

Book Reviews

Understanding School Refusal: A Handbook for Professionals in Education, Health and Social Care

Thambirajah, M.S., Grandison, K.J. & De-Hayes, L.

London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007, pp.160, ISBN: 978 1 84310 567 1, £17.99 (pbk.)

Successive governments have launched a series of initiatives, costing millions of pounds, to improve levels of school attendance. Yet non-school attendance remains a widespread concern. Any book which can help promote a wider understanding and get beyond the media stereotypes of disaffected truants and their supposedly feckless parents and enable a greater understanding of the complex world of non-school attendance is to be welcomed. This volume examines in detail one particular category of non-attendance, namely school refusal. As the authors note, the issue of school refusal, or school phobia as it was once referred to, remains concealed somewhere in the statistics of school non-attenders.

The authors rightly stress that school refusal should be differentiated from truancy and requires a totally different response. School refusal essentially consists of two main components, each with varying degrees of severity – an emotional component consisting of emotional distress at the time of, or prospect, of attending school, and a behavioural component manifesting as non-school attendance. The point is well made that, if undiagnosed and untreated, school refusal can lead to social isolation, increasing anxiety, depression and severe social disability. The factors which may occasion or contribute to this school refusal – whether these are school, child or family factors – are explored in detail.

The nature of the anxiety experienced by school refusers – the physical or emotional

changes and the behavioural changes it can trigger – is explored. A school refusing child becomes anxious at the prospect of going to school so avoids going to school. He/she typically becomes trapped in an avoidance-reinforcement cycle that over time becomes self-perpetuating.

In terms of assessment and treatment the authors advocate a sensitive, integrated, non-pathologising, early intervention that focuses on those child, family and school factors which contribute to the onset and maintenance of the school refusal. The main principle in managing school refusal is seen to be the exposure of the child to the feared situation in gradual and emotionally tolerable ‘doses’ until he/she learns to overcome the anxiety and return to full attendance at school. The authors recognise that, in severe or persistent cases, more specialist treatment may be necessary.

Parents retain the prime responsibility for ensuring that their children attend school and professionals are offered a range of approaches to use when working with the parents of school refusers – some of which, such as getting the father involved as much as possible, can be all too easily overlooked.

Schools have a crucial role to play in addressing school refusal and the book shows that, for a child at risk of school refusal, a combination of risk and protective factors at school interact with individual child and family characteristics to increase or decrease the likelihood of that child becoming a school refuser. Schools are advised to analyse carefully these risk and protective factors and to respond accordingly.

Whilst early intervention is crucial in addressing school refusal, for some extreme cases an early return to school is unlikely to be an option. In such circumstances home

tuition or time in a pupil referral unit may be appropriate. The book, however, rightly emphasises that careful thought should precede any decision to opt for home tuition – in some instances home tuition may actually compound the difficulties.

The book concludes by emphasising the importance of multi-agency strategic planning. Readers are reminded that this planning must not be divorced from ‘the realities of practice’ but should, instead, be conceptualised as a two-way communication between practice and strategy.

This book, written in a clear, concise and jargon-free style, offers a number of illustrative case studies as well as practical examples of assessment forms and handouts for parents. It should prove useful to teachers, education welfare officers, school health advisers and others who work with children who are reluctant to attend school. School attendance and persistent absence are high on the government’s agenda. Within this big picture of non-school attendance, school refusers have been a largely hidden and under-recognised small group. This volume should help ensure that they become less so.

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Using Evidence: How Research can Inform Public Services

Nutley, S.M., Walter, I., & Davies, H.T.O.
Bristol: Policy Press, 2007, pp.376,
ISBN: 978 86134 664 3, £21.99 (pbk.)

Even in a 320 page book, the task of condensing the relevant literature on the evidence-into-practice dynamic in public services is a considerable one. The problem is not so much the volume of material as the complexity of the topic and, therefore, the challenge of establishing a developing

narrative which is simultaneously both readable and structurally coherent. Given the nature of the topic, the authors rightly focus on readability and the result is a lucid, informative and accessible addition to the research utilisation literature.

