

from different parts of its detail. There is also useful guidance for administrators, policy makers and politicians.

The author's concluding remarks are worth savouring:

In a time when decisions about children's welfare are highly contested both in public and private arenas, and when everyone seems to have a view on what is in children's interests, it is even more important that children's own voices are included effectively in those debates. When the patterns of children's everyday lives are changing dramatically, it is important to understand how those patterns are determined and what part children have to play in the process. At a time when politicians are proposing to introduce curfews for children – in other words are suggesting that it might be an offence for a child simply to be in a 'public' place at the wrong time – the question of what

is a child's place, in the world and in the family, is one that deserves our attention. If we are to understand these things better, we need theories and research that are based on respect for what children themselves might have to say (p. 201).

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Children in secure accommodation: A gendered exploration of locked institutional care for children in trouble

Teresa O'Neill

Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 2001

At first glance one might conclude that this book is not relevant for most Australian readers as the style of secure units still operating in Britain has been phased out in all of the Australian States and Territories. Victoria still operates two small secure welfare units where young people can be accommodated for up to 21 days with strict gate-keeping. In fact, these facilities have had, in one case, major refurbishment and in the other, purpose built replacement. The other jurisdictions appear to rely on the channelling of young people with severe conduct problems or self-harming behaviour into the juvenile justice system as offenders, into the mental health system as voluntary or involuntary patients, and sometimes into drug treatment facilities. Frequently these young people move through many home-based or residential placements, can spend much time missing, and when it proves too difficult to maintain them in accommodation and education, they may be left to their own devices as orders expire or are actively discharged. A little time spent in close proximity to the field is sufficient to convey the angst many workers have concerning acting out and self-harming young people and their progress into more coercive and costly adult systems.

A second glance at this book reveals that the research undertaken by Teresa O'Neill canvasses many issues related to the care and supervision of troubled and troublesome young people. These are issues which are high on the agenda of all Australian jurisdictions, though to date it would appear that practice is not as well informed by research as it could be. A number of States and Territories have commissioned work on challenging behaviour, high risk adolescents and

clients with complex needs. The product of this work is often not easy to access in the public domain. The late Robin Clark undertook significant work in a number of jurisdictions (Clark, 2000; Spall, 2002) which pointed to the depth and diversity of issues and the high level of commitment needed to succeed. The impression remains that not a lot of the knowledge gained is yet embedded into practice, and programs are still very susceptible to cost constraints, coordination problems and shortfalls in expertise. Some important viewpoints remain contested and the need remains for ongoing research and evaluation.

The research on which this book is based was carried out in 1996/7 on a sample of six local authority secure units selected to represent metropolitan and non-metropolitan, single and mixed gender, older and newer facilities in different English geographical regions. In these respects, they represent the 31 secure units in England and Wales which accommodate almost 500 young people. O'Neill sees the study coming within an interpretive research paradigm complemented by feminist theories and a children's rights perspective. Rich data was collected from 29 young people and perspectives were also obtained from local authority social workers involved with these young people and from secure unit managers and staff.

The book is divided into five parts. The first explores the research and practice literature. It canvasses the historical and legal context for the secure accommodation of children in trouble in the care and criminal justice systems and proceeds with analysis of policy and professional practice

concerns. It is suggested that ironically in Britain in the early nineties, just as interest in children's rights was stimulated by the UN Convention, a coercive backlash against children in trouble was also mounting with 're-politicisation and prioritisation of youth crime and the systematic demonisation of all children in trouble' in media reports and in the political arena. An upshot has been increased focus on control, punishment and retribution (p. 9). Within the broad contextual discussion, O'Neill highlights the evidence and concerns raised when one applies the lens of gender to research, policy and practice. The second part takes the reader to the study itself, introducing the children and revealing the complexity of their lives and the compelling diversity of their needs and difficulties. It is concluded that the degree of psychosocial adversity warrants much more than the provision of a non-therapeutic custodial environment. The third part examines the professional context providing the perspectives of secure unit managers and staff and the social workers. Among the various, often divergent viewpoints, issues related to the mixing of offenders and non-offenders and the mixing of genders are brought to the surface and explored, revealing many elements of their complex and controversial nature.

The viewpoints of the children make up the first two chapters of part four, firstly giving details of their lives before placement in secure accommodation, then the experience of living in secure accommodation. Liberally supported by quotes from the young people, the impact on the reader is powerful.

I ran away with the fair ... I got beat up and raped ... after that I ran away for longer and I got put with foster parents but I ran away ... then I got put in a children's home but I absconded so I got moved to another place ... I was running away a lot there ... I was working all the time at prostitution (p.192).

On the first night I couldn't get used to being locked in the room ... if you need the toilet at night you have to ring your buzzer ... The next day I was given a uniform and a pair of shoes that I had to wear ... being in a secure unit hits you really hard as you can't do anything without permission or anything for yourself ... a lot of people say it's not a punishment to put you in here but it feels like it (p. 211).

The boys get more advantages than us. Because there's more boys than girls, they get to go down the gym whenever they want but we have to wait till they're not in there or there's only a few of them in there or there's enough staff around to take us down there (p. 225).

The exploration of their world continues with a chapter on therapeutic intervention and specialist services, and another covering subjective evaluations of the immediate outcomes of the experience and longer term, to the extent that it could be gleaned with only a small fortuitous follow up of some of the young people. One is left with the feeling that this is all

very challenging territory which demands a level of sophistication in response which often falls short.

In the final part of the book, O'Neill provides a useful summary of the territory traversed by her research and points to some policy and planning implications. She points to a trend in Britain toward more locking up of children and significant restructuring of the 'secure estate'. Her research points though to the need to think carefully about the needs and career relativity and differential routes through the system of a number of subsets of the population. Overall there appears to be a need for much more sensitivity and specificity in responses to troubled and troublesome youth, within comprehensive needs-related systems providing care and control. This, I think, will resonate with many struggling with services for similar young people in Australia. The insights in this study will be welcomed by care system and juvenile justice practitioners, policy makers and program designers.

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