

Book Review

Children, families and care: Reflections on the first sixty years of FICE

Robert Shaw.

Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books, 2008. 244pp, ISBN: 978-1-85856-445-6

I had the great pleasure of attending the 60th anniversary congress of FICE (Fédération Internationale des Communautés Educatives), held in Helsinki in June 2008. I met conference-goers who had warm memories of the 2004 congress in Glasgow, and particularly the ceilidh in the Barony Hall. I have my own special memories of international guests, many in national dress, attempting dances like the Orkney Strip the Willow, to the wild music of incomparable ceilidh band, Last Tram tae Auchenshuggle.

Robert Shaw's history of a truly remarkable organisation was published to coincide with the Helsinki Congress. It is a significant achievement, given the varied interests of the member organisations and the massive task of reviewing a vast source of documents in three languages, ranging over a 60 year period. FICE was founded in Switzerland in the aftermath of the second world-war, by professionals engaged with the emotional and educational needs of children affected by the ravages of war and the continuing effects of reconstruction in Europe. Its origins were in the work of UNESCO and the children's villages' movement. FICE currently has national sections in 30 countries, principally in Europe. The concerns of the member countries are both overlapping and unique, but FICE exists to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences about extra-familial care.

Shaw's book is an unusual and intriguing collection of accounts of events in the life of FICE. These include details of the high and low points of a complex international organisation, representing some of the tensions within and between states which inevitably impact on the conditions of care for children. There are references to the politicians and professionals who have greatly influenced thinking and practice in the care and education of children from disadvantaged families. There are also reports of the biennial congresses, and brief accounts of selected events over the years.

What I found particularly interesting, and perhaps a little depressing, was how some of the issues which troubled delegates in the early days of FICE have hardly changed in the present time. For example, the General Assembly and study days held at Lyons in 1950 included discussions about the lack of physical resources, the difficulty of recruiting suitable staff, and the need for: 'a new type of teacher whose skills went beyond book learning to being able to inspire children and to work outside the school with the child's family and

community using holistic approaches to their education' (p.58). In his final chapter, Shaw considers the future of FICE, and among the points he makes is the suggestion of undertaking an analysis of some of the annual reports of member countries and making them available in searchable form on the internet. I hope that FICE acts on this suggestion since the organisation's web presence, unlike this history, is rather disappointing (see www.fice-europe.org).

Dr. Graham Connelly