The premise of the book is that a better understanding of how evidence is utilised will lead to enhanced use which in turn promises benefits to democratic discourse, policy and service organisation, and quality in the public sector. Although narrow technocratic prescriptions for research utilisation have been repeatedly critiqued, the evidence-based bandwagon has experienced something of a resurgence in the last ten years. This leads to a curious situation in which much emphasis is put on a ‘what works’ approach to policy and practice despite little tangible support that ‘what works’ actually works. Perhaps inevitably, we now seem to have passed through the phase of great optimism and are gradually recognising the limits of ‘evidence’ as a solution to problems of public sector policy and practice. Early on in the text, the authors recognise this retreat as implicit in the increasing use of more modest phrases such as ‘evidence informed’ policy and practice in place of the previously pervasive and more evangelical ‘evidence-based’.

The book gives some thought to different types of knowledge – and, in so doing, problematises established hierarchies of evidence. However, more time is spent deconstructing the notion of *use*. Although this will be familiar ground for some, there is something to be said for once more bringing together all the ways in which commentators have tried to capture the complex relationship between evidence and knowledge on the one hand and policy and practice on the other. Instrumental (or direct) research use is found to be less common than conceptual influence (i.e. in the form of changed perceptions and increased understanding) and use is

identified as being invariably subtle, complex and necessarily unpredictable. Having established the inherent diversity of research use, the authors set about distilling lessons regarding the factors influencing its extent. Unsurprisingly, they find some support for the view that the nature of research outputs and presentational styles, combined with perceptions of researchers' credibility, have some part to play in predisposing decision-makers and practitioners to usage. More tellingly, however, they assert the primary importance of a receptive organisational and systemic context, thereby exposing a key flaw in much of the empirical research in this area which focuses on individual behaviour and preferences.

The book draws on a multitude of theories, frameworks and debates from policy and practice disciplines and uses the areas of health, criminal justice and education as case studies throughout. Again, it is remarkable how debates taking place as far back as the 1950s and '60s can have such undiminished relevance to the contemporary public sector landscape. The authors argue that a linear, rational model of the research-into-practice process is unattainable. However, there is less engagement with the trickier question of whether such a model is desirable. Insights from post-modern commentators are presented (and here I felt more acknowledgement could have been made of earlier feminist schools of thought) which suggest that all knowledge is contested and provisional, and that knowledge cannot be divorced from its social context. However, overall, the authors perhaps wisely refrain from a full exposition of debates around the politics of knowledge and information.

In terms of moving things forward, the authors advocate methods of knowledge exchange which incorporate active interaction, social influence and facilitation rather than passive dissemination and transfer. A key contribution (derived from

tangentially relevant disciplines such as Knowledge Management and Diffusion of Innovation) is that the organisation, rather than the individual, should be the primary unit of analysis and development. Chapter Nine is particularly useful and concludes that strategies for increasing research use that are based on a more sophisticated understanding of how knowledge is constructed and shared will have a better chance of success. Predictably, and in my view correctly, the last chapter's review of methods for assessing research impact argues that no one model can capture all that is of interest.

Overall, the book convincingly argues that research use is complex and contingent and that evidence is more likely to be *adapted* than *adopted* by decision-makers and practitioners. The authors conclude that interactive and social models provide the most insight, and are likely to lead to more effective strategies for improvement. Despite the addition of some practical tips, and areas for suggested research, the primary function of this text, in my view, is to reiterate to those involved in conducting public services research the importance of considering its impact at all stages of design and execution. It is no longer sufficient for studies to be robust to academic peer review and those involved in generating policy or practice-related evidence and information need to be outward-looking if their endeavours are to be worthwhile. Contributions such as this text suggest that, albeit with some gaps, research-use is actually fairly well understood. The challenge now is for the learning presented here to become embedded in research institutions and practices.

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Learning Disability Today: A Handbook for Everyone Committed to Improving the Lives of People with Learning Disabilities

Carnaby, S. (ed.)

Brighton: Pavilion Publishing, 2007, pp.236, ISBN: 978-1-84196-224-5, £19.95, (pbk.)

This is the second edition of a textbook on best practice in the learning disability field which was first published in 2002. The earlier edition was explicitly aimed at direct care staff working towards Learning Disability Award Framework certificates and National Vocational Qualifications. The new edition avoids any reference to these awards. I am not sure whether this is because of the uncertainty concerning the future qualifications framework for learning disability or because a wider readership is being sought. If the latter then I suspect the publishers may be disappointed; health, education and social work professionals may well prefer one of the several profession-specific texts now available.

