



The role of memory in Residential Child Care

This is by way of a very belated thank you to the Finchden Manor community who a few years ago kindly agreed to my request to attend their annual reunion.

Each year, the same Sunday in the same place, a meeting is held which affords the opportunity for a reunion. During the day people met each other, cooked, ate and washed up together, celebrated memories in writing and conversation, showed a film of building a hot air balloon with a clockwork camera attached, shared a slide show including bathing the dogs it seemed every boy had, remembered absent friends, played the piano (could everyone play the piano at Finchden?). As the day went on something magical happened, something that books could not ever convey, I noticed that the room took on an ambience, maybe Finchden being recreated. At that moment I felt I was no longer a participant but an observer and I knew, being present only as a visitor it was time for me to take my leave.

My attendance continues to inform the way I think and input to discussions and developments. In these days where there is high regard for Change my Finchden experience reaffirmed other experiences of the necessity of Continuity. It was a powerful expression about the relationships and experiences shared by people when living together and the enduring meaning they have for those who shared them.

What I have to contribute today is concerned with an appreciation that it is this informal information that is also needed along with other types of research when influencing and informing policy. Clough¹ sees 4 different types of writing on residential work

- Autobiographical
- Texts distilling thinking on practice
- Reports, inspections, enquiries
- Research studies

He goes on state that research should aim to provide a disciplined enquiry into a topic and thereby the basis for an understanding on which practice can be based. How do people come to an understanding of an event and an

¹ Clough R (2000) The practice of residential work: Basingstoke , Macmillan

explanation for it? Gilbert (1992)² states *that 'social research has to be concerned with an understanding, not just a description'* to which Clough adds the explanation *'it looks at what is happening, how it is happening and why it is happening'*. He considers how the task of the researcher and residential worker are parallel – the search to understand resident's experiences and then to think about the consequences for their work.

The Finchden experience and others like it is not 'soft' information, though it is qualitative. It is not parallel or complementary but essential if we are to have holistic understanding of the subject on which we are making policy. Such experiential material is not a glorified Friends Reunited approach but serious research allowing an insight into the continuity of development. This is longitudinal work, of which we frequently bemoan we do not have enough. Maybe we have not been looking in the right places?

To implement policy we now make use of 'change agents.' To successfully implement policy we may need a complementary group of 'continuity agents.' The first cohort are in this room. The task of these 'continuity agents' is not only to do something specialised but also to ensure continuity is an everyday activity for everyone working with children.

Kahan argued (her word) in 'Growing up in groups'³ that stability and continuity were *'not only essential for good care but are the necessary conditions for a child to grow up well.'* She makes the point that we need to ask regularly the question 'How well is this child growing up?' Then ask what is needed to enhance development. This may mean she says *'sticking with the child through the good times and the bad times,' putting up with difficult behaviour, and where necessary demonstrating disapproval of the behaviour, but not the person.'* She sees that for the *'wish to return to it, children in a children's home must feel that they lived in a stable and caring environment and have experienced 'real care'*. This may hold true for a sector and care too.

In England as the numbers of Children In Care have decreased and as ideas about looking after children have changed RCC has decreased in size considerably and has had its task changed. It is no longer seen as an option for the long-term bringing up children but as a specific intervention for a narrow group of young people for whom all else has failed or who are rejecting of other settings. It is to be used usually for as shorter time as possible. There have been many closures, each usually without any idea of continuity of care being included in the planning, for individual children or for the service for the future. In the closures we lost much knowledge. In its place we have had pragmatism and anxiety, twin enemies of thinking. How has this occurred?

Every Child Matters⁴ is based on meeting the needs of the majority population of children, those most often met in personal or professional life. ECM thinking

² Gilbert N (ed) (1992) *Researching social life* London: Sage

³ Kahan B (1994) *Growing up in groups* National Institute for Social Work. London: HMSO.

⁴ www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

confirmed by available research is based on child development and chronological expectations running smoothly together. For the group of young people we are concerned with in RCC emotional stage is not always corresponding with usual chronological development and as a result the usual social, emotional and academic expectations are not always easily achievable using usual means.

