

Unpublished Paper given to American Assoc. of Psychotherapists
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Child welfare in England today; what would
Clare Winnicott say?

The invitation to give this paper came at a time when I had already embarked on a difficult and quite painful process of reflecting on a considerable body of my own work, unpublished and published, to see what may still be of value before I die. I have been continuously involved in British child welfare, through practice and education, since 1954 – the year in which I qualified as a social worker, one of Clare Winnicott's students at the LSE. Throughout this period of fifty years, I have commented on policy and practice and have been involved in a turbulent and distressing era for workers in this field. In accepting this invitation, I knew that it would form part of a journey back to the formation of my professional self, that which Clare described as 'the most highly organised and integrated part of ourselves' (1955. In Kanter p.150).

My debt to Clare and Donald Winnicott is immeasurable. Clare laid the foundations on which to build my understanding of the social work process and of the needs and rights of children whose care has

Role of ho
i) The movement between inner and outer worlds
of child

ii) Ideological split.

iii) Genre/Specialist

a) agency - la "unhappily married"

b) education - loss of child.

fear of psychoanalysis

been disrupted. When I look again at her writings and observations, expanded in Joel's book, it is almost uncomfortable to see how profoundly my own teaching and writing was influenced by hers. It is not plagiarism, however, because it was so thoroughly internalised that the values and concepts became my own. As I write this, I am seeing Clare in my mind's eye lovely clothes, pale shades of green, green eyes, fair hair; hearing her, a definite, unpretentious voice trying to find precisely the right words to describe a child or the role of the child care officer, listening carefully to us and responding directly with none of the quasi-analytic passivity associated with some of the then psychiatric social workers.

Also, I see Donald, small, pale, wrinkly, lecturing at the LSE. He had a surprisingly high voice; a bit of an actor, he knew how to raise a laugh. It was difficult to know whether he really did lecture without prior planning. Whether this was a stream of consciousness bubbling up from who knows where, or whether this was a bit of a game, consciously used to lighten the tone of the very profound matters he was gently pushing us towards. I see him at the blackboard, chalk

covered hands, drawing a circle with a dot in the middle – a baby in the womb. Then gradually erasing bits of the circle to illustrate how the world outside the womb should impinge gently upon the infant, hence the need for ‘primary maternal preoccupation’.

I see both of them together in my mind’s eye so that those and other visual images constantly recur as I read and think about their work. They are real and alive, as are all outstanding teachers, who rank with parent figures in the intensity of memories. There is, of course, a lot more to be said about our reactions to revered, perhaps idealised, figures. Ambivalence and envy lurk round the corner but it is not necessary to go round that corner in this paper, except to say that I knew I would face her in the room with us. I am wanting her approval and am nervous of her disapproval, as I was 50 years ago.

What is clear to me now is that Clare’s values and fundamental assumptions about child welfare and social work have stood the test of time remarkably well. I shall analyse that assertion later in this paper. But perhaps the most important point (and excellently shown

Clare had no stomach at that time for the fight. Yet she was absolutely right in her insistence that, whilst understanding of a child's feelings is essential, 'some of the profound things we do to touch the lives of other people are in terms of the provisions we make for them, not in anything we say.' (p51, ref 113).

In fact, the issue which has had the more profound effect on British child welfare centres upon agency function rather than method. That is to say, most of our most important arguments centred on the degree of specialisation or genericism which the individual social worker should have in their work.

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In the 1960s when I was a young academic, the vision of unifying social work was very attractive; it heralded the emergence of an educated profession, with a common basis of values and skills which were transferable. Thus, I and others like me, though uncomfortably (sort of) aware that these views might not fit with Clare's, were enthusiastic in our welcome to a unified professional association and,

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in 1970, to the creation of 'generic' social service departments within local authorities, which brought together services for children and adults and offered promise of a generic family service.

Our optimism was undimmed in the 1960s but, looking back, and especially with added experience of later organisational changes in our field and others, we can see that the vision for the care of children became blurred. We lost the clarity of purpose for which Clare was so justly renowned.

One of the reasons for this was undoubtedly the move to genericism before the profession was established. The effect of this could be seen in two major developments which ran roughly parallel in time. The first of these concerned education. The second the creation of unified 'generic' social services departments in local government.

Education: Very soon after a handful of 'child care courses' were set up, the move towards a generic profession led to their being merged with the other developing courses in other branches of social work. It

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proved impossible to keep the focus on the key elements in child welfare social work. Choices in curriculum content were forced upon those who taught, not least because, with few exceptions, professional training was only one or two years in duration. It is now widely recognised that somewhere in the period mid '60s – mid '70s most courses lost, or did not initiate, the intensive periods of child observation and the obligatory residential child care placements which were at the heart of the LSE child care course and part of Clare's vision. I had modelled the Oxford University course, which I started, on the LSE course. I still meet ex-students who tell me of the enduring impact these experiences had on them. When I left Oxford in 1978 for a more senior position in another university, and many more students, such placements were not included.