As a manual for care workers with limited experience of people with learning disabilities, however, I think this book probably works very well. It has twenty chapters covering most key issues in this field and includes two new chapters on autistic spectrum disorders and working with parents with learning disabilities. I would particularly recommend Peter Baker's chapter on challenging behaviour, which addresses the stereotype of the 'attention-seeking' client still widespread in learning disability services. Similarly commendable is Stephen Carnaby's chapter on profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD), which emphasises the importance of meaningful inclusion for individuals with PMLD.

Bullet points, case studies and checklists are used very effectively to communicate recommendations for practice. The further references given at the end of the chapters

are both appropriate and likely to be helpful. Sadly, most of the interesting photographs of the long-stay hospitals and art produced by people with learning disabilities which featured in the first edition have been left out here.

There are a couple of glaring omissions in terms of content. The first is a chapter on working with the family carers of people with learning disabilities. The majority of adults with learning disabilities still live with relatives (Emerson *et al.*, 2005) and those who are living in supported accommodation may retain close family links. Tensions between relatives and care providers are not uncommon and it would have been good to have had a chapter which offered suggestions as to how these can be overcome or managed, perhaps including an introduction to systemic approaches.

The second omission is a discussion of the social model of disability, which has significantly influenced the strategic direction of policy in the learning disability field. This is particularly curious given that the book includes discussion of other critical perspectives, such as gender theory, in the chapter on anti-oppressive practice.

Some readers may feel that the lack of reference to 'self-directed support' and the 'personalisation' strategy also constitutes an omission. Given that the Government only confirmed its commitment to these policies at the end of 2007 (HM Government, 2007), it would be unfair to criticise the book for this. It does include chapters on direct payments and person-centred planning, both of which have now been pulled under the umbrella of 'personalisation'. However, the rapid pace of development in policy affecting this field means that textbooks such as this one can seem dated almost as soon as they are published. A further revision will undoubtedly be needed in order to produce a version of the book which can equip the new breed of 'personal assistants' to work with people with

learning disabilities who are also their employers.

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HM Government (2007) *Putting People First*, London: The Stationery Office.

Health and Social Care: Establishing a Joint Future

Petch, A.

Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press Ltd, 2008, pp.96, ISBN: 978-1-903765-73-9, £13.50 (pbk.)

As long ago as 1959, Eileen Youngusband, a social work pioneer, commented that, whilst each profession has its unique function, it is imperative that they co-operate and work together, as no individual discipline can meet the complex range of human needs (Youngusband, 1959). In this contemporary volume, the author demonstrates how partnership working has become even more imperative and dominant in recent policy debates both nationally and locally.

This text is one of a series, '*Policy and Practice in Health and Social Care*', that focuses on reform agendas from a Scottish perspective. However, like other books in the series, it is inclusive of the wider UK context, as this enables the discussion of contrasting policy and practice trajectories north and south of the border. Furthermore, the discussion throughout the book is strongly research- and evidence-based. It

reflects and incorporates the author's recent research activity; for example, a research study that investigated which outcomes of partnership working were considered by service users to have a positive impact (p.14). Whilst not exclusively so, the content of the book is largely inclined towards community care and adult services; that being said, many of the issues of partnership working that are debated within this text are applicable and relevant, no matter who the recipients of collaborative services are.

It is perhaps deceptive and unfortunate that this paperback book is small and slim, as its size in no way reflects the depth of content and analysis contained within. The book has six chapters, the first of which offers a broad introduction, exploring definitional complexities and considering the evidence-base for partnership working. The second chapter sets out the UK national policy context of joint working agendas, starting with its historical development and concluding with details of more recent policy initiatives. At the end of the second chapter, the author argues that, despite the wealth of policy directives and the expressed wishes of service users, effective implementation has yet to be realised. The Scottish agenda is then more specifically developed in the subsequent three chapters within the context of the Scottish Executive *Joint Futures* agenda which, at its core, has recommendations to improve joint working (Scottish Executive, 2000). These chapters include detailed exploration of relevant legislation and recent policy priorities, with specific aspects of integration, such as single shared assessment and Local Partnership Agreements, being examined in greater depth.

