Ways of resistance: Social control and young people in Australia

by Cheryl Simpson and Richard Hils (eds) Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1995. 208 pp. RRP $24.95

Ways of Resistance is an edited collection of essays about Australian young people in settings characterised by some form of social control. The contributors are principally academic, practitioner and policy researchers with an interest in various aspects of juvenile justice systems and the events leading to involvement with young people. One clear aim of the book is 'to provide a vehicle for the voice of disadvantaged youth to be heard' (p.7). The editors explain also that the use of the term 'resistance' is not infused with overtones of political defiance, but is concerned with how young people in social control settings, 'get by', 'get through', 'cope', 'adjust', 'adapt', or 'survive'. Broadly, it is concerned with the sense of psychological survival and the means employed by the young people involved to manage the 'vagaries of power and authority in control systems' (p.15).

In an introductory chapter, Sharyn Roach-Anleu provides a view of the juvenile justice system, legislation and law enforcement, using examples from South Australia and other Australian jurisdictions as well as some from overseas. She covers the usual discussion of the 'welfare' and 'justice' models, but points to the blurring of the boundaries and the complexities of the relationships between agencies and young people themselves. A more cogent issue, she points out, is 'the location of discretion in the system'. Shifting it from welfare departments to the police may simply 'relocate and replicate disparities in the treatment of young people' Empirical research on the experiences of young people is needed to identify the discrepancy between the intentions of reforms and their outcomes (p.45)

Seven Chapters follow which take the reader into social control settings where the liberal use of verbatim observations from young people introduce a challenge. Each draws on a substantial piece of research or program evaluation. In turn they are: the substantial work by Geoff Asher on life in a custodial institution for young men; Cheryl Simpson's study of triad counselling groups in an institution for young women; Nanette Davis, Suzanne Hatty and Stuart Burke drawing on work about street life and refuges with homeless young women in Sydney; Chris Cuneen's study of Aboriginal juveniles and police violence, conducted for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission National Inquiry into Racist Violence; Brian Simpson's PhD work on children's rights and school discipline; and some material drawn from evaluation studies on crime prevention camps described by Darren Palmer and Reece Walters; and wilderness programs described by Toni Craig, Richard Hil and Robyn Keast

Throughout, images are conveyed of power, pressure and influence being exerted in many forms, by a variety of others including those in authority, ranging from overt violence to subtle and not so subtle psychological pressures These agents include police, correctional authorities families, peers, other victims, teachers, leaders and helpers, and anyone imposing differential treatment on the basis of gender. The picture which emerges, often expressed in the words of the young people themselves, reveals pressure to conform in ways which produce a mixed bag of outcomes. Sometimes it amounts to brutal oppression or exclusion; sometimes it ensnares young people in dependency on elements of the correctional system, engendering helplessness in daily life, but not always. After all, the aim of intervention is often to prevent and solve problems and to help. The important theme pursued in this book though, is the independence of the perceptions and self concept of young people as they strive to survive with their individuality intact - a factor expressed as resilience and resistance.

Garry Coventry contributes a concluding chapter, on 'Social order and the New Correctional Industry'. He sounds warnings about the increasing reach and dispersal of the correctional industry, net widening and the tendency to cache responses in terms of individual pathology while neglecting the structural basis for the problem. The situation of these young people is often the product of societal breakdown and institutional failure. They are frequently victims of injustice, an injustice compounded by discretionary practices which tend to victimise, if not brutalise, young people (p.197). In turn, this can lead to public perceptions of young people as an 'assailant class' An analysis is provided of prevailing social control interventions. Looking to a better future entails the need to address concerns around employment, education and community involvement and to challenge intervention practices with evaluation. This will include listening to the voices of young people sentenced or recruited into this industry. Agents of social control should demonstrate defensible goals and an impact which constructively prevents, controls or brings about long term change in unacceptable behaviours without extending the dependency, victimisation and powerlessness which already characterises their lives (p.200).

Overall, this book provides a challenging perspective for workers in the system, and many insights useful for policy makers and the community at large. It does the additional service of bringing to public view some important pieces of local research.

Reviewed by Lloyd Owen
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