Morality, Authority and Care in Secure Institutions for Children

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> The problem of youth offending and its management in particular, [is] a *moral* problem (Daems 2008).

During the 1980s Hans Boutellier participated in a research project on youth work from the University of Leiden. He encountered serious and pressing problems: youth workers were powerless in giving moral guidance to the youngsters they were dealing with. They 'did not have any anchor points or language to confront them with their unacceptable behaviour' (Daems 2008). There was no moral discourse to separate right from wrong – youth workers did their difficult job in a 'moral vacuum' (Boutellier 1988a: 20-21; Boutellier 1993a: 9-10; Boutellier 2004c: 7-8). In 1985 Boutellier wrote a personal reflection upon those feelings of powerlessness. The problem of youth work was first and foremost a moral problem: people working in the field had ended up in an 'ideologically and morally unprotected position'. They had difficulties defin[ing] themselves as 'moral subjects', as sources of 'moral acting' (Boutellier 1985a: 22; see also Boutellier 1985b, 1988a, 1988b). For Boutellier the questions to be addressed in relation to young people in secure institutions were very different from the ones other analysts of institutional life had identified. Instead of analyzing discourse in terms of power / knowledge he called for a *moral* discourse that seemed to be missing in the field. (Daems 2008: 134)

In this paper, I reflect on the remarkably similar findings to emerge from an evaluation of a 'staff transformation' training initiative led by the charity Youth at Risk in one Secure Training Centre and one YOI holding under 18s and their implications. The evaluation included two comparator establishments. The findings confirm the observations above, suggesting that the key issues in secure institutions for children are morality, authority and, we argue, care.