Back to the Future: Review of Positive Residential Practice: Learning the Lessons of the 1990s and Champions for Children: The Lives of Modern Child Care Pioneers

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David Crimmens and John Pitts (eds) (2000) *Positive Residential Practice: Learning the Lessons of the 1990s*, Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing, xii + 180 pp., ISBN 1-898924-51-1, £14.99.

Bob Holman (2001) *Champions for Children: The Lives of Modern Child Care Pioneers*, Bristol: The Policy Press, vi + 204 pp., ISBN 1-86134-342-6, £14.99.

Two recent books have much to say about child care today because, in contrasting ways, they set recent developments in residential care in the context of the history and development of child welfare services more generally.

There are not many books published with a specific focus on residential child care – a situation that the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care hopes to help change! A very valuable exception to this is *Positive Residential Practice: Learning the Lessons of the 1990s*, a good title in the current climate when residential care is so often on the back foot. The book is divided into four sections: 'The Lessons of the 1990s'; 'Re-structuring Residential Child Care'; 'The Voice of the Child'; and 'Locking up Children'. Each chapter is written by a different writer or group of writers who come from both practice and academic backgrounds, and this mixture produces a varied book which contains much that is of relevance to residential practitioners throughout the UK.

The first section starts with a chapter on the recent scandals and inquiries and draws heavily on the North Wales (Waterhouse) Inquiry. It is written by Brian Corby, one of the most perceptive analysts of the impact and effectiveness of different forms of investigation and inquiries. Having emphasised a positive view of the contribution of residential care, 'residential care needs to build on its strengths and eliminate its weaknesses' (p.13), he summarises some of the key lessons that need to be learned, including that: 'Training is broad-based and focused on the needs of children rather than on non-abusive ways of controlling them' (p.14).

'Re-structuring Residential Child Care' is the longest section with five chapters on a range of topics; there is a chapter on inspection (Morgan) and two on training (Crimmens; de Silva) which will be referred to below. There are particularly interesting chapters on the opening of a new residential home by

Lewisham Council in London (Hume, Lowe & Rose), and another on the running of a residential refuge the London Safe House (Gurney). The chapter on the new unit is co-written by the unit manager and the Director of Social Services for the authority. It is therefore all the more striking to read their claim that the main obstacle to the effective working of the unit is the false expectations of fieldworkers!

Reflecting modern practice, the book gives a section over to the 'Voice of the Child' which provides a significant 'reality check'. One chapter consists of extended interviews with two young people (Wheal). In part, they have good things to say about their care workers but much of what they have to say is pretty damning. Among the things they have had to contend with are buildings in a poor state of repair, constant changes of social worker, and care staff with a defensive approach to their rights. This section also includes a chapter by Frost and Wallis which reports on research into the use of complaints systems. Given the investment that has been made into the development of these systems, this chapter is vital reading for unit and external managers. The researchers themselves are clear that: 'Complaints procedures alone cannot provide safe, quality environments for children' (p.126) and their chapter makes a number of interesting points about the link between the use of these procedures and wider practice issues. The final chapter in this section outlines the developments in children's rights and stresses the importance of this agenda in providing a safe and positive experience for children and young people in residential care (Willow).

The last section on 'Locking up Children' contains two chapters on changing ideas about youth justice in England and Wales, where an increasingly punitive approach has developed (Pitts; Shaw & Sparks). Given recent public and political concern about youth crime in Scotland, and proposals for youth courts, these chapters will still be of interest to Scottish readers, especially those in the secure sector.

By way of contrast, Bob Holman's book tells the 'story' of child welfare service development through the medium of biography. His fascinating and original *Champions for Children* is compelling because he is able, in just a few pages, to provide an insight into the family backgrounds and lives of a diverse collection of people who have contributed so much. The champions include those like Eleanor Rathbone and Peter Townsend who campaigned against poverty and for decent benefits for families, while the others, Lady Marjorie Allen, John Stroud, Clare Winnicott and Barbara Kahan are characterised as key activists and developers of child care social work. The recent history of residential work is illuminated in the chapters on Lady Allen and Barbara Kahan. The former famously stirred concern about children in care with a letter to *The Times* in 1944. Allen was angry about the state of the large 'orphanages' of the time,

although as Holman points out, she did not actually have a very thorough knowledge of the sector. Nevertheless, she was a formidable campaigner and there was a huge response to her letter which ultimately resulted in the government setting up committees of enquiry, the Curtis Committee in England and the Clyde Committee in Scotland. Their reports, especially the more thorough and progressive Curtis Committee Report, encouraged smaller 'family group homes' and laid the groundwork for the creation of new Children's Departments in 1948.

Such is the speed of change these days, both in society and in the development of social work services, that it is difficult for residential practitioners to know what has gone before, even in the relatively recent past. Barbara Kahan originally started work as a Children's Officer in a county Children's Department and was active in child care till her death in 2000. She was latterly much associated with residential care and her book *Growing Up In Groups* (Kahan, 1994) was, and remains, an important 'encyclopaedia' of policy and practice. Kahan was one of the investigators into the awful 'Pindown' regime, but she came to be associated with a positive view about what residential care could do during the scandal-prone 1990s. Holman's chapter on her includes interview material in which she tells how proud she was of her contribution to the closing of the old Approved Schools (as they were called in England) in the late 1960s. However, in looking back, Kahan also acknowledged that the baby had been thrown out with the bath water:

> 'Nobody had the guts to replace approved schools with anything. There was a wholesale destruction of residential facilities which was a disaster.' (pp. 66/7)

At this time of great hope and continuing controversy about training for residential workers, it is perhaps worth noting what these books have to say on the subject. The relevance of history leaps from the pages of Holman's book. He points out how the Curtis Committee in 1948 had recommended training for all residential workers (p. 41), and Barbara Kahan, after many years of supporting joint training for residential and social workers, eventually 'concluded that current training had failed residential workers. She advised that their training would have to be separate from social workers if their skills, specialist tasks and knowledge base were ever to be given the resources and attention they deserved'. (p.69)

In *Positive Residential Practice*, there are two chapters given over to a detailed exploration of current training issues. A chapter by Crimmens gives a useful summary of recent recommendations about training and debates about what sort of training is required. He makes a case for seeing the 'positive potential' of VQ3 as a basic qualification, but makes clear the need for more in-depth

learning. He quotes various criticisms of the DipSW and points to university level training for child and youth care workers provided in most other European countries. Given the needs of the children and young people who are now found in residential settings and the particular features of a group care environment, he argues that:

> 'A radical shift away from the conventions of the past 25 years are required which secures the kind of future suggested by contemporary policy. What residential child care needs in this area is a separate and specific training.' (p.92)

Back to the future!

References

Kahan, B. (1994) *Growing Up in Groups*, London: HMSO.