Being able to foster resilience requires that we know the child we are caring for inside and out. Where policy makers understanding and experience has been limited to young people who have relatively good experiences and encountered a little misfortune they might assume that there is already enough inside the child so that they can resume the correct chronological age expectations with some specific measurable achievable realistic or relevant time-limited support.

The experience of intense disadvantage being rare leaves even the understanding of professionals too limited and especially excluding an understanding of what is necessary to care appropriately for young people who come to live in RCC. The result of this is that the identification of the needs that Every Child Matters is seeking to address has as yet been too limited. The assessment of services needed which is based on this limited identification has potential to result in services for young people that cannot match their exceptional needs adequately being provided with by people for whom training has not been sufficiently provided.

Most young people will be able to benefit from what Dockar-Drysdale⁵ would call 'the preoccupation of ordinary devoted parenting.' However the young people with whom RCC is concerned require something of a different order, therapeutic management. This has much in common with ordinary devoted parenting but therapeutic management is continually conscious skilled compensatory re-parenting, a professional technique, structured in the help that it offers, while giving as near as possible an approximation to the kind of positive parenting which a child should have received'. Therapeutic parenting is about extraordinary parenting being made to feel for the child as 'ordinary' and meaningful for them as possible.

For this group of young people the ECM palate needs enlarging. It maybe as Sinclair et al ⁶ observe, "*It is clear that planning procedures are a necessary but not a sufficient component; they can guide the intervention, but cannot replace the need for a consistent exercising of social work skills.*"

Fees ⁷ writes that '*the cumulative loss of primary archival memory means that the richness and depth of the work which has taken place over the recent past can never be fully known. This means in turn that we can never incorporate into our own lives and work the discoveries which have already*

⁵ Docker-Drysdale, B. (1993) *Therapy and consultation in child care*, London: Free Association Books.

⁶ Sinclair, R, Garnett, L and Berridge, D (1995) *Social Work and Assessment with Adolescents*, London: NCB

⁷ Fees C (1998) *Therapeutic Communities* Vol 19(2),p 167-178

been made and the successes and failures which have already been overcome.'

Though he was writing 10 years ago I was struck by how current his words are today, *'There is discussion about practice, policy and technique but there is an absence of in-depth and on-going history'* and later *'Memory and its effective use are the bases of the capacity to act, creatively and effectively: people who do not or cannot 'remember' their past or the past of the field within which they work are condemned to repeat it...The memory of a community is a fundamental component of its safety and creativity.'*

David Wills (it seems right for this name to be mentioned here today) writing the foreword to Bridgeland's classic *'Pioneer work with maladjusted children'*⁸ looking back on the founders of Lyward, Shaw and himself and forwards to the then current generation of Dockar-Drysdale, Balbernie and Barron saw *'they are developing what we lacked and what indeed we failed to provide for those who were to follow us – a highly professional and scientific rationale of therapeutic education and environment therapy... the new wave will not have to spend time starting afresh from the new premises and concepts but are able to move forward along the road on which they have already started, to a greater understanding and to more effective endeavours in a field where there is still much to learn, and where there is enormous scope for improved methods and techniques.'*

In 2006 35 years later Clough, Bullock and Ward⁹ opening NCERCC's *What works in RCC* were able to say *'Research into what works in residential child care is noticeably compartmentalised'* but *'notwithstanding the difficulties of bringing messages together to form an understanding'* and identified themes..

NCERCC has been in existence for 4 years. We had undertaken a feasibility study, our work plan devised from the sector and inspection, yet we knew something was not yet in place. One of our moments of enlightenment was when we understood what is was, when we could give a name to this aspect of the lived experience of NCERCC. It felt like emerging from amnesia. From that moment of naming those of us of a certain age knew why we have remained in the RCC sector. Our previously unconsciously apportioned task to remember what we have forgotten and to make it available in ways that can be used for today became a conscious task of articulating at policy and practice levels that as the needs of young people in RCC are eternal so there is much that we need to recall from earlier times that will be of great use. A conscious part of NCERCC work now involves remembering RCC, reclaiming RCC, and looking towards a renaissance of RCC made relevant for these times.