The effects of this loss of focus were, it may be argued, catastrophic. There is much evidence to support such a large claim; a good deal comes from the series of inquiries into the deaths of children at the hands of their parents or caretakers which have dominated the British social work scene since 1973, when the first, into the death of Maria

Colwell, a 6 year old murdered by her step-father, hit the headlines. Over and over again, in the succeeding years, the reports of inquiries have commented on the lack of careful observation and/or of direct communication with the child in question by the social worker. It is a most peculiar irony that although successive legislation in this period has placed the welfare of the child as paramount in all circumstances, the reality has been that, in many ways and for many reasons, this legislative imperative has not been effectively translated into policy and practice.

It would be simplistic to suggest that gaps in training courses be held solely responsible for the 'lost child'. But this is a particular issue on which Clare had views which sorely needed to be heard or rehearsed over the years which followed her withdrawal from social work. The objectives, role and skills which the social worker should have in relation to children in care were at the core of her teaching. And she could tackle head on the uncertainty which many social workers had as to whether they were straying into the territory of psychotherapists.

Sadly, in the context of work with children in care, this issue did not get taken forward in the '70s and '80s.

However, if you live long enough, things come around! By the 1990s, the deficit was increasingly recognised. New plans for teaching in child development and on direct work with children were introduced in many courses. We are, however, left with a work force, some of whom are frankly incompetent. The last horror was the case of Victoria Climbié in 2000, again, as Maria Colwell, aged six, an African child with French as her first language, who was murdered by her aunt and partner. The report gives an account of her contact with various social workers but there is no indication that any social worker spoke to her – or found someone who could speak to her - in French.

Social Service Structures; the second failure of the 'genericism project'. The second failure, perhaps of even greater significance, lay in the reorganisation of the social services in 1970. Crucial to this was the assumption that social workers should be competent to work

across the previous boundaries. The government of the day did not promote or resource the strategic planning or the staff development necessary to ensure that those in post had clear goals and that they were adequately equipped to deal with a massive change. For the unification to be a success there needed to be clarification of field workers' roles, in particular the degree of specialisation, including specialist knowledge, required to work effectively with different client/user groups. The nettle was not grasped and so the understandings of social work in child welfare, in which Clare had led the way, were left, as it were, lying about – not rejected but not used, revisited or reformulated to meet changing situations.

The part played by child and family guidance and mental health services for children in care was also a disappointing story. For although there were valuable exceptions, it is broadly true to say that most social workers in child care employed by the local authorities did not find these specialist services helpful. In the last few years I have chaired an inquiry into a residential establishment caring for highly disturbed and/or learning disabled children. I was shocked to

hear the same things in 2000 as I heard in 1956 as a young social worker. For example, the panel heard that the local child and family mental health services could not help children unless they were 'settled' in a permanent home and that the practitioners did not have the skills to help children if they had even mild learning disabilities. Arguably, a closer alliance between these two aspects of child welfare could have played a part in retaining some of Clare's insights in the services for children in care.

Yet again, however, I have to acknowledge that this problem is recognised by the present government and that, in the huge raft of initiatives set in motion, moves to bring these two groups of professionals together in dealing with desperately needy and disturbed children are underway.

Thus far, I have shown how the rush to genericism, whose underlying rationale I still support, undermined Clare's vision of child welfare before it was properly embedded in an emerging profession. But these

were not the only reasons for failures. Another lay in the agency context in which social work at that time was mainly located.

Agency context: Clare showed brilliantly the role of the social worker in bridging and mediating the child's relationships with the adult world. This to me is her lasting contribution to the work. But these direct transactions, which she reported so graphically in her published work, have to take place in an agency context. The central task is how to provide an organisational environment which is facilitating.

It is widely agreed that the main provider in the UK, the local authority, has proved an inhospitable host to services for children. It has failed to find structures which balance the need for overall management with due respect for professional decision making at the lowest level possible – i.e. nearest to the child and the family. I am sure that Clare would have agreed with that analysis. But she would have assumed that the professional decisions would be taken by people who had the best available education on which to draw. As we can see from Joel's book, she fought senseless bureaucracy. But she

was much too wise a woman to have denied the legitimacy of bureaucratic structures. Its classic definition concerns the need for some rules and regulations to ensure equity in the way clients are helped, which ensures that individuals are treated equally. I have found Tillich, the theologian, helpful in his distinction between 'proportional' and 'creative' justice. At its best, bureaucracy is about proportional justice or evenhandedness, creative justice stresses the need of individuals for unique, individualised justice. Both kinds are social necessities. The latter, creative justice, lies at the heart of good social work but it has to be contained within a framework of equality of treatment. These are real issues when there is a battle for resources, such as expensive residential treatment, the host agency has to be professionally sophisticated as well as managