



Book Review

Nell Musgrove and Deidre Michell
*The Slow Evolution of Foster Care in
Australia: Just Like a Family?*

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan
2018, 314 pp.

As the book title indicates, “The Slow Evolution of Foster Care in Australia” covers the history of foster care in Australia. The central goal of this book is to answer this question: has Australia’s foster care programme improved over time? The initial hypothesis appears to be that it has not. Throughout the book, the authors indicate many parallels between the complaints and controversies surrounding foster care close to its inception in the mid-1800s and in the past few decades.

The focus of the book is exploring the diversity of experiences of foster families across the six states of Australia. This approach has been chosen partly because Australia’s system has been, since its creation, managed by individual states instead of at a federal level. In so doing, the book does not provide a clear-cut answer, but instead provides insights into the experiences that those within the foster care system have had.

The book is divided into an Introduction followed by two parts. The Introduction emphasises that as much as data can help people understand aspects of foster care life, it can never explain the individual experiences of people in foster care: everyone’s experiences are different and unique. Part I, “Putting the ‘Care’ in Foster Care,” covers the history of foster care in Australia and explores the themes of public interest in foster

care, and how it has waxed around controversies and waned as these controversies fade from memory. This section also explores how foster care breaks or creates families and examines motivations for people to become foster parents.

Part II, “Shaping the Lives of the Invisible Children of the State,” looks at the philosophy and rhetoric which has shaped the views and policies of foster care in Australia over time. This part provides a historical review of foster care in the press in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a review of literature on foster care (particularly fiction, biographies, and documentaries), and an analysis of the transformation of foster care in recent decades from the 1980s-present to one focussed on kinship care: formal and informal placements of foster children with relatives. This part of the book ends with conclusions about what the history of foster care can teach us about the future of foster care.

While focussing on the personal experiences of parents involved in foster care, this layout provides a history which is easy to follow. There is a clear timeline showing the evolution of how foster care is provided and what it is intended for, from its beginnings as re-education schools to a seesaw battle between institutionalised living and “boarding out,” to the ascendance of kinship care. This presentation helps to contextualise the current state of affairs and to better establish expectations of what state foster care in modern Australia should be.

Throughout the timeline, parallels are drawn between controversies today

and controversies in the past – and worryingly, the futility of the state responses, as well. There is mention of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, started in 2013, which uncovered many instances of abuse (although the focus was on sexual abuse) and the inadequacy of government agencies to intervene or prevent it. The authors mainly see the inquiry's benefit as providing a platform for victims and developing empathy among the public. The most significant changes, based on their review of events, seems to be the work of activists creating websites, fundraisers, scholarships, petitions, and documentaries.

The positionality of the authors seems to be couched in a historical and philosophical framework, connecting the past and present whilst positing and exploring challenging questions to instigate deeper reflection. The authors include former foster children, an experience they admit to helping shape the course of the book. A major aspect of the content is the sharing of experiences by interviewees and the utilisation of diaries for historical accounts, upon which much of the exploration of themes are based. They augment this qualitative data with figures pertaining to the proportion of the child population in foster care and the proportion at institutions, in kinship care, and those staying with unrelated foster families. A limiting factor for the utilisation of quantitative data is the occasional lack of studies conducted. Because each state in Australia manages their own foster care system, the rigour with which each state collects data varies over time and across states. That said, the emphasis on utilising the personal experiences of people in

foster care seems the most appropriate for the aims of the book, particularly in developing empathy and to illustrate that no two foster care experiences are the same.

While gaining a more intimate understanding of foster life is worthwhile in and of itself, the educational implications for foster students is significant enough to be worthy of attention in the field of education history. Turn-over rates among placements remain high, meaning that children go through multiple homes before returning to their biological parents, being adopted, or permanently residing with a foster family. The trauma associated with events which send children to foster care, the experience of being in foster care, and the atrocities committed by foster parents and siblings, teachers, and social workers all contribute to having psychological and emotional needs met before learning is possible. By going through multiple placements, this frequently means changing schools, which disrupts the flow of learning. Even if a child can stay at the same school, having instability at home also contributes to difficulties with learning.

One interesting study noted in the book suggests that foster children who primarily stay in homes, whether they are with unfamiliar people or other family members, perform better academically than those raised in institutions; however, foster children staying with family members perform better than foster children living with unrelated foster parents. The stability provided by living with familiar people seems to be more impactful than, on average, staying with wealthier families. The impact of parental wealth on educational outcomes is already

widely studied and the academic consensus is that wealthier families typically produce more academically successful children. The study suggests that perhaps stability is a stronger predictor of attainment than wealth itself.

Because the argumentation is from an activist standpoint but infused with academic rigour, it is difficult to find fault with the argumentation or positionality of the authors. The critiques of the responses by government authorities to controversies pertaining to foster care enables readers to more effectively question the attention to detail put into the measures. On multiple occasions, the regulations implemented would not have prevented situations from transpiring which triggered the call to action in the first place.

It would have been nice, however, to have seen more proposed solutions to the problems raised within the book. References to inquiries in other countries were mentioned more in passing than connected to the inquiries in Australia; perhaps more analysis into other countries' inquiries would have allowed for more suggestions for reform within the text. It is, however, also valid to point out problems without substantial contributions to ideas for solutions. Anyone wishing to improve conditions within a foster care system would have a solid foundation for investigating the problems in their own geopolitical context based on the methodologies of this book.

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