

Reviews

Postscript.

Poems by the Creative Writing Group at The Felix Post Unit

London, Survivors Press, 2008, 56pp

ISBN 9781874595205

My Memory

Your discussion was always about

Insight

What I wanted to talk about

Was what I had created.

Flowers from the flower shop

And the feeling of rain.

Alice Haycock

This poem possibly sums up the circumstances under which this anthology of poetry by members of an older adult day hospital group has been produced, in celebration of its work as a last blast before the doors of the unit are closed and professional practice moves on to different vagues in health care. Sometimes the things that are really valuable get lost in the monolithic processes that determine service structures. It seems strange, given the current focus on activities which promote wellbeing and client centred practice, that groups like these are deprived of the opportunity to continue meeting. You can see, from reading these sharp, funny and often moving pieces, that something fine is going to be lost. Just read them aloud and try and capture for a moment these voices in your own. These writers have wrested their poems through a maze of struggles with memory, speech and language, and what bursts out is:

Me
John Beezer
John Beezer
John Beezer
This is my name
My name written up there
My name.
What shall I do with it?
When I leave I am going
To Jamaica
I was born over there
Born over there.
My father is dead mother
Too.
Not bury me today
Not bury me.

John Beezer

... poems straight to the point. The nurses responsible for running the group describe their aims on the back cover: 'the act of writing poetry gave our members an eloquent, and powerful means of expressing themselves, and also a sense of release and peace.' Some of the results are enviable lines by any standards, inspirational and feisty work, hard and starkly real like Joan Dando's *Eels*: 'Slit 'em open and /Out with the backbone/Just how mum taught me.' These poems, in touch with everyday things, like Mabel Lowing's account of working in *The Bookie*, or Hubert Clarke's wistful memory of holding hands, give you the urge to get writing yourself. To share writing, you need a group to write and listen with, and this is an anthology by and for groups. If the doors have closed for the Creative Writing Group at The Felix Post Unit, its members have opened the book for those who will read and use this collection.

Nick Pollard
Senior Lecturer in Occupational Therapy
Sheffield Hallam University

Understanding Advocacy for Children and Young People

Jane Boylan and Jane Dalrymple

Buckingham: Open University Press, 2009, 160pp

ISBN 9780335223725 (hbk) £65.00 / 9780335223732 (pbk) £23.99

Locating advocacy in the context of the lives of children and young people is a complex task, not least because of a number of interconnected but often conflicting issues. There is little doubt that the mechanisms for formalising, respecting and promoting young people's rights have developed significantly over the past two decades. The mechanisms for enhancing participation are one such example, with the introduction of a number of initiatives across welfare, criminal justice and education designed to strengthen young people's voices and influence with decision making processes. Yet, this period has also been marked by what Kelly (2003) terms an 'institutionalised mistrust' of young people related to adult anxieties, the dominance of the risk paradigm in social welfare and emphasis on identifying and managing various 'new' problem behaviours (Wood, 2010). In the period of these rather contradictory policy priorities and perceptions of young people, understanding advocacy and its contribution to the protection of children and the enhancement of their rights is crucial. In this context, practitioners who work with children and young people will often define themselves as advocates and yet, the concept has been under-explored in recent texts. For these reasons, a dedicated book for students and practitioners is most welcome indeed.

Boylan and Dalrymple open their book by charting the development of advocacy for children and young people, focusing on a number of different domains. In exploring a number of different professional groups, advocacy emerges as a key occupational obligation or skill. Historically, the idea of advocacy was traditionally wedded to the notion of ensuring the 'best interests' of a child or young person (first enshrined in the Children Act 1948). This had led to an inherent tension between children's welfare and children's rights where decisions were (and are) taken without the involvement of young people in the processes. The authors argue that any ambiguity about the role of the advocate can be dismissed since such a role should 'ensure that the views and perspectives of the young person are expressed – which in turn enables those responsible for making decisions...to

be as fully informed as possible' (p8). Other misunderstandings and contradictions of advocacy exist. In education, where participation and children's right education have developed strongly, the advocacy role has been less prominent. This is perhaps unsurprising given the literature base that challenges whether undemocratic institutions such as schools can meaningfully nurture democratic education. Significant policy, such as the example of *Every Child Matters* offered in the book, has also misunderstood advocacy by conflating the role of 'advocate' with that of an 'independent visitor' who offers a long term befriending role for young people. In another policy example cited by the authors, the establishment of Children's Commissioners in the UK arguably provided an important national voice for children and young people. Yet, this area of development was also notable for its inconsistency in terms of the powers afforded to each commissioner. England's initial reluctance to establish the post, and the subsequent creation of a 'watered-down' version compared to many counterparts, was telling and at a time when the office of the Children's Commissioner is classed as 'under review', this chapter is a helpful chronology of why such a role, if truly independent, can be critical.

The book therefore establishes, clearly locates and is consistent in the argument that advocacy is aligned with three important and connected themes: rights, power and participation. The chapter that explores the development of children's rights is a useful review for becoming familiar with the guiding frameworks that have challenged notions of protectionist discourses around services for children and young people. Key to this is recognising the moral principle of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the legislative provisions in the Human Rights Act (1998). The critical perspectives we associate with the book's authors really begin to emerge in the chapter on participation, voice and resistance. Here, the authors set out that young people 'having a say' is not enough and readers need to be aware of the contested notions of participation and voice. The authors explore common models and definitions of participation and provide a critical review of the dominant consumerist models that characterised citizenship in the 1980s and 1990s. The logic of choice and consumer power in public services is challenged not least in terms of the relative power base of children and young people. The alternative, 'democratic approach' is rooted in service-user movements and aligns more with

the struggle for collective rights in the liberal model of citizenship (see Wood and Hine, 2009). In practice, democratic approaches are signified by a determination to increase the 'voice' of young people though there are two contentious issues raised by the authors. For one, 'giving' voice seems patronising and itself may reinforce the power imbalance between adults and children. Thus, the authors cite hooks' idea of 'coming to voice' as a preferable model: opening up knowledge and information so that young people themselves can engage in the discourses required to influence change (in line with many community development and youth work principles). The other issue permeates all critical debates around participation. It is all very well increasing mechanisms for young people's voices but the real question is to what extent voices are *heard* and *acted upon*. Voice is connected to power, and if the structures and systems are unresponsive to young people's voices, the advocate has a duty to support 'resistance' by young people. The difficulty is that whilst the chapter is strong on setting out the principles of enhancing voice, like so many other texts, little attention is paid to how an advocate may challenge adults to 'hear in new ways' (p.73).

Perhaps the key message in this text is that which appears in the penultimate chapter. The authors argue that with the increasing professionalization of advocacy, there is a danger that practitioners may in fact find themselves not always acting on behalf of young people's agendas. This is certainly felt by practitioners across a range of children and young people's services subjected to greater professionalization. In their contribution to the debate, Boylan and Dalrymple argue that the principles of advocacy must be closely aligned to anti-oppressive practice so that critical practice can flourish. However, as the authors also acknowledge, taking a stand is not always possible and actions taken by independent advocates can lead to their further marginalisation. As with all similar calls, little can change whilst structural inequality and oppressive systems are maintained.

All in all, this is a thoughtful and comprehensive introduction to advocacy in work with children and young people. It contains important factual information about the development of advocacy, useful theoretical and policy frameworks and good attention to developing critical thinking in this area. The book is complemented by a range of useful case-studies that illustrate the tensions and dilemmas inherent in this work. As a contribution to the emerging literature around work

with young people, it is useful reading for students and practitioners in its associated disciplines.

References

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Jason Wood
Head of Research
Youth and Community Division
De Montfort University
