

BRIEFING

BRIEFING

BRIEFING

BRIEFING

BRIEFING

BRIEFING

THE DEBATE ON CHILD ABUSE WITHIN

SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDRENS' HOMES:

THE ALIENATION OF THE CHILDCARE

WORKERS

David Basckin

Department of Psychology

University of Natal, Durban

Delegates at the recent (September 1985) biennial conference of the National Association of Childcare Workers (NACCW) met to discuss "The Dilemma of Risk". Brian Gannon, the Director of NACCW said this:

"The problems are overwhelming. In a period of three years we virtually lose our whole staff. I can't blame them. There is no training infrastructure for child care workers and they come to us full of idealism and a feeling for children. They very soon confront the reality of angry, untrusting kids and the hopelessness of trying to turn a dormitory of 14 children into a home experience ... the profession is totally under-developed in this country - other countries tend to take their youth more seriously - no research is being done (sic) and the State subsidies are inadequate. One of the main resolutions of this conference will be to call on the State for increased equal subsidies for children of all races." (*Daily News*, 21 September 1985.)

From this statement we learn that there are three main reasons for the continued existence of child abuse in South African institutions. The manifest reasons are *Apartheid* and inadequate training. The latent reason (Basckin, 1983) is the attempt to impose a nuclear family structure on an institutional setting which shares nothing with the nuclear family except adults (a few) caring for children (many) in a

building quite unlike an ordinary dwelling.

However there is another reason for the continuing failure of South African Childrens' Homes to maintain their staff. This is salary. Not all the training in the world is going to motivate a new childcare worker to remain in his or her job, with its stresses and low status.

What exactly are these stresses? Clearly, individuals respond differently to their situations, but some of the common experiences of stress amongst childcare workers are these:

1 the contradiction inherent to performing work that is of great importance, yet in the common mind (which includes many Management Committees) "low-grade", "unskilled" and "intellectually undemanding";

2 the pressures of night-duty, or more obviously, working to shifts that do not always conform to a comfortable

Bam-4:30pm;

3 the absence of a visible payoff for their work, since positive change may only appear later in a child's life;

4 the unpleasantness of living-in as is the case in some institutions. This prevents a sense of recreation on the

part of the childcare workers concerned and has occasional negative effects on their private and family lives; and

5 the possibility of the childcare worker becoming as institutionalized (eg Goffman, 1976) as the children, with senior staff (social workers, principals, Committee members) consciously or unconsciously exercising punitive and infantilizing control over them.

What then is the answer? Two solutions spring to mind.

Firstly, the myth that childcare is a "profession" must be dispelled. Childcare workers, like social workers, teachers and nurses gratefully accept the designation of "profession" since it does something to soothe their ego's sense of abuse. Somehow the word alone suggests that they loll together in the pantheon with the doctors, lawyers and university professors. A brief comparative analysis of their status, pay and working conditions must surely disabuse them of this comforting illusion.

The fact of the matter is that childcare workers are workers. Workers transform the world by their labour. Not only that, but they form active trade unions (not "professional associations") which democratically campaign for their members' working rights.

Secondly, pay. A glance around some of Durban's swishier Childrens' Homes reveal great attention having been paid to the material resources of the institution. Often these have been paid for by public subscription organized by the fund-raising energies of the Management Committee and other well-wishers. It is time for their fund-raising energies to be redirected towards Childcare Worker Salary Funds which will augment the inadequate subsidy from the State. The resulting sense of continuity in the relationships between childcare workers and the children, will modify the current belief that a bad family is better than a good Childrens' Home.

REFERENCES

The Daily News, 21 September 1985.

Basckin, David: *Multiparenting: a new model of socialization for children in care*. Occasional paper, Department of Psychology, University of Natal, Durban: 1983.

Goffman, Erving: *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Pelican, London: 1976.