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Lawrence, J

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BOOK REVIEW

PRACTICE JOURNAL: BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Williams, P. (2009) Social Work with People with Learning Difficulties. (2nd Ed)

Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd. 174p. Price:

ISBN 978 1 84445 215 6

As a researcher, practice teacher, and also as someone with a professional background (as a social worker) firmly rooted within the field of learning difficulties, I welcome this book, it gives an immediate feel about the positive value attached to social work with this group of people: a field of practice which has seen dramatic advances in recent years.

The book provides an up-to-date overview of the progress and successes of the White Paper, 'Valuing People', using case studies and activities to draw out the key points to enhance learning. The structure is also clear and helpful and allows the reader to either read from start to finish or to dip into particular sections as and when they want to. Written specifically to support students on the social work degree, it contains practical activities, summaries of contemporary research, suggestions for further reading and current government guidance and policy documents.

Paul Williams has 40 years' experience of working with people with learning difficulties, and his writing style is unambiguous which is strength of the book. His enthusiasm and commitment permeate his writing, ensuring that this group of people are seen and heard where there has been a depressing account of negative societal values towards them. The author has gone to great lengths to maintain the personal integrity of people willing to share their experiences and journeys, highlighting some of the complexities of working with those identified as having a 'learning difficulty'. For example, he illustrates the recorded words or writings (and some poetry) of people with learning difficulties themselves, who can communicate a wide range of interests, ideas, understanding and experience.

The book contains seven chapters, beginning with the basics in terms of definitions and perceptions of who people are. Williams argues that people with learning difficulties themselves (via self-advocacy groups) take up this issue in particular, as there is a strong dislike for the term 'disability' which means...

'you can't do things', 'difficulty' means you want to learn and be taught how to do things'

2009:2

The book has a natural flow which allows for understanding and reflection, leading onto the importance of values, giving illustrations from social policy and historical concepts.

Other chapters illustrate how social work skills and knowledge can be applied to support people and their families in a wide range of situations. Important areas of professional practice are also covered, such as issues and needs at different life stages and a variety of approaches to assessment of individuals, services and community resources. There is a very useful section about different kinds of risk, with an account of advocacy as a means of protection as well as empowerment. The final chapter covers various ways of supporting increased involvement of people with learning difficulties in service and policy development, and indeed, local community life.

The book as a whole is well researched, with the storytelling adding an excellent dimension. The individual stories make compelling reading for both students and professionals from a variety of disciplines. For example, the book is most useful for practitioners already working within the field of Learning Difficulties, which encourages us to re-visit the 'big picture' and acknowledge the positive progress and changing attitudes towards this group of people. It can also be used as an aid memoir for lecturers when involved in teaching social work to student social workers. It is a valuable book for someone new to this field of work, and for practitioners involved in both group work and direct work with individuals.

Paul Williams writes with understanding, experience and commitment about vulnerable adults. Most notably he also emphasises the possibility of long-term work and of strong and

lasting relationships that may be more available in this field than in other areas of social work.

Julie Alexandra Lawrence

j.lawrence@salford.ac.uk

University of Salford

School of Community, Health Sciences & Social Care

Allerton Building

Salford

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