

Book review

**Taylor, W., Earle, R. & Hester, R. (eds) (2010) *Youth Justice Handbook: Theory, Policy and Practice*, Cullompton: Willan in association with the Open University Press
ISBN 13:978-1-84392-716-7 (pbk., £22-99)**

This book arises from a colloquium held in 2007 and organized by the Open University (UK). The purpose was to inform the curriculum for a new Foundation Degree in Youth Justice. In the process, the colloquium organizers have furnished themselves with a challenging book that, no doubt, will comprise a key text for their new degree. It is titled a Handbook but it is not a 'how-to' manual. Taylor describes it as a 'friendly companion' (p.xxi) and this is what the reader must expect. The coverage is extensive, with 23 substantive but relatively short chapters, and, very occasionally, the argument can be rather compressed for easy reading. However, I found this offset by the advantages of breadth and the exercise of tight editorial control.

The book is in five parts. The editors frame it with opening and closing chapters but, additionally, guide the reader with valuable introductions at the start of each part. There is some helpful cross-referencing between chapters. Production standards are good although there is an unfortunate misprint of 'astrological' for 'astronomical' in reference to the natural sciences (p.102). The five parts achieve coherence and progression as they move through theory, policy and practice, the authors taking well argued stances of 'critical interrogation' in their approach to their subjects but always offering positive alternatives to current shortcomings or unfounded assumptions. Part one covers the contexts of youth and childhood with an emphasis on class and structural issues, and critiques of normative developmental psychology. This provides the groundwork for the volume. Part two addresses research and knowledge, with Phoenix (p.73) arguing that government has 'structured a particular relationship between knowledge production (i.e. research) and professional practice such that youth justice research and practice now serve the demands of policy'. This has created a closed, instrumental and politically driven research-policy-practice nexus. Part three considers implementation of a selection of policy areas, namely parenting orders, restorative justice and the use of custody, concluding with an absorbing ethnographic study of ethnicity and sense of identities in Rochester Young Offenders Institution. Part four addresses reflective practice, including pivotal chapters on reflective / reflexive practice and desistance. The fragile process of desistance can be undone by 'deficit', offence-focused interventions that ignore past victimization and trauma: '[y]oung people can feel let down by adults who could have cared for them or helped them but did not' (Hine, p.174). The final part takes account of international conventions and values statements, how these can provide a framework for ethical practice and the degree to which the four nations in the UK are forging divergent paths in youth justice. Northern Ireland and Scotland have their own jurisdictions and, following devolution, Wales, whose jurisdiction is integrated with England, is finding its own voice. These relatively progressive developments outside England pose a significant challenge to the English way of doing things.

Indeed, after thirteen years during which youth justice in England and Wales has been firmly steered by New Labour building upon the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, challenges now abound. Some are evolutionary but others could mark a paradigm shift. These challenges are too recent to have been integrated into this volume and, retrospectively, the book may emerge as part valedictory on New Labour and part prescient of future changes. The first evolutionary change is the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act, 2008 with implementation, in effect, occurring during 2010. The Act rationalizes the preceding system by replacing a plethora of community sentences with one ‘flexible’ order – the Youth Rehabilitation Order – to which a range of requirements may be attached to reflect seriousness of the offence, assessed risk and criminogenic needs. Following this logic, a new ‘scaled approach’ has been introduced whereby the intensity of supervision for each convicted young person is set to reflect the assessment of risk and needs (Youth Justice Board, 2010). Case (pp.96-7) identifies the main concerns with the scaled approach but the full impact will only be known following implementation of the new Act.

The second change is that, following the 2010 General Election, the UK has a new coalition Conservative – Liberal Democrat government. Its clearest statement of intent to date is a consultative Green Paper for England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2010), which has a chapter on youth justice. This appears evolutionary in that the 2008 Act and the structures of sentencing and local youth offending teams remain broadly untouched. But there are proposed changes, including abolishing the national Youth Justice Board (YJB), altering funding mechanisms and ‘payment by results’ to incentivize reduced use of custody, giving more prominence to parenting orders and restorative justice, and increasing discretion at practitioner level. The wider policy context is one of deep cuts across public expenditure.

