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Residential Child Care and Its Alternatives: International Perspectives (Peters, F. (ed), 2008: Book Review

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This book is the first in a series covering the different aspects of working with children which will be published jointly by the Federation Internationale des Communautés Educatives (FICE) and Trentham Books. The book should appeal to anyone working within child and youth care services. The international contributors have discussed many aspects of residential child care and its alternatives including historical context, policy, trends, training, professionalisation and participation. The book is a valuable contribution to the study of the ever changing and developing world of residential care for children and young people.

The first part of the book examines 'Policy-related strategies on child and youth care' while part two, examines 'Professional and research perspectives on a changing world of residential child and youth care.' The book draws our attention to the very interesting and worthy discussions and debates currently happening within the areas of residential care. The international perspective enhances this discussion giving insight into both differences and similarities. Practitioners are today more than ever becoming more professional, constructively critical, and reflective in their work and learning. This has been mirrored within the book. The continuing development of social care and social pedagogy has begun to contribute to a more open and enquiring practitioner whose responsibility is the delivery of good quality care to those children and young people who for many reasons need to be cared for outside their immediate family. Continuous professional training and education of those working with children and youth has become commonplace. In most countries those entering the field of social care are required to have a degree level qualification. Change within residential care and its alternatives has been driven by both internal and external forces. Legislation in relation to children and youth has been updated. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has influenced governments and children are beginning to have their voices and opinions heard.

Residential care presents a challenge to those working within its complex field. Practitioners need to be able to deal with a diverse set of problems on a daily basis. This book provides quite a comprehensive picture of residential care in various European contexts and highlights the need to move forward, whilst noting that much has been achieved in the last few decades to

move away from the large, impersonal institutions of the past. The book makes reference to recent reform and development and to the need for professionals within the field to decide future developments. In chapter two Wolfgang Trede describes some of the alternative types of care available and the recent trends in alternative care. He also portrays how in Europe (with the exception of Germany) the most likely 'out of own home' placement is that of foster care. He outlines that there are significant differences in staff qualification levels between countries and in attitudes to children's rights and length of placements.

In chapter three Keith White provides an interesting piece on his experience at Millgrove (a residential community in London), where residential care can provide a secure base "in the sense that Bowlby meant". He describes how young people "often and consistently express a preference for residential care over foster care and alternatives." This interested me greatly as my experience while working in the field of residential care was that young people had expressed a preference to remain in residential care, rather than be placed in foster care.

In chapter four Bullock notes that in the U.K. residential care caters for 30% of over 15 year olds in care. The reasons for these trends are described and form a useful basis for understanding differing systems. Bullock also describes more liberal progressive policy developments within foster care where carers are increasingly drawn from more diverse backgrounds and those who need to be fostered are not limited by age, behaviour etc.

In chapter five Peter Hansbauer looks in detail at the German residential care system and the changes that have occurred since the 1960s.

In the past, and to some extent today, children and young people have been subject to multiple movements within care systems during which each transfer signifies a move towards more secure care. They become products of a system where their needs become secondary to their placement. During this process labelling may occur. Labelling children and young people is not productive as they may be seen in terms of a label as opposed to their needs. As they journey between systems which often can not facilitate them, their transitions become commonplace to the point that no one seems to know what to do next which results in insecurity and even further rejection. This, thankfully, is discussed constructively within the book. James Anglin outlines the need to put energy into what might work as opposed to what we know doesn't work. He also outlines the need to acknowledge each person's experience and respond with "true sensitivity and empathy".

The professionalisation of care practice in Slovenia has been examined by Alenka Kobolt and Bojan Dekleva who say three elements should be included in University programmes in child and youth care; namely, theoretical knowledge, practical skills and self-knowledge. How and to what extent these elements are transferred was the focus of these researchers. Kobolt and Deklva surveyed students and their findings will be of interest to social care educators.

Chapter eight, by Kaija Klap, describes the work at the Laust Family and Rehabilitation Centre in Finland and the Centre's rehabilitation process for children. The work with the families is outlined and described in a way that is well set out and easily understood. The process is grounded in both knowledge and experience. The functions of shared parenting are detailed in addition to methods by which working with families are outlined. These practical examples can be useful for those seeking to develop work with families, an area that is in the process of development. Despite the complexities, this writer communicates the message well. This chapter illustrates the committed and empathetic approach taken by this organisation and highlights for the reader the importance of the relationships which have to be built up both with the child and the family to effect rehabilitation.

Emmanuel Grupper and Irit Mero-Jaffe describe how relationships can be preserved for families and how helping and empowering parents facilitates rehabilitation and a smoother transition when children return home. They describe a three year pilot project which took place in Israel which hoped as one of its aims to "bring about a change in staffs attitude towards parents" (p. 122). The project proved to be successful in many aspects, including an improvement in the attitudes of the staff and an improvement in children's functioning. Positive and concerted effort seemed to produce positive results. Projects such as these and the practical outcomes that have been described provide useful learning for the practitioner. The positive results are also motivating and act as a driving force to those who might be struggling with their current practice.

The importance of relationships further emerges when Mechthild Wolff discusses an interesting workshop set up in Germany to explore young people's views on participation. One young person said "a good relationship with a care giver is important for me to feel safe" (p. 142). Wolff describes how 'Hart and Gernerts participation scale' can indicate how participation can be encouraged or impeded.

The final chapter by Marc Noom and Micha de Winter details a novel research method which involved peer research by youth experiencing homelessness in the Netherlands. The results of this research outline the need for this type of participatory research to continue.

The strength of this book lies in the range of both contributors and areas that are covered. Whether the reader is interested in policy regarding youthcare or the more practical aspects of intervention there is something for everyone. I preferred the second part of the book because it provided some practical aspects and methods. I think this book will certainly be of value and interest to anyone working in the field of residential childcare or in related fields. The ongoing development of social care/pedagogy needs literature and research such as this with its international perspective. Wherever they live in the world children and young people have the same basic needs and rights. It is evident that the people working in the area of child and youth care want to progress and deliver the highest quality of care. Sharing of

ideas and information between professionals will provide more positive outcomes for both children, young people and families and this book paves the way for this process. I will be keeping an eye out for the second book in the series.