Finally, Chapter Six might be considered as 'knowledge-informed speculation', as the author admits to a deficiency of systematic evaluation being available to inform her reflections on the most recent developments in this Scottish initiative. Petch concludes

this final chapter by pondering on whether the debates about partnership working will form a “constant organisational backcloth” whilst other initiatives are prioritized and given more attention (p.83).

In my view, this book, whilst compact, is comprehensive and develops considerable scope and depth of analysis. The firm research basis of the material, throughout, makes this book valuable and relevant for educators, students and those interested in policy across health and social care.

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References

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Care, Community and Citizenship: Research and Practice in a Changing Policy Context

Balloch, S. & Hill, M. (eds.)
Bristol: Policy Press, 2007, pp.299,
ISBN: 978-1-86134-870-8, £24.99 (pbk.)

This is a timely publication which captures the contradictions, difficulties and possible synergies of care, community and (social) citizenship in conceptual and real world terms. As such, it is a valuable resource for a wide range of practitioners as well as for researchers – and should be for policy makers too.

Balloch and Hill’s brief introduction sets out the multi-authored book’s aims and provides an outline of its four sections (and is well complemented by their fuller conclusion). The two aims stated are: “to question current approaches to ‘community

care’ in which the meaning of community is ill-defined and the concept of care is taken for granted” and “to identify effective strategies and practices, and the thinking that lies behind these, through which individuals may be supported to live normally and safely within communities regardless of income and wealth, age, impairment, gender or ethnicity” (p.1). These aims imply a critique of current discourses of citizenship and the difficulties notions like ‘active citizenship’ connected to an imagery/imaginary of community can pose in relation to the care and well-being of vulnerable groups, individuals, families and for society as a whole.

Having a particular interest in the intersection of citizenship with community as a discursive strategy and the impacts on individuals’ biographies¹, I would have liked to have seen the exploration of these issues voiced as a third aim for the text. It would also provide a means of highlighting the paradox of ‘community’ suggested here: as a simultaneously ill-defined concept and as the identified location for services supporting individuals. This is not so much a criticism of the text but more a plea for an extension of its concerns to incorporate a consideration of a *unified* concept of citizenship – civil, political and social – and thereby provide a more robust challenge to the behavioural prescriptions of citizenship for individuals and ‘communities’ signalled in contemporary political discourses. From an activist’s perspective, it would also address the unhelpful dislocation of social rights from equally significant civil and political rights (a further and related consideration here is that, in an era of rapid migration, the rights and inclusion of ‘non-citizens’ in relation to care and community needs is an increasingly relevant issue).

As for the four sections, Part One addresses care, community and citizenship in the delivery of welfare; Part Two, ethics, care and community; Part Three, bridging the gaps, a practice-based approach; and, Part

Four, comparative perspectives. This structure is useful; it permits readers to focus on chapters or sections of particular interest, but also encourages a fruitful, wider exploration of the issues reading across the sections.

In the foundation-laying Part One, the editors' chapters, along with a chapter by Petch, develop issues raised in the brief introduction, embedding these in broader conceptual considerations, UK policy, and policy and practice in Scotland.

Part Two focuses on a careful examination of ethics, values and dilemmas in caring and community roles. It begins with Barnes' chapter which, through the lens of an ethic of care, highlights policy 'blind spots'. These are created as the interdependencies and value of care remain largely unrecognised in the glare of a contemporary political emphasis on a contractual active citizenship, and exacerbated by the separation of policy areas to either a (public) civic sphere or a (private) care sphere. Chapters in this section highlight the interplay of real world values, ethics and dilemmas informing and problematising practice (policy implementation) where the concept of an ethic of care as opposed to active citizenship is a much more illuminating tool.

Part Three, the largest section, raises and applies many of the insights of Parts One and Two with an examination of practice in a range of areas. These chapters are informative and thought-provoking and different readers will, no doubt, feel more attuned to some chapters than to others. The striking feature of the seven chapters is the challenge to the everyday experience of practice posed by a context of apparently misaligned policies and funding priorities which are tied to normative concepts of community, care and citizenship (as well as of choice and efficiency). Consequently, the capacity to address extant processes of inequality, appropriately respond to

individuals' perceptions of their experiences, and understand the dynamics of relationships in personal, caring and community scenarios - not to mention within organisations - is weakened.

Part Four provides a comparative perspective on some of the pertinent issues raised in relation to older people in Sweden and Japan and civic engagement in Germany. These underline the universality of dilemmas in care and for 'communities' in the context of policy change in a shifting world.

It is impossible to do justice to this book in an 800 word review. Why I think you should read it rests in the final words of the book's editors:

All citizens – to greater or lesser degrees – need care at times. A good society is one in which it is regarded as normal and natural that we both give and receive care in a social, economic and political structure that supports this activity. (p.285)

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Footnote

¹ Bearing in mind that, "citizenship is not an eternal essence but a cultural artefact. It is what people make of it. Like language, it depends on, and changes with usage. Changes in political regimes and agendas usually entail changes in the uses and meanings of citizenship." (van Gunsteren, 1998, p.11)

References

van Gunsteren, H.R. (1998) *A Theory of Citizenship: Organising Plurality in Contemporary Democracies*, Boulder CO: Westview Press.

Morals, Rights and Practice in the Human Services: Effective and Fair Decision-Making in Health, Social Care and Criminal Justice

Connolly, M. & Ward, T.

London: Jessica Kingsley, 2008, pp.200, ISBN: 978-1-84310-486-5, £19.99 (pbk.)

The two New Zealand-based authors of this book set out to provide an ethical framework for practice that is grounded in the idea of human rights. Chapters One to Three provide a foundation for the rest of the book. They introduce the idea of rights, address the various familiar objections that are commonly raised to a rights-based discourse (What about duties? Aren't rights a Western, Eurocentric construct?) and set out arguments for choosing rights, as opposed to moral principles, as a foundation for decision-making. Chapters Four to Eight aim to demonstrate the application of the authors' rights-based approach to various contexts: rights across the life course, the rights of offenders, disability rights, children's rights and service user rights in the child welfare field. Chapters Nine to Ten are about integrating a rights-based approach into practice. They are followed by some brief 'concluding thoughts'.

There is much to like about this book. It is written in a user-friendly and unpretentious way. The authors clearly care about their subject matter and their gallant attempt to give rights an essentialist foundation also seemed to me rather appealing, at a time when various forms of relativism and constructionism sometimes seem to undermine any attempt to find a stable basis for thinking about values. Rights, the authors argue, are about universal human needs, "needs, which if not met are likely to result in lives of desperation and misery" (p.16).

However, the book does have its flaws. For one thing there are some eccentricities in its construction. Why does a chapter entitled

'Values, Rights and the State' deal mainly with religious faith? Why does nearly two thirds of the final chapter, which is called 'Embedding Rights-Based Ideas', deal with the rather specific question of the needs and rights of indigenous people in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This is an important area, of course, but the rest of the book does not lead up to it.

More fundamentally, while the book does make some good points about the utility of a rights-based discourse (to do with entitlements) as against a morality-based discourse (to do with how we ought to behave), the argument is often stretched. Accounts of allegedly rights-based approaches often seemed to me to be little different to prescriptions for good practice that could equally well be derived from other sources. Case examples of situations where there are competing interests and principles at play (such as the issues of sexual and reproductive rights in the case of a 16-year-old with a moderate intellectual disability, discussed on page 108) seemed to me to be addressed with the usual (and probably inevitable) admixture of 'fudge' and without the special sharpness and clarity that the authors seem to claim for a rights-based approach being very much in evidence.

The book's attempt to by-pass cultural relativism by linking rights to basic human needs also runs into difficulties, even though its heart is in the right place. If human rights really do "spell out the basic conditions of a life of minimal dignity, a life that is recognizably human" (p.46), then how come one may travel to a country where people do not have the right of free speech, or the right to choose a marriage partner, or religious freedom, and still see people living a life that is recognizably very human indeed?

I was somewhat disappointed too that the right to privacy and confidentiality was not given more prominence, given the massive

erosion of privacy that is taking place in society generally and in human services in particular. The paternalistic surveillance culture implicit in the UK's *Every Child Matters* agenda is mentioned, for instance, but not really acknowledged as something that impinges on what is widely seen as one of the most basic of rights.

'Rights' are not, I think, quite the panacea for difficult decision-making that the authors claim because rights, like principles, collide with one another. But I learned something by engaging with their arguments and I am sure other readers will as well.

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