

Book Review

Residential Child Care: Collaborative Practice. Ian Milligan and Irene Stevens, London, Sage, 2006, 154pp, ISBN 1-4129-0851-5 (Pbk), £19.99.

In 1994, Barbara Kahan wrote in her book *Growing up in groups* about ‘the need for greater collaboration and common acceptance of good practice’ (p xi). Milligan and Stevens have taken up this baton in their book *Residential Child Care: Collaborative Practice*. The book confronts the difficulties residential child care faces in its relations with other professionals. What is exciting about this book is that although it is about residential child care it is not solely directed at residential child care workers. It communicates with all the professional disciplines involved in nurturing and educating troubled children. This is as it should be. Professional collaboration, as the authors suggest, is not only about taking up a singular professional role in a joint project, but also concerns being informed about, and understanding, the aims, roles and professional attitudes of others in a collaborative venture. The authors argue cogently that if residential child care is to take its place – in the authors’ view, its necessary place – in the spectrum of child care provision, then all those from the different professional disciplines who are involved with looked-after and accommodated children need to be trained to work as co-operative partners.

In perhaps the most important chapter of the book, entitled ‘Social Workers and Residential Workers: The Key Collaborative Relationship’ the authors rightly pinpoint the relationship between residential child care workers and social workers as a critical one. They discuss some of barriers to achieving this key collaborative relationship. Amongst these is a predominant tendency in social work training and social work culture to be unsympathetic towards residential child care. Milligan and Stevens suggest that the quality of inter-professional collaboration between social workers and residential workers is a powerful predictor of outcome for children in residential care.

The authors provide an informative contemporary snapshot of residential care, discuss what is meant by inter-professional collaboration and set this into a wider context of work teams and organisations. There is also comprehensive discussion about the ethical sensitivities involved in collaborative work. I particularly welcomed the chapter which linked the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child with the duty to collaborate with children rather than to do or decide things for them. In my experience, the articles of the convention are often breached. The most frequent and worrying of these breaches was that of Article 12, ‘Children have a right to an opinion and for it to be listened to and taken seriously.’ Sadly, I do not agree with the authors’ optimistic assertion

that there ‘is a growing awareness and respect for the concept of human rights’ (p.125). It may well be evident as the authors suggest that there is a ‘development of policies and procedures in relation to children and young people’ (p.125) but it seems to me that the existence of policies and procedures does not necessarily equate with changes in practice.

Despite this misgiving, *Residential Child Care: Collaborative Practice* is an important book. Perhaps the best of authors’ significant achievements is that their book can both be an informative text book, and at the same time it can be used as a complete training programme for intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary professional development in collaborative practice. The learning objectives are set out at the beginning of each chapter and there are learning activities offered to stimulate discussion. At the end of each chapter there is a summarising commentary on the general issues which arise from the text and from the activities. I can already vouch for the efficacy of these activities having used a number of them with a small group made up of residential child care workers, social workers and teachers. The ‘discuss and learn’ approach adopted in the book encourages the reader to be both thoughtful and creative. The authors deserve to succeed in their aim to embed collaborative practice in the ‘reflective processes of students’ in the confidence that ‘the outcomes for children and young people in residential care will improve’ (p.7).

References

Kahan, B. (1994). *Growing up in groups*. London: HMSO.

Charles Sharpe

Independent Consultant

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