There are inextricable links between the achievement of a sense of identity and a knowledge of origins, or heritage. Thoburn¹⁰ observes two important

⁸ Bridgeland M (1971) *Pioneer work with maladjusted children*, London: Staples

⁹ Clough R, Bullock R and Ward A, *What works in residential child care: a review of research evidence and the practical implications*. London: National Children's Bureau.

¹⁰ Thoburn J (1988) *Child placement: principles and practice*, Aldershot: Wildwood House

themes in research studies of young people growing up apart from their birth families – continuity, a sense of belonging, and identity, achieved by continued contact with important people from the past. Beedell¹¹ writing in *Residential Life with Children* has something pertinent to add here when considering provision for children's needs. (He uses the word units rather than homes). He writes '*Knowledge about one another (is) ...necessary and valuable in four ways (apart from its instrumental uses):*

- *it gives children a personal reference point by which to assess for themselves their development in the unit.*
- *it gives opportunity for safe or exploratory identification with admired adults or peers. It is rather risky, and sometimes dangerous to begin to imitate or identify with someone one knows only slightly or partially.*
- *it means that the unit has a chance to deal with realities and not just surface behaviour, and*
- *it ensures that, to some extent at least, children and adults meeting in a variety of different situations are relating to each other 'whole' and not just using particular, limited 'bits' of themselves in fairly formalized interaction.*

He goes on to show how such mutual knowledge depends on *shared knowledge of each individual's characteristics and exploits... A family's knowledge about its members includes remembering dramatic and sometimes traumatic events, incidents elaborated into comic tales in the telling, awareness of what is a particular triumph for this child, tacit agreement to let some events be unrecorded (though they are not unremembered) as well as intimate knowledge of individual preferences, mood patterns and tender spots. The fact that a child recognises that his family know about him in this way gives him an important implicit reference point.*

What are the implications of this for residential units?... (If)... knowledge of the child and the child's recognition of this knowledge..... is realistic, fairly complete and put together, and shared (though with some variations) by most staff and some children, it will help the child to discover a reference point in the new base.

If we can know this holistically for each child then we can see how it holds true for the policy regarding the sector too.

There has been progress made on the NCERCC understanding of the need to remember, reclaim, renew and make relevant. NCERCC has been acting on its understanding of a wide range of research as described by Clough, Wills and Beedell. Such an understanding has provided foundations for politicians and civil servants who have little or no knowledge or experience of RCC when developing for example

- A National contract with considered child care focussed service requirements¹²

¹¹ Beedell C (1970) *Residential Life with Children*, London: RKP

¹² www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/strategy/planningandcommissioning/nationalcontracts/

- A National Occupation Standard for managers in which in England there is a mandatory Group Living module that reflects the complexity and subtlety of RCC¹³
- Commissioning, though still raw, developing with an emerging understanding of the need to match needs to placements and this requires conscious planning to ensure all 3 tiers are present and sustained.

So what does NCERCC hope for in the task for the CCHN? That it will enable the study the culture and practice of RCC and as part of this create a Life Story for RCC that will act in, in another word to be reclaimed, 'holding' the task of RCC practitioners. How might it do this?

Rose and Philpott¹⁴ show the stages of Life Story work. At the first stage of Life Story work we gather *'facts, stories, anecdotes, memories, fiction, religious and cultural life, fantasy, expectation, loss and fulfilment, hope realised and hope dashed , family idiosyncracies, the good and the bad'*.

The next stage is internalising this information, coming to an understanding of the information, learning from it and being able to reflect upon it. What is the story around the information? What are the connections with how they are today? Without this confirmed identity then it all too easy to become inward looking, self-protective and defensive.

The third stage involves creating a life story book, the construction of a notion of 'family' for those who have never known one or where there are pieces missing or one that has become fragmented.

We hope to see the task before the CCHN as one of helping create the basis for Life Story work that can communicate and connect to policy and practice.

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¹³ www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/nos/leadership-and-management

¹⁴ Rose, R Philpott,T, (2004) *The Child's Own Story*, London: Jessica Kingsley/SACCS