The third change may promise a paradigm shift. It is captured most vividly in a recent chapter by Porporino, one of the programme developers of Reasoning and Rehabilitation, which he states (2010, p.64) is ‘generally acknowledged as the progenitor of the cognitive behavioural paradigm’. In this chapter Porporino addresses the growing body of work on desistance. He describes (2010, pp.62-3) this approach as a ‘counter-movement [that] is now also in full swing’ to the largely cognitive behavioural, risk-based orthodoxy of evidence-based What Works, which has so dominated UK criminal justice policy. Indeed, he is ‘a bit apologetic’ regarding What Works and the chapter is presented as that of a ‘constructively critical friend’ of it. He mounts, in effect, a fairly comprehensive critique of the evidence base of What Works and the ill considered manner of its implementation: indeed, this hegemonic implementation should not disguise the valuable role of cognitive behavioural programmes for some clients when offered at the right time and in the right context. Echoing earlier critiques (for example, Elliott, 2001; Mair, 2004; Pawson and Tilley, 1997), he concludes (pp.80-1; italics in original):

Perhaps we may be more successful, offenders and our communities may be better served, if we get past our programme fetishism, casework managerialism, and our compliance-on-demand syndromes when working with offenders. The desistance paradigm suggests that we might be better off if we allowed offenders to *guide us* instead, listened to what they think might best fit their individual struggles out of crime, rather than continue to insist that our solutions are their salvation --- Perhaps corrections need not be reinvented, only reoriented towards sense and sensitivity that seriously allows and supports skilled staff to become truly skilled helpers.

The particular persuasiveness of this critique and the case for relationship practice that it entails lies in its authorship, holding the promise that, rather than lurching from one extreme to another, a balance of approach may be achieved in the future.

How well will the book under review weather such changes? The critically reflective stance adopted – with emphasis upon a critical approach to research, the importance of structural and contextual issues in young people’s lives, the processes of desistance, trusting relationship and young people’s own agency, and the need for reflective practitioners operating with a degree of discretion – will serve as a useful guide, especially if there is a gradual paradigm shift. Regrettably, staff social work supervision is omitted from the book; this merited a chapter of its own or discussion in the chapter on reflective practice by Taylor. But is paradigm shift likely? The prospects of change are most promising in Scotland, with its ‘social education paradigm’ (chapter by Whyte, p.224); Wales, with its entitlement based assertion that ‘young people should be treated as children first and offenders second’ (chapter by Haines, p.238; see also Brayford and Holtom, 2010); and Northern Ireland, which, also drawing upon international rights conventions, places restorative justice mainstream for nearly all offences on the principles of inclusivity, balance between the needs of all participants, non-coercion and a problem-solving approach (chapter by Doherty, pp.244-5).

What then of England? As Haines notes (p.235), rights and entitlement remain conditional in England; for those who commit offences or are anti-social, rights will be replaced by exclusionary ‘interventionist measures of containment or control’. This book demonstrates, as does reading, for example, the YJB’s *Case Management Guidance* (2010) that the system is imbued with an individualized, risk-based approach. With respect to the Green Paper (MoJ, 2010, pp.67-76), there appear contradictory pulls. The recent decline in sentenced custody numbers satisfies the government that no change is required apart from a ‘small number’ of ‘payment by results’ pilots focused on the cycle of custody and reoffending, whereas a robust stance is taken towards reducing the high level of remands in custody. Parenting orders will be encouraged ‘[w]here parents refuse to face up to their responsibilities’ – the dismal shortcomings of this approach, albeit ameliorated by the skills of practitioners, are identified in the chapter by Holt – while, in contrast, restorative justice is promoted ‘drawing on the experience of youth conferencing in Northern Ireland’. As a final example, greater professional discretion and local partnerships with mainstream children’s services sit alongside, at the centre, the decision to transfer the YJB’s functions into the Ministry of Justice – and decidedly not the Department for Education (which includes children’s services).

The future of England, therefore, feels finely balanced. The history of What Works demonstrates that academic discourse matters if there is a ‘fit’ with political discourse and, with persuasive argument, change can be achieved. Goldson’s chapter sets the grounds for a ‘principled youth justice’ (pp.65-8) that could be a blueprint for policy. However, the recent strident media and political exchanges around the Green Paper suggest that England remains mired in an escalating ‘strategy of punitive segregation’ (Garland, 2001, p.145). Yet, as Goldson notes, the public are ‘significantly less recriminatory and punitive than is often supposed’ and ‘senior politicians have a responsibility to inform public opinion’, sometimes to lead and not just to react. We can cross three internal UK borders to observe nearby progressive developments: the challenge facing England’s politicians is clear.

References:

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