

Book review

Book review: *Boys' Stories of Their Time in a Residential School: 'The best years of our lives'*, by Mark Smith

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**Book review: *Boys' Stories of Their Time in a Residential School: 'The best years of our lives'*, by Mark Smith**

London: Routledge, 2023, 172 pp., ISBNs: 978-1-138-59870-6 (hbk); 978-1-032-33388-5 (pbk); 978-0-429-48616-6 (ebk)

I grew up in a small rural town in England and, overlooking the town, was a residential 'reform' school in an imposing building, which was infamously known as the 'naughty boys' school'. As I read Mark Smith's book about St Roch's, a Scottish residential school, the myths, assumptions, media focus and subsequent 'care' reviews all came to mind. Smith and the men he collaborated with challenged these and the knowledge I thought I had around residential children's care. Smith quotes the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), who makes the point that seeing things from one side only helps create 'one story'. This reinforces stereotypes, which not only become wrong but are incomplete. This book offers another perspective to help us gain a more complete understanding of the complex nature of residential childcare.

To help the reader really gain insight into what the care felt like in St Roch's, the contributions of the men, or as Smith refers to them, 'the boys', is invaluable. They talk with openness about their

experiences, memories and wider lives and this helps add another dimension to the exploration pursued within this book. Woven through each chapter the comments of 'the boys' help bring to life some of the salient points addressed throughout the book, adding depth to the discussion of emotive, contentious subjects (for example, around abuse in chapters 8 and 11) and the reality of issues such as moving on from residential care. Smith references the social pedagogical theory of Head, Heart and Hands (Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, 1746–1827) and this certainly adds to and strengthens the 'heart' and human part of the book, which is often missing in other portraits of life in residential children's homes.

Yet the main point of the book, as Smith reflects on in chapters 4 and 10, is what kinds of conditions are needed to provide care for children and young people who cannot live with their families. As Ricki, one of the contributors, says,

Aye, I loved it. It was like a family. I felt it was a bit more like a home. Get your slippers and your jammies [pyjamas] on. [The housemother] all the time being like your mum. I loved it, I really did. Loved it. I don't know, maybe because I was used to being with parents [who weren't there for me]. (p. 76)

Hearing 'the boys', like Ricki, talk about their lived experience and how this shaped their lives, we can see that meaningful belonging, love, solidarity, care and, above all, friendship are the key. As well as recounting the life space and everyday experiences of living alongside each other, Smith also explores the dominant narratives of therapeutic care, trauma and evidence-based practice. He develops the argument put forward by Harbo and Kemp (2020) that we cannot rely on a manualised approach to care. We need to be able to use theory as navigation points (Jensen, 2018) and be skilled at using the life space to help nurture children and young people as they grow.

Sadly, we are still in a position where residential children's homes are seen as the last resort. Smith sets out a valid argument as to how this has happened and why this is damaging to care-experienced children, young people and the staff who work in these settings. As Donny, another of 'the boys', points out, 'What we have got now is a situation where kids need one-to-one. All that does is prepare them for being one-to-one. Which parts of adult life are kids on one-to-one all the time? Apart from seclusion in the jail or hospital' (p. 119).

Smith's critical exploration of the impact of neoliberalism and managerialism on residential children's care, the idea that free markets and competition would see an increase in standards, is again very timely, especially as in England the current government has decided to pass legislation that removes the legal requirements for standards of care for children aged 16 years and over. As the campaign group Article 39 (2021) rightly argues, this now 'formally creates a two-tier care system, and it legitimates the absence of care for 16- and 17-year-olds in care.'

As I reached the end of the book, I resoundingly agreed with Smith that what matters most is not the setting in which children and young people are cared for. What matters is the environment that allows care and love to be there as the foundations, the ethical bedrock. How this environment is created and experienced in the life space shared by these children, young people and staff is important, as is how they feel this care in the everyday interactions in their 'home'. So maybe it's high time we stopped engaging in the 'top trumps' game of fixating on the best type and setting of care. Instead, we should recognise that we need a wider range of care that offers more choice for care-experienced children and young people that would best meet their needs. This can include foster care, kinship care, residential children's homes and group living homes, and yet what matters more is the loving environment that underpins each of these: environments that help our future care-experienced adults to settle and flourish and look back saying 'these were the best years of my life'.

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