Childhood, Well-Being and a Therapeutic Ethos, edited by Richard House and Del Loewenthal (Karnac Books, 2009), pp. 254

Reviewed by Neill Thew

This edited collection of essays takes as its starting point a deep concern about the well-being of children in our society. For an academic book, it has very public, and politically engaged, origins. Two of the book's contributors were instigators of the two Open Letters to the national press (in 2006 & 7), signed by hundreds of professionals and academics, which expressed a concern at:

> … the escalating incidence of childhood depression and children's behavioural and developmental conditions. We believe this is largely due to a lack of understanding, on the part of both politicians and the general public, of the realities and subtleties of child development. (*Daily Telegraph*, 12.9.06)

This intervention sparked wide-ranging public debate about the prevalence of 'toxic childhood' in the UK (the term is Sue Palmer's – and she reflects on it in Chapter 3). The Research Centre for Therapeutic Education, at Roehampton University (where both House and Loewenthal are based), organised a day-long seminar where many of the letters' signatories met. This was followed by a further conference on *Play and Playfulness*. It seems likely that all of this discussion had a positive influence on the development of the UK Government's Children's Plan of 2007.

So, after all this activity, this collection – which features the work of many contributors both to the letters and conferences – offers a welcome opportunity to pause, draw breath, and survey the current scene.

One of the first things to note – and this is a strength of the collection – is that there is by no means agreement either on the extent of contemporary childhood 'toxicity', or on its probable causes. Sue Palmer, drawing on her work with primary school teachers, identifies an endemic, game-changing problem of the nature of 'twenty-first century life … seriously damaging children's physical and mental health' (p.37). Ricky Emanuel, in a rather different vein, wonders 'whether it is true that

children's childhoods are in fact more toxic than they have ever been before', and adds, 'It may be helpful in this context if I choose to define 'toxic' in relation to the notion of what supports development, and what impedes or perverts it' (p.91).

Throughout the collection, a range of explanations for the crisis in childhood is put forward. Some are notably better evidenced and more convincingly argued than others. The weakest simply presuppose their own conclusions by drawing unconvincing comparisons with an imagined past in which childhood was simply better (for an author to claim that they are neither romanticising the past nor childhood does not make this so). Others make somewhat unfocused claims against the damaging effects of 'technology'. The best have serious, and thought provoking, things to say about the nature of personal and group alienation in our late Capitalist society where market relations increasingly replace human or affective ones; and where an increasingly instrumental education system is driven by a frankly tyrannous audit culture, bent on measuring things that may be quantifiable, but may not be of genuine value in promoting children's growth and well-being.

Another area for debate is over the role of a 'therapeutic' ethos in education. This is, of course, by no means unproblematic. In a powerfully argued contribution, Kathryn Ecclestone warns that simplistic narratives focusing on the supposed emotional vulnerability and dysfunctionality of all (young) people in our society risk promoting not only a damaging kind of individualistic narcissism, but also a remarkably diminished sense of the possibility and agency of the human subject. I therefore warmed considerably to Del Loewenthal's case for a version of 'therapeutic education', which, far from focusing on narratives of damaged victimhood, offers a positive and progressive vision of education in which 'therapeutic education can be seen to be about awakening thought rather than instilling knowledge' (p.23). As an aside, his chapter also offers a fascinating introduction to Plato's understanding of the vital importance of 'therapeia' in society.

So, in all, I was thoroughly engaged by this collection as an exploration of some of the 'toxic' currents swirling around contemporary childhood in the UK. I was mindful, too – prompted by Rowan Williams in his characteristically thoughtful introduction – that to think about childhood is also to think about adulthood and, particularly, the role education plays in society.

What I was most interested to see in the collection was the beginning of highly promising work towards finding a way forward beyond the mere recognition of a problem and towards a newly enabling and developmental vision of education and learning. Here again it was Loewenthal and House's own work I found most helpful, along with an excellent chapter by Christopher Clouder, in which he drew on a

report from UNESCO's *Commission on Education for the 21st Century*, which calls for a new perspective on education constructed on the four pillars of Learning to Know; Learning to Do; Learning to Live Together; and Learning to Be.

Here, it seems to me, is a practical foundation from which we can all make progress. Many of us reading this review will be involved in education, training or development in one form or another. To remain mindful of the importance of all four of these pillars (side-stepping, if needs be, the impoverishing focus in many educational systems on just the first) is to act in order to 're-ensoul' education, childhood, and ourselves.

Inspiring Creative Supervision, by Caroline Schuck and Jane Wood (Jessica Kingsley, London, 2011), pp. 208

Reviewed by Charles Neal

This book proposes using a wide range of techniques and materials, involving reflection, imagination and the senses within contexts where those working with others seek inspiration and support from mentors, coaches, supervisors and trainers. It makes work great fun!

Through simple, clear discussion and guidelines, using research, theory and practical approaches, the authors provide masses of new ideas for ways of working experientially to free up consultations and encourage creativity and innovation to provide unusual insights.

Detailed examples and suggestions are given of all sorts of novel uses of story, dream, visualisation, drawing, mind maps, toys, colour, fabric, objets trouvé and more, as well as invaluable information on 'resources and props' and helpful references to follow.

The book is engaging, stimulating and jargon-free, well structured and referenced and is itself inspiring. It would prove an asset for practitioners in psychological, as well as physical and social health fields, teachers, coaches and all involved in encouraging those they support to consider new approaches and unusual angles on their work. I strongly recommend it.

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