
King Lear exhorts us to ‘reason not the need’, but need is central to our thinking about children. Appropriately then the first volume in what looks to be a significant series focuses on definitions and classifications of children in need. Future volumes are projected on the law and child development, children in state care, effective interventions, children’s services in the developing world, and on the concept of child development itself.

This volume, edited by Nick Axford of the Dartington Social Research Unit in the U.K., contains 24 essays, all previously published but very conveniently put together in one (expensive) volume. The series will be a must for any library where childhood studies, children’s rights, child care policy or research into children generally is the focus.

The emphasis is on classic essays – only four were published in this decade. The first section on the theory of need offers us Raymond Plant, Robert Goodin, Doyal and Gough, Soper, Culyer and Jonathan Bradshaw – no surprises here. But it is important to stress that there couldn’t be a better way of introducing undergraduate students to the theory of need than to study these six essays. The section on the needs of children takes us back to Maslow (1943) and includes Dora Black’s ‘What Do Children Need from Parents?’ and some Rutter and Gordon Jack. Perhaps something from Mia Kellmer-Pringle might have been anticipated, though her best writing is her well-known monograph, first published in 1975 (Kellmer-Pringle, 1975).

The section on assessment contains pieces which are less familiar (at least to me). There is no Sinclair: I would have thought her article in *Child Care in Practice* (Sinclair, 2000) might have been included. I am pleased to see here an article by Roy Parker (from *Children and Society*).

Part IV turns its attention to measuring the needs of child populations. Perhaps the most important question here is why children’s services agencies in developed countries struggle to identify children in need and tailor services to these needs. Of the attempts to answer this, Michael Preston-Shoot and Veronica Wigley come closest. At least they offer a range of answers. Most of the answers are obvious – heavy workloads, lack of inter-agency collaboration, lack of knowledge and experience – but they need to be set out and examined. It is better to do so now than await the next Victoria Climbié or ‘Baby P’.

The final section is headed ‘Towards Meeting Children’s Needs’. The gap between the assessment of need and the interventions provided is well-documented. Too often the responses are responses to moral panics (‘scandals’). There are four essays in this part. One, entirely new to me, describes the FAST Track (Families and Schools Together) programme. There are valuable essays also by Michael Little, and by Axford himself with Vashti Berry.
The essays selected in this volume illustrate the extensive use of 'need' in charting child well-being, and analysing such data to inform the planning of children’s services at both the individual and group levels.

The Introduction to this volume is a resourceful overview of the issues. It closes with three concluding comments. First, the concept of need is ‘robust enough’ to be useful to determine what children require to ensure healthy development. Secondly, it is possible to measure children’s needs, and there is considerable room for improvement to bring common practice up to the standard of the best. And, thirdly, there are ways of strengthening the link between high quality population needs assessments and rigorous service development.

Barely articulated in all this is the role of children’s rights. How important in meeting the provision needs and the protection goals of children at risk is entitlement? Would needs be better met if rights (in the UNCRC, for example) were actualised in the real world? Axford himself has recently turned his attention to children’s rights (Axford, 2008), and he alludes to this in his Introduction. He asks whether need offers the most suitable rubric for determining the allocation of resources and evaluating the impact of services: is it, he goes on, ‘necessarily congruent with efforts to promote children’s rights’?

This is an excellent volume, a resource for study and research, and a stimulus to thinking. But I can’t help remarking that like so much else, even by writers who would not so identify themselves, children emerge from much of this volume as objects of intervention, rather than subjects in their own right. Where is the child as agent, as creator of her own social world? This is neglected at our peril. I fear it is too readily glossed over in this volume.

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References