



Introducing Professional Practice

A Culture of Blame: Lack of Trust and a negative image

Patrick

In the field of child protection, it's vitally important that we keep sight of what we're working towards, that we put the child's well-being at the centre of everything that we consider, that we're focusing our efforts entirely on producing good results for the child. It gets terribly complicated when half of our effort is taken up in protecting ourselves, in protecting our own interests. I sometimes feel that the child protection system might be better characterised at times as a system-protection-system. It sometimes seems that so much of the effort of those involved, is expended in protecting their own positions, and making sure they're not going to be open to criticism, rather than having the energy left over to concentrate on doing what's best for the child.

There's a feeling that our social workers, health visitors, and teachers, are being changed from being professionals, able to guide their own practise, and make judgements about what's in the best interests of the children they work with; being converted into technicians, who have to follow strict rules and guidance about how they do things. We don't have the feeling that we're able to allow them to exercise their own judgement, make their own decisions, rather we have to hold their hands and walk them through every step of what they're doing. And those of us who teach in this area, have noticed the change that we see in the students that we're producing. We find that people are much less willing to make judgements. They're very good at collecting data, but much less willing to interpret it than they have been. They don't trust themselves, and the reason they don't trust themselves is because, we as managers, have told them we don't trust them.

For the child protection system to recover, we really badly need to try to develop a culture of confidence. I'm not really talking here about a climate of smug self-satisfaction and complacency, but rather the idea that people working in the field of child protection might just be able to come into work every morning, feeling that generally they're doing a good job, and that they're respected by their fellow citizens for what they're trying to achieve. When I think about it, it seems almost unimaginable that we're going to be able to achieve that any time very soon. But it's not really such a strange notion. If we just look over the channel, at the way child welfare services are regarded in continental Europe, we find that the negative image that we've got of child protection in the United Kingdom just isn't reflected there.

On the continent, they have a much more positive attitude to the state in general. The state's seen as facilitating, enabling, the state helps people to achieve their full potential. In the United Kingdom, we're much more dubious about state intervention. Social workers in continental Europe are generally assumed to be working in the best interests of the families and children that they work hand-in-hand with. It's not the same in the United Kingdom, they're generally seen to be working in opposition to the families that they're engaged with, and the law does nothing to help this. If you think about our adversarial legal system in the United Kingdom, that's the system that automatically puts one side against another, and the judges are there to decide who's right. Are the social services right when they ask for a care order, are the family right in resisting that care order? They're in opposite camps right from the very beginning, right from the initiation of proceedings. The social workers are on one side; the families are on another side. It doesn't happen in continental Europe. In continental Europe there's an inquisitorial system, where the purpose of the judge is to find out the truth. They're not interested in just looking at evidence; they want to know what's going on in this case. Clearly, taking that adversarial element out of relationships is bound to affect the confidence and trust which parties feel in one another. Attempts have been made for a number of years, to introduce a less adversarial system into child protection proceedings in

this country, but they've never really got anywhere. People may be familiar with the idea of a family court, which would be modelled very much on the continental system. In fact we see this kind of system in operation in Scotland, because the Scottish have the same kind of tradition in their legal arrangements that we see on the continent, but it's never worked south of the border. That kind of co-operation has never been introduced, and it's difficult to work out why that might be.