

Chris Hanvey reviews the recently published book 'Quality Standards for Professional Alternative Child and Youth Care in Group Homes' by Verlag Ploechl FICE (Austria), in his article '[Zen and the Art of Quality in Residential Child Care](#)'.

Zen and the Art of Quality in Residential Child Care.

By Chris Hanvey

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A review of *Quality Standards for professional alternative child and youth care in group homes*. Verlag Ploechl FICE (Austria) Freistadt Austria ISBN 978-3-903093-59-1.

"Quality" is an elusive term. It's an aerosol word, liberally sprayed to increase the value of a product or suggest a kind of service which goes well beyond the normal. And yet, it is rarely defined. In the philosophical motorbike journey which the author Robert Pirsig undertook with his son, he wrestles continually with the meaning of quality- trying to lasso a cloud:

Quality.....you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is.

But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? (1)

And so Pirsig proceeds, trying to tease out "quality" in a morass of uncertainty and contradiction.

The authors of "*Quality Standards*" are similarly exercised. Here, they are preoccupied with what quality means in terms of group home care for children and young people and to draw up a series of quality standards which they hope will get them closer to this elusive concept.

The book is an initiative of the International Federation of Educative Committees (FICE), an organization which exists to create networks across continents worldwide to support improvement and change for all of those working with vulnerable children and young people. It is FICE Austria that has commissioned the book where nineteen organizations working in child and youth welfare work in the country came together. What quality care can and should mean is

explored in the context of quality care standards for all of those involved in the alternative care of children, young people, and their family systems.

The context is important here. In Austria, quality requirements are primarily aimed at the nine provinces, working in conjunction with organizations including the Child and Advocate Office (Vienna), SOS Children's Villages and the Austrian Ombudsman Board- all preoccupied with child and youth welfare. In 2019 Austria had 7,800 children and young people cared for in small group homes, under the 2013 Children and Youth Protection and Support Act. There were no longer any large facilities, in the form of children's homes, with an underlying expectation that families should be assisted in bringing up their children and for those not able to do so for whatever reason, there should be a system of group home care.

What FICE felt was missing was a system to give residential care providers a professional basis for orientation and decision making and which would help define what quality care looked like. As such the book is divided into five parts. There is a general introduction, setting the context in Austria, with Part 2 looking at the concept of quality in residential care settings. Part 3 examines the professional ethos and approaches which are of importance for all the quality standards and Part 4 examines, in detail, what these standards are. As such the book can be read from cover to cover or dipped into with a detailed examination of the standards themselves. Finally, the book concludes with a brief summary of the most important quality aspects in the process of accommodating and caring for children and young people in group homes.

The central part of the book is Part 4, looking in detail at the sixty six quality standards, guided both by the principle of the best interest of the child and by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. There is much in the book that is worth accommodating in any set of professional standards for children and youth carers in residential care. The starting point or guiding principle is firmly that of what is in the best interest of the child. So even a risk assessment should mean the involvement of the child.

For each group of quality standards there is an introduction, and the reader is provided with a conceptual framework, within which the standards are set. This is followed by a detailed definition of the standard, followed by the practical implementation. Sometimes the legal context is also explored, and the section ends with useful references.

Quality measures for work with children demand that staff have basic knowledge of trauma and attachment theory, the baseline health of the child is assessed, and adequate care guaranteed. The manual is clear, also, about the need for

staff to have regular and structured conversations with parents and that there are transparent structures in place for the running of the homes. The quality standards are equally clear about the need for appropriate schools, the return of children to their birth families, when appropriate and the need for collaborative relationships with all of the “system” partners, such as health, social care and education. These are but a few of the sixty-six quality standards which go to make up the book’s recommendations.

Two challenges face the reader of this book. The first is that some of the language is hard going and could be expressed more simply:

The development and safeguarding of pedagogical quality in residential child and youth welfare facilities cannot be viewed and implemented separately from the social and legal context nor the structure and “procedural logic” of the social sub-system responsible and the various support organizations.

Some of this is, I suspect, an issue of translation. Some of the text could be expressed more simply and while the whole emphasis in the book is on a pedagogical approach, the concept still has some unfamiliarity to a UK audience, less versed in the bringing together of education and social care in this way. The second challenge is a regret that the book did not draw on other attempts to define quality standards in countries beyond Austria. There are plenty of good examples to be drawn from practice in the UK, where other models have been explored. But overall Pirsig would have approved. Attempts to define quality in group homes are both vital and endless. Beginning with what is in the best interest of the child is a good starting point and it is probably the case that where quality is achieved it is recognized by staff and young people alike.

References.

1. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.*
Robert M Pirsig, 1974, Bodley Head, London.
2. Dr Chris Hanvey was CEO of the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health and now works as a free-lance consultant.