Professionalization of the Residential Youth Care Worker—or a Possible Alternative in Israel

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ABSTRACT: The situation of residential youthworkers in Israel is described as the basis for an analysis of the implications for professional and nonprofessional conceptions of the role. It is argued that a nonprofessional model with extensive inservice training is most appropriate to the current situation in Israel.

The professionalization of residential child and youth care workers is a completed process in many FICE member countries; in some others the process is still ongoing and in a few countries, among them Israel, the process has not even begun.

In this article, I will try to explain why so many care givers in Israel are skeptical about the feasibility of the professionalization of residential youth care workers on the Western European and American model under Israeli conditions, in spite of the fact that approximately 15% of the country's youth population are educated and cared for in residential settings. I must emphasize that I wish to discuss here the professionalization problem of the residential youth care worker only. The residential child care workers are in effect not trained professionally in Israel either, but this is not a consequence of a deliberate policy approach, but rather a result of a series of lost opportunities. In the concluding part of this article I will discuss a possible alternative training model, which is mainly in-service, designed to advance the status and develop the career opportunities of the care worker, thereby halting high staff turnover, benefiting both the care worker and the residential education system as a whole.

At the core of the educational philosophy of residential settings in Israel is the emphasis and the focus on group and community education, fostering group goals, and group solidarity, through which the

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individual can gain acceptance, self-fulfillment, and a sense of self-worth and belonging.

The residential youth care worker, or group leader is called "madrich" in Israel. The madrich is a combination of group leader, care worker, tutor, custodian, counsellor, and instructor. He serves also as a role model for members of his group and sometimes (mainly in kibbutzim) even as an ideological mentor. Paradoxically, the madrich has no training for this complex role.

Staff turnover in this work is high, and the average time spent on the job is two years. Working conditions continue to be difficult and the salary relatively low, the same as in the past when the almost exclusive aim of residential education was pioneering and the work of the madrich was perceived as a mission. Understandably in this context, the personality of the madrich and his ideological commitment were the most important qualifications for fulfilling the task.

In spite of the radical changes that have occurred since—in the composition of the resident youth population, in the goals of residential education (which have become less specific and more general), and in the norms and value system of Israeli society as a whole—the basic job description of the madrich and the educational requirements of the position have not changed perceptibly.

Many of those involved in residential education—practitioners and theoreticians alike—fear that unless the madrich is given better working conditions, job advancement opportunities (to assure longer-term commitment than the current two-year average), higher status, and better professional preparation for his job, the future of residential education in Israel is endangered, in spite of its deeply rooted tradition and its considerable achievements, especially in the absorption process of new immigrant adolescents and in the resocialization of young people on the margins of society. Thus it cannot come as a surprise that more and more people seek as a solution to the problem the professionalization of residential care work and education, through a two-to-four-year training programme—as is the accepted practice in most FICE member countries.

Israel has a tremendous need for counselling manpower. More than twenty-thousand young residents live in youth groups of 25-42 members each, needing about 400 madrichs per year. (Approximately 20,000 additional adolescents are educated in religious residential institutions of a different structure. Their situation is not relevant to this article.) It is quite difficult to find suitable candidates willing to undergo lengthy preparatory training for residential child and youth care work, lacking as it is in prestige and having unattractive material benefits relative to the high demands of the job, including a very long daily schedule. There are many other professional careers open