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Leadership in Residential Child Care: A Relationship-based Approach

Adrian Ward

Smokehouse Press, Norwich, 2014

184pp., £18.00 (hbk), ISBN 9780957633537

For well over two decades, Adrian Ward has given us models for understanding the complex, often chaotic, world of residential child care practice that are simultaneously highly theoretical and deeply practical. In this, his parting gift to the field, Ward has offered up a synthesis of the best of what leadership, psychodynamic and systems theories have to offer in an accessible and engaging book. His overall aim is to identify the difficulties associated with the leadership task, examine what people seek from leaders and provide guidance on how leaders might address these challenges and expectations. What sets this book apart is its explicit relationship-based approach to leadership, which he defines as emphasising the quality of human interactions at both a practical and emotional level. Recognisable examples from practice, including accounts of his own struggles as an emerging leader, are incorporated throughout in order to make tangible what might otherwise remain distant or abstract to some readers.

Ward also brings his wealth of insight and experience to establish the particular complexities of the residential child care context and why they are important:

We cannot think usefully about the leadership of these places without remaining firmly aware of the nature of their task... the challenging reality is that these particular children bring with them all of the distress arising from their disrupted lives, bringing these feelings not only into the very fabric of the building but also into the whole system of human

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interaction in the place...without a proper understanding of the full complexity of the leadership task, some of the knowledge about safety and child protection will never be fully implemented (pp. 10 & 13).

This well-developed argument offers a much needed counterweight to the current trend towards context-free management, one of the many deficiencies of the managerialist turn.

Ward then goes on to explore the leadership task from a variety of perspectives, including: leadership as a transitional process; the nature and functions of leadership; its varying roles; interpersonal and team dynamics; unconscious elements in the experiences of leadership; themes of power, prejudice and dependency; the struggle to remain human; and wider contextual features that support or undermine the leader in carrying out her role. Within all that, he tackles bullying, loneliness, professional isolation, sexuality, confidence, boundaries, role clarity, personality clashes, collusion and the need to be needed – all those potential flashpoints in what is often a minefield for leaders in residential child care.

So much of the book is impressive that the challenge here is to select only a few highlights, but three will suffice. First is the theme of parallel process, which pervades almost all of the chapters.

Perhaps the best example is his description of the everyday, unplanned moments of useful communication and how these moments actually constitute effective leadership; Ward coins this 'opportunity-led leadership', cuing the parallel with his model for direct practice, 'opportunity-led work'. This is such a useful reminder in the current climate of slick techniques and target setting.

For it is through attending to the parallels between leadership and direct practice that leaders will cultivate the kinds of cultures which promote the flourishing of its members.

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Second, Ward locates the role of the leader on the boundary between the inside and outside of the unit, house or home, explicating the complex array of activities and pitfalls in managing this boundary. The particular pitfall of using one's position to defend against anxieties wrought by either the inward- or outward-facing demands of the role are extremely well illuminated. The collusive head of home or the absent unit manager will be recognisable to anyone who has worked in the field, yet they are approached with compassion and some optimism for redress. This combination of clarity and compassion increases the possibilities for honest self-reflection in readers.

Third: coming from a Scottish context in which psychodynamic perspectives are not always welcomed or understood, I found the chapter on unconscious dynamics to be perfectly pitched. Ward acknowledges readers' potential reticence, but gently and persuasively argues for psychodynamic and systems perspectives in helping to 'make sense of some of the more puzzling and problematic aspects of leadership and organisational life in general' (p.102). He then goes on to discuss key related concepts, usefully grounding them in practice examples and providing clear guidance on how they might inform leadership practice.

This book is intended for those in senior roles in residential child care – team leaders, depute managers, heads of care, external managers, and even those tasked with inspection and oversight – and will be an invaluable resource for newly appointed and experienced leaders alike. While it provides an accessible introduction to leadership, psychodynamic and systems theories as applied to residential child care, this is not to say that the book holds little value for those well-versed in these ways of thinking. On the contrary, it is highly instructive in its ability to convey complex ideas straightforwardly and with a minimum of jargon. Moreover, the warmth and personal presence that Ward brings to the writing may well be a source of comfort to readers struggling with the significant

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demands of the leadership task. I wholeheartedly recommend this book; I only wish it had been available back when I was in still in direct practice.

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