

The value of international studies

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In our island location, the word ‘international’ still adds a frisson to mundane matters. I once lived near a small airport that had one flight a week to a neighbouring country – enough to justify it proudly emblazoning the word ‘International’ on its welcoming banners.

This journal has no such titular pretensions but in recent years the number of articles from overseas has greatly increased. Among the 66 included in the 12 issues for 2016–2018, five described child welfare practice in specific countries (France, Egypt, South Africa, Finland and Nigeria); another 14 were written by overseas authors (in nine countries) and five more focused on intercountry adoption. There have also been reports on two international adoption research conferences (ICAR5 and ICAR6) in New Zealand and Quebec.

This is quite a cosmopolitan compendium but readers may well ask, does it add anything more than a bit of spice? How much do we actually learn?

I believe the answer is ‘yes’ for practical and intellectual reasons. With regard to practice, sensitivity to the diversity of children’s cultural heritage is now a necessary condition for fashioning child welfare services. The proportion of looked after children in England described as belonging to ethnic groups other than ‘white British’ is around 30% and in some areas, such as parts of London, it is as high as 75. The diversity of backgrounds is also growing: in England, 4% of those looked after are ‘white non-British’, 9% ‘mixed heritage’, 5% Asian, 7% Black and 3% ‘other’. But the categories also display significant internal differences; for example, of the 7% black children, 2% are of Caribbean origin and 4% from an African background.

At a more theoretical level, when readers seek to extract the relevance of overseas articles for their own practice, they face several challenges. There are, initially, linguistic difficulties in knowing whether we understand the same things by the same terms, whether for administration, services, user groups or interventions. The term ‘state’ to a European implies the central government, whereas to an American it is California. Likewise ‘foster care’ can mean all children in care in the US, not just those in foster homes.

Similar complications arise in comprehending service structures. For example, the lack of a schools psychological or probation service in some countries means that social workers serve a broad range of users. In the US there is no National Health Service and what is deemed as radical often involves the provision of basic health care normally available

elsewhere. Similarly, some countries have compulsory military service which provides a structured exit route for older care leavers.

Finally, in scrutinising cross-country evidence, care must be taken that 'like with like' cases are being compared. Looked after populations vary in the severity and complexity of their needs and the extent to which they include groups such as disabled children, young offenders and those separated under private arrangements.

Once we appreciate these difficulties, the advantages in adopting an international perspective are indisputable. First, it explains problems and their resolution in terms of wider social factors rather than local legislation or influential individuals. The challenges posed by the arrival of unaccompanied asylum seekers or demands for more secure accommodation in Britain are often seen as reflecting deficiencies in national legislation. But the same issues can be heard in cities around the world, suggesting that there are much wider structural forces at work.

International studies also offer new information and ideas as each country has good and bad experiences to report. The US leads the world on matters of race, gender and sexuality, the UK has pioneered alternatives to residential care, Sweden and Holland can tell us how to divert juveniles from custody, Denmark is sympathetic to single parents while Israel must be the most immigrated society in the world.

So, if we wish to get the best out of overseas articles, we need a comparative framework and I would suggest that this will have at least five components.

A framework for making international comparisons of services for disadvantaged children

First is the historical context of policy and practice. Services evolve, yet there are key moments when several options are possible. In the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the Civil War in the US produced considerable family disruption. Charities and orphanages flourished. However, in Europe, the turmoil caused by two world wars led central governments to assume fuller responsibilities, a pattern that continues today. Similarly, features of the British Poor Law, such as the separation between education and care, still haunt current provision – in sharp contrast to the social pedagogy framework that developed in many countries.

Second, are the social and economic contexts of services. Each society will have its own family and marriage patterns, age structure and gender roles, all of which affect the position of disadvantaged children and the care options deemed appropriate. Some societies may also be more socially and educationally mobile than others and economic forces can further push and pull certain trends. When thousands of poor British children were forcibly emigrated to Canada, the plot of land allocated to settlers was often just the size to require an extra helping hand.

Third, the cultural and ideological contexts of childhood reveal the value placed on young people in different societies and their life itineraries. They give meaning to age, as in the concept of the 'teenager' in western societies, and formalise rites of passage by laying down appropriate ages of marriage and leaving school.

Ideologies also shape social structures in that in some societies, the fundamental components of law, religion and education overlap within a common value system, whereas in other more pluralistic and fragmented ones, social cohesion is achieved by more economic dependencies. These arrangements have wide effects on matters like the relationship between

the state, family and individuals, the aspects of life over which control is exercised, the preferred explanations of problems and the types of solutions encouraged. They can also affect the role of research and definitions of what constitutes evidence. Some of mainland Europe takes a philosophic, logical approach to designing services that is noticeably bereft of background information. Britain, in contrast, has a long history of basing policy on empirical evidence and in the US the use of demonstration projects to publicise programmes reflects its enterprise culture.

A fourth aspect of any international comparison is the arrangement for service delivery. This can differ in the way it is funded, the extent to which it is legalistic in terms of clear codes and constitutional rights, comprises state, charity and private providers, grants professional autonomy and defines the responsibilities of social workers, especially the management of financial relief.

Lastly, we need to remind ourselves that while governments sign up to worthy intentions, services operate in local settings. Thus, there is always an issue of what the state can afford to be worried about. For instance, in desperate conditions, efforts to ensure children's physical survival may have to override concerns about developmental issues such as attachment and self-esteem. In more auspicious circumstances, we might reasonably ask what politicians should be concerned about, and in doing so consider the agendas offered in the United Nations' and European Union's attempts to set common standards across diverse economic and social contexts.

In urging all this caution, it is important not to be too deterministic for there are policy choices within the limitations described and lessons to be learned from policy and practice elsewhere. It is for these reasons that *Adoption & Fostering* welcomes international contributions in its efforts to disseminate authoritative innovation and thinking.

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Fostering unaccompanied asylum seeking young people: the views of foster carers on their training and support needs

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Abstract

The implementation of the National Transfer Scheme, whereby local authorities across the UK are encouraged to voluntarily receive unaccompanied young asylum seekers, has prompted a necessary focus on the training needs of those caring for this population. As agencies consider how to build their capacity to support unaccompanied young people, this study set out to learn from the experiences and views of foster carers, in order to inform the development of effective carer training and support. Eight semi-structured interviews were undertaken with foster carers who have cared for unaccompanied young people in one county in the South West of England. The findings draw attention not only to the potential benefits of training focused specifically on fostering unaccompanied young people, but also reveal aspects of the impact that limited access to training and support can have upon carers. The findings shed light on the carers' experiences of encountering 'unknown' factors and allow new insight into the networks they had developed over time to enhance their ability to access information and support as new challenges arise. Possible implications for local authorities and fostering agencies are considered.

Keywords

Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people, foster care, foster carer training, foster carer perspectives, foster carer expectations, foster carer support

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