

Facing Forward : Residential Child Care in the 21st Century

David Crimmens and Ian Milligan, editors.

Lyme Regis, Russell House Publishing, 2005. 224pp, ISBN 1-90385-575-6 (Pbk), £19.95.

This is an extremely useful and timely collection of writing about the state of residential care in the UK. Although it acknowledges the recurrent troubles of this sector and faces quite starkly some of the lessons which have to be learned, the whole book has a constructive and forward-looking tone.

It is undeniable that much official policy continues to treat residential care as an unwelcome and uncomfortable guest at the child care table, despite the fact that for many young people it remains the preferred alternative, as several of these chapters make clear, quoting research from across the UK and beyond. It is therefore easy at times for those acting as advocates for or supporting the residential sector to become embattled and to speak too defensively for the cause - which of course may not help - but the editors and authors of this book have managed to remain both committed and passionate without becoming too subjective or strident.

The seventeen chapters cover a comprehensive spread, arranged into several themed sections, including Policy, Diversity, the Voice of Young People, Theory and Practice, and Education. I found every chapter worth the read and I learned a great deal in the process, especially in terms of valuing the voice of the young people themselves and hearing about how this has been incorporated into practice in a diverse range of settings.

The chapters on difference and diversity are especially helpful in this respect, as are the chapters based on a Who Cares? Scotland project and the Blueprint project in England. The chapters on group care theory and practice are particularly valuable, including Robbie Gilligan's discussion of Resilience and Mark Smith's enlightening discussion of the Child and Youth Care (CYC) model which developed in Canada and the US.

It is helpful for UK readers to have this glimpse of a different and yet somehow familiar approach to the group care task. I would like to see this work taken further, especially in the light of the emerging interest in the social pedagogic model from continental Europe. For many years residential workers have operated in something of a perceived desert of useful theory, and it is clear that we have much to learn from other countries in this respect.

In this context I was also very pleased to see the chapters by Ruth Emond and Laura Steckley. Ruth Emond focuses on her experience as a researcher living in two children's homes and she draws many powerful lessons on the importance to young people of their peer group. Laura Steckley's chapter is a case study in the value for young people of activities, in this case football, but it is also well grounded in its theoretical base which will make it especially useful for students. It is this sort of theorising from ground-level up which will be of most help to practitioners, because it speaks so directly to their experience.

The remaining chapters cover aspects of policy for residential care, whether in terms of education, inspection, the secure estate or more broadly addressing the whole social inclusion agenda. These chapters add further substance to the book's declared aim 'to stimulate thinking and debate about the necessary, purposeful and positive possibilities of group care for those who can no longer live at home'.

I would recommend this book wholeheartedly for anyone interested in the future of residential care. The editors and their authors are to be congratulated on a fine collection.

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