Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies
Est 1998. Published by Social Care Ireland

Volume 9 | Issue 1 Article 9

2009-01-01

Rethinking Residential Child Care (Smith, M., 2009): Book Review

Noel Howard
Irish Association of Social Care Workers

Recommended Citation
Howard, Noel (2009) "Rethinking Residential Child Care (Smith, M., 2009): Book Review," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: http://arrow.dit.ie/ijass/vol9/iss1/9

Smith, M. (2009). Rethinking residential child care. Bristol: The Policy Press. ISBN 9781861349088

Review by: Noel Howard
Irish Association of Social Care Workers

© Copyright Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies ISSN 1393-7022
Vol. 9(1), 2009, 84-86

This book is a breath of fresh air. However, there is a big problem with it. But more of that later.

Based on many years of practical and academic experience Mark Smith brings an analytical eye to bear on the subject of residential child care in this publication. With a well defined and easily readable historical foundation, as well as drawing on past and current thinking from a number of sources, he gives his subject matter immediacy and relevance. He forcefully questions many of our new found concepts around children in care, their rights and protection and what really is in their best interests. Reading this book I had to admire the level of restraint he brings to his arguments.

One has only begun when page nine, quite scarily I think, shows New Labour's relentless pursuit of change in the interests of "modernisation" in the UK. This has seen "rafts of new policy or practice initiatives or seemingly perpetual agency reorganisation." Not a bad description of the Irish scene and as one gets into this book it is evident that practically all of what he has to say seamlessly translates to the situation that pertains in Ireland regarding the understanding (or rather, misunderstanding) that there is around residential child care.

He argues, extremely successfully in my view, that what is sometimes seen as promoting what's best for children in care comes from a bureaucratic system lacking moral and professional courage to face up to the real issues. This is because "care is messy and ambiguous" (p. 166), "complex, ambiguous and paradoxical" (p. 133) and that "care that is neat and tidy and conforms to bureaucratic specification is not care at all" (ibid).

That's where this book has a particular Irish relevance. When he says "Legalistic and regulatory responses have cast a veil of suspicion over the sector and those who work in it" many here can and will identify with that sentiment. He further says that "at a practice level it has sanitised the very essence of care making it increasingly difficult to offer children the kind of affection and control they need" before going on to make what is perhaps the most telling, self evident point of all, by referring to the trend "of locating the locus of knowledge about residential care in sets of abstract principles and standards and in an array of external managers rather than in the expertise of those who do the job."

Despite its validity this is not a popular line to take at the present time where there is an ever increasing tendency to ignore the ebb and flow of daily life in residential care ("rhythms and rituals") and assume that mountains of paperwork and boxes ticked somehow adequately reflects the "care" children are getting.

He has some interesting things to say also about the concept of "upbringing" as it relates to children in general and those in care in particular. It's an old fashioned term and wouldn't fit with today's jargon but I do believe if you substitute "care" for "upbringing" the two terms and their implications dovetail. Care and upbringing by the care giver for any child is a tough, monotonous grind as any parent or social care worker can confirm. Much of it is unglamorous and deals with primary care giving and responding to events as they arise every day of every week. The complexity of the work is in its simplicity – not an easy task at all – but today we prefer to ascribe an exaggerated, almost obsessive investigative complexity to elements of normal, interactive living with children living in care which demands that everything must be written down to somehow prove that something good or at least 'not bad' is happening over any period of time. "Sharing their (children's) stories and their hopes and fears" (p. 172) is how the author puts this vitally important aspect of caring for children. The opposite notion plays right into the hands of individual social care workers who are far happier writing tomes about the children rather than being with them. No amount of paperwork or a few hours visit to a residential centre can adequately capture the normal, positive "hanging out and hanging in" (p. 172) atmosphere that very often permeates any day, week or month.

His take on "professionalism," (getting the job done, competently and ethically) and "professionalisation" (status, pay etc.) really sums both concepts up for those who work in residential care. There is no doubt that there is room for both in their place but it is good to see the distinction being made. His view of "managing" as opposed to "managerialism" is also one which is perhaps easily recognisable to child care staff but more often than not may be lost on managers.

The chapter on "Theorising Residential Care" is a crisp and enlightening overview which stresses that practitioners need to be conscious that no one theory has the answer. For example, in relation to attachment, he argues strongly, and I would agree, that "locating the roots for behaviours in past experience should not be used as a reason not to address unacceptable behaviours in the present" (p. 77).

One of the most challenging chapters is on "Working at the Boundaries" and it is good to see an honest exploration around areas that are minefields for residential staff, i.e., love, sexuality, touch and restraint, not to mention (shock/horror!) the glass of wine or bottle of beer on p. 62. Many of these are areas often shied away from and if one of the outcomes from this book is that perhaps more robust discussion can take place then, for that alone, publication

of this work has been very worthwhile. For example, his views on restraint and its "inherent messiness" should be required reading for anyone teaching, working, managing, monitoring or inspecting in residential care and that is said without lessening the vital importance of the other areas in this particular chapter.

But there is much more in this book. Just a few other areas, among many, in addition to what I've adverted to already stand out for me: life space (p. 82); dependency and independence (p. 149); Maier's "core of care" (pp. 82-3); the "compost heap" (p. 87); "hanging out and hanging in" (p. 172) and "neo liberalism" (various references).

The book ends with a piece on "Professional activism" and for this reviewer hits the nail firmly on the head in relation to those who work in residential care. "Well qualified, reflective and reflexive practitioners" (p. 175) should not see themselves (or indeed allow themselves to be) "simple victims" in the history of residential care. Can a well qualified, competent, reflective practising social care worker be a "simple victim" in the work they try to do? I believe so unless he/she sees the broader picture and become an "involved" qualified, competent and reflective practitioner at unit, local and national level to assert how the real needs of children and ongoing development of staff can be maintained and enhanced. Otherwise, time will prove that, as Mark Smith says "recourse to a language of rights, protection and outcomes speaks of a very limited vision for children" (p. 174) and no social care worker wishes to be part of that limited vision. Their potential to make a difference in children's lives is far greater than that.

The inspirational and challenging quote from Moss and Petrie (2002) on the book's final page perhaps best summarises what Mark Smith has attempted and succeeded in doing in this book. In giving the book its title about *rethinking* residential care I feel a first step has been taken for us in Ireland too toward *rescuing and preserving* what is best in *residential* care. This is not to say that excellent work is not being done here currently because ample evidence exists to show that it is.

Here I come to the problem I spoke of at the beginning of this review. I do not think that the political vision or will exists to allow the concept and practice of residential care, so cogently argued for in this book, to be what they should be. This despite the fact that many (often at very high levels) who work in an administrative and /or regulatory capacity will agree, off the record, with most of what Mark Smith says in this book.
But will anything be done about it?

References

Moss, P. & Petrie, P. (2002). From children's services to children's spaces. London: Routledge Falmer.