highlighting significant variation in standards of practice, did not identify clearly those characteristics of managers that contributed to effective leadership. As such, the research upon which the book is based outlines the relationship between structure, process and outcomes.

Separate chapters detail the structural characteristics of the homes involved in the research. It examines the processes involved in managing the children’s homes, with a particular focus on aspects of practice and its management that are common to all homes. It provides an analysis of how such information contributes to a conceptualisation of leadership in children’s homes. It also explores the cost-effectiveness of residential care for children and young people. Finally, it provides an analysis of how such factors have an impact on the outcomes for children and young people. Undoubtedly, different sections of the book may have varying levels of appeal or relevance for readers, depending on their role and motivation for reading the text. A particular strength of the book is that the separate chapters have their own focus on different aspects of the research. As such, different topics can be identified and accessed quickly. Hence, students, residential managers and those responsible for commissioning and planning services may all be able to access the material relevant to them with the minimum of fuss. Additionally, appendices provide a more detailed overview of the research methodology and sampling techniques employed.

The book is at its strongest when drawing together the different strands of the research and considering implications for practice, policy and training. Strong and important themes emerge. The authors found that structural characteristics of residential provision varied markedly. Effective leadership was associated with a manager’s ability to achieve a collaborative team dynamic that worked consistently over time. Analysis of cost-effectiveness, whilst largely exploratory, did suggest that higher staff-to-resident ratios resulted in higher costs but did