

Book Review

Ward, A. (2014). *Leadership in residential child care: A relationship-based approach*. Norwich: The Smokehouse Press. 184pp. ISBN 9780957633537, £18.00

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This delightfully candid book, drawing upon the full length of the author's extensive experience over five decades of working with, researching, and writing about children and young people in residential group care settings, exemplifies the value of understanding our historic present. As Olive Stevenson (1998, p. 154) so aptly observed: 'British child welfare has suffered from a lack of historical reflection: to acknowledge the distinctive and unique problems that we face today does not invalidate comparisons with the past'. If you are looking for an incisive, insightful, restorative text to begin to address this perceived deficit in your understanding of how practice wisdom can be accrued through time, then you can do no better than starting with Adrian Ward's considered reflections.

I have referred to the publication as a text but it is not a text book in the conventional understanding of the term. As the author states honestly from the outset 'this is not primarily an academic text but a practical one, aimed at helping leaders and those supporting them to think more deeply about their work' (p. 4). There are no facts and figures, no charts and no references to legislation, policy or procedural guidelines of practice. There are sources cited, but they are used sparingly. In short, this is a book written by someone who appears to be eschewing the demanding straightjacket of academic research frameworks, whilst embracing a much older tradition of telling stories about social work practice.

In recent decades this narrative approach largely has been lost from social work literature. Before this change, Clement Attlee (1920), Felix Biestek (1957), David Brandon (1976), Bill Jordan (1979) and more recently, Olive Stevenson (2013) all told stories about their practice. There is a paradox at play here: whilst formal academic literature is often at pains to deny the power of the 'I', it takes courage for the humble, reflective, reflexive practitioner to feel sufficiently bold to claim to have something important to say - something not based upon a rigorously designed research study, but upon their life's experiences and, in this case, about leadership in that most difficult and exposing of milieus, where people - in the main - do their best to try to make something good and meaningful with and for society's most damaged and disadvantaged children and young people.

As the title of the book indicates, the substance of this work fleshes out the tensions that are present at the crossroads when working in the residential life space, with

axiomatically highly damaged children and young people, with a diverse, undervalued and often untrained workforce, and where someone is charged with the task of 'leadership'. Adrian Ward first took on this role as a young man in his 20s, and the book essentially tells us about how he got on, how he learned to become a leader and how he has subsequently unpicked the dynamics of leadership within a relationship-based framework.

To the above end, Ward examines the meaning of 'leadership' in relation to 'management', he focuses on relationships rather than outcomes, and all the time these tensions and dilemmas are explored through case studies, practice examples, reflections, memories, through fragments of insightful experience. As he so pertinently reminds us, working in the group care context means that 'so much of the work is done in public, or semi-public' (p. 20). In this scenario, leadership is about setting standards, modelling behaviours and language, being an example of the values-based practice you want to develop with others. Yet the actions of the leader are exposed, literally, to critical scrutiny and examination by all: by resident children, by their families, by social workers and other professionals and by the care, support and ancillary staff members. Very little has been written about leadership in residential child care settings, with a few important exceptions (Whitaker, *et al.*, 1998; Hicks *et al.*, 2007). By adopting a psychodynamic frame of reference, with the chapter entitled 'Below the Surface: Unconscious Dynamics' best exemplifying the application of such a model, Ward shows how the 'leader' is necessarily the fulcrum of a complex and dynamic web of emotions involving all members of the community. As he states, '[t]he real challenge for any leader is to be oneself and be true to oneself while also meeting the wide range of expectations and achieving the task expected of a leader' (p. 151). Indeed, a tall order!

The author is appropriately and pertinently sceptical of the myth of the hero-leader, of the idea of charisma and the concept of being a 'born leader'. In reality, we lead with the consent of others, and thus leadership is as much about 'followership' as anything else - the capacity of creating the conditions whereby others are enabled to 'follow' in the realisation of an enabling culture. Ward's guiding principle in being a leader was always 'to find my own authentic way of holding this position' (p. 23).

The book might have, helpfully, made reference to emerging models of residential child care that have been strongly influenced by European pedagogical approaches (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2008), and also might have, fruitfully, acknowledged the profoundly changing populations in residential child care over the last 50 years, moving from the mainstream to the margin, marooned as an undesired residuum, but these are possibly unfair expectations, as this book, like any other, has to be reviewed against what it set out to do. Anyone working in residential child care, or in foyers, in group care settings with vulnerable young people or indeed in any community life space will benefit from the stories here, told with one eye to the realism of the present and the past, but with the other always firmly fixed towards the optimistic future. As Stevenson stated in her last work (2013, p. 70):

[t]he core issue is how are we to create social work organizations and practices that are compassionate in their encounters with those who are suffering in poverty and from other forms of social injustice and that ensure social workers

have the personal qualities, training, insight and support to be emotionally attuned to the lives of children and adults, and to their own needs as human beings and professionals.

Anyone striving towards Stevenson's laudable goal will be richly rewarded by the nuggets of wisdom contained in Adrian Ward's account of his accumulated practice years.

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