

Book Review: Mediation in Focus - A Celebration of the Family Mediation Service in Ireland

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This month I want to share with you a little gem of a mediation book, published late last year by the Irish state-funded Family Mediation Service (FMS). I wanted to review this book for two reasons - first of all, because it is an excellent publication which, though written in the context of the 25th anniversary of the Irish service, will be of relevance to mediators, policy makers and service designers all over the world. Secondly, I was keen to review it because it is not available for sale, only for free on request from the service and is therefore not benefiting from the publicity and promotion that a publication of its calibre really should be having.

The book comes at an interesting time in the life of the FMS. 25 years old last year, it is currently undergoing a substantial transition in that it has recently been moved from auspices and administration of the Family Support Agency, a statutory body under the umbrella of the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs, to the Legal Aid Board and thus the Department of Justice. This shift in administration and potentially policy, has given rise to a number of interesting pilot projects aiming to increase integration of the courts and mediation, and has also provided an opportunity for reflection on the service and the theory and practice underlying it.

The book is edited by Delma Sweeney and Mary Lloyd, both experience family mediators and founder members of the FMS. Its 14 chapters, all authored by individual mediators from different backgrounds, are divided into three sections: The Development of the Family Mediation Service, Mediation Research, and Mediation Theory and Practice. The first section makes for a fascinating read, particularly in how the development of the service was influenced by the socio-legal-political development of Irish society, including for example the journey from a difficulty in accepting the reality of marriage breakdown to the introduction of divorce for the first time in 1996. The service itself has also gone through many changes and weathered many storms in relation to administration and funding. Carmel Savage provides a particularly interesting insight into the training that mediators employed by the service have been given over the past years, including the numerous international influences that had input into the first training programme. Section 2 looks at research into mediation in a number of different contexts, including the role of the mediator, the role of children in mediation, and a thought provoking overview of the results of a conflict resolution programme introduced in an Irish school, which is discussed by Fiona McAuslan.

Section 3 probably holds the most relevance for international readers, and for practising mediators, as it contains a number of different perspectives on the practice and theory of mediation. These are not confined to the context of family mediation but have a broader relevance in many different areas and forms of conflict resolution. Two hugely important contributions are those by Ann O'Kelly and Siun Kearney, both focusing on the role of children in mediation. Ann O'Kelly looks at Creating Child Inclusive Practice in Family Mediation and Siun Kearney specifically at The Voice of the Child in Mediation. The concept of children participating, whether directly or indirectly, in mediation is still underdeveloped in this jurisdiction, particularly when compared to some others. It is also an area that, in my opinion, many practitioners are rather reluctant if not anxious to delve into, therefore the insight and questions raised by the two aforementioned authors provide some important starting points for mediators and policy makers alike.

Niamh Lehane, in her chapter on Making Talk Work, puts forward the case for a synthesis between different forms of mediation theory and practice, and Miriam Logan focuses on similar but distinct themes in Empowering Creativity in Mediation. Two of the chapters that spoke most to me, and provoked the most thought about my own practice, were Claudia Greene's Mediators Understanding of the Nature of Self and Delma Sweeney's White Water Rafting: A Mediator's Intuitive Practice which contains similar themes to those in the PhD she is researching on the mediator's use of intuition in practice. The rather intellectual titles of both these chapters belie the practical application of the concepts explored, such as the need for self-awareness, reflection and authenticity in the former, and the necessity of creating a safe space and using language artfully in the latter.

Without exception, all articles in this publication a thoroughly researched, well thought out and excellently written. All hold lessons for all of us, whether we have connections with Ireland or not, whether we are practicing mediators or not. I wholeheartedly recommend reading this book at all interested in conflict resolution, mediation, and of course, the quirkiness of Irish society. It is available upon request, for free, from:

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Full title: Delma Sweeney & Mary Lloyd (Eds.) "Mediation in Focus: A Celebration of the Family Mediation Service in Ireland" (2011) Family Mediation Service