

## Reviews

### **Change and Continuity in Children's Services**, Parker, R.

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Historical perspectives are largely absent in current thinking about children's services. Ministers and policy makers work to a short-term political cycle, and longer-term analysis of social problems and their solutions is very unusual. More generally, the link between research and policy can be tenuous. Some observers have claimed that we have entered a period of 'post-truth politics'; and the former Secretary of State for Education during the 'Brexit' campaign advised voters not to listen to the experts but to trust their own instincts.

Children's services are not the worst example of these trends compared with, for example, policy making in education, or poverty and welfare. There has been more cross-party consensus on services for children whose welfare and safety are endangered. However, an appreciation of the history of children's services in policy making does not exist, and there is a general lack of context to discussions of child and family problems and possible solutions. It is often claimed that the lead department, the Department for Education and its predecessors, has no institutional memory. There is frequent movement of civil servants; and research previously commissioned on a topic, for example, is underused, or policy makers can be unaware of its existence. Instead, new solutions are required, rather than a considered understanding of how the current position was arrived at and a detailed analysis of the reasons.

Roy Parker is a notable exception to, and critic of all this; and has been a leading figure in child welfare in the UK over his 50-year career. I was very fortunate to first encounter him when as Professor of Social Policy at the University of Bristol he was my PhD supervisor. I have always admired Roy for the great breadth of his interests and expertise; his recognition of the importance of statistical evidence on services and children's experiences; and his eloquent and accessible writing style. He has always been very generous with his time and ideas. Many who met Roy as students or colleagues will have tried to emulate these characteristics, to the benefit of future generations.

These qualities are reflected in Roy's latest book, which is a commentary on a large span of children's services, mainly over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but going back further. It includes a series of historical essays on children's services in the UK – particularly England, but with reference to other countries. Some are intentionally reprinted as written, from the 1980s/90s onwards, while others are updated. The chapters include: the end of the Poor Law and the development of foster care; landmark legislation, including the 'Children's Charter' in 1908, the Children Acts 1948 and 1989; children's services since the 1980s; the role and functions of inquiries; and more research-based reflections, including the subject of 'outcomes', and the nature and use of evidence. A scholarly analysis of these topics may sound rather dry, but the book is a fascinating insight into how particular policies developed and why: that is, how child care legislation and policy are linked with political economy.

The second chapter, Residential Child Care: An Historical Perspective, provides a useful insight into how we arrived at the current position. It explains how children's residential care expanded alongside a proliferation of other institutions in Victorian England. Building land was cheap and there were developments in construction. Institutions were seen as the remedy for a wide variety of social ills. Very importantly for what followed, workhouses were set up as 'oppressive and frugal' institutions, with harsh regimes designed to deter use and to control the children of the poor, who were now more visible in cities following industrialisation, and with the absence of compulsory education. These stigmatising features cast a long shadow over children's, and other welfare, services.

Religious revivalism grew and children could be subjected to spiritual and moral upbringing in a single location. Children's charities emerged, fuelled by sectarian rivalry. There was reluctance

to restore children to their families, and a popular solution was unaccompanied child emigration to Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Institutions for children depended on the loyalty of a large, low cost, female workforce and following the casualties of the First World War, residential employment solved the employment and housing problems of large numbers of women.

Roy Parker reminds us that over barely 40 years, the number of children living in residential homes dropped from some 38,000 to only 8,000. This is a remarkable social change, envied by many other countries, but with repercussions for complementary services, particularly fostering. The other main conclusion here is that children's residential services are currently attempting to fulfil a very different function from what was originally intended, and in very different circumstances: their *meaning* has fundamentally changed. It is no wonder that reconciling these changes is a challenge.

The chapter on Reflections on the Assessment of Outcomes in Child Care (written in 1997) usefully reminds us of some of the fundamentals of outcome measurement. Performance monitoring is routine nowadays in children's services, and inspections and league tables rely heavily on various assessments of outcomes. The chapter discusses the important issues involved in the timing and stability of outcome measurement and its relationship to the services(s) provided; important distinctions between individual and aggregate outcomes are identified, as well as the different dimensions and comprehensiveness of outcome measurement. He also urges caution in the use of outcome measures and illustrates the hazards of explanation and prediction. The Assessment and Action tools that were developed from the work of Parker and others became over-prescriptive and contributed to the bureaucratisation of social work from which Eileen Munro and others have since been trying to extricate us. Rather more became expected from the excellent conceptual framework than was originally intended by Roy Parker and his colleagues.

The chapter (from 1998), on Evidence, Judgement, Values and Engagement, discusses the perennially important issue of the relationship between research, policy and practice and its relationship to 'political will'. It considers confidence in, and the reliability of, research evidence; and how to assess the quality of a study and the effects of our own predilections. There is also the important issue of the relationship between research findings and professional judgement, influenced by individual values. Roy Parker also highlights the importance of 'engagement', that is relationships between researchers, policy makers and practitioners. He was one of the first people to be expressing these ideas in this field. Much more than this is contained in Roy Parker's impressive and eloquently written book. It spans centuries of British and Commonwealth history. It shows detailed understanding of history, the law, politics, social policy, social work and other disciplines. It cites research into child emigration, children of the Holocaust, the history of the British Empire, child emigration during the Second World War, Poor Law institutions, the formation of children's charities, and detailed archive reports, that must stem from months if not years spent in libraries at home and overseas.

Inevitably, not all potential topics are covered here. Future commentaries on children's services in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are likely to give greater prominence to institutional abuse and child sexual abuse. Ofsted, inspection and performance management grew in significance. Politicisation of policy making was developing, replacing voluntary sector and sectarian influence a century earlier. I was also more interested in the sections that looked back rather than those aiming (more briefly) to look forward.

Overall this is a book that should be read by every serious researcher, policy maker, manager and senior practitioner in children's services. Roy Parker convincingly demonstrates that in trying to develop the best services for disadvantaged and endangered children, we must approach the future with a proper understanding of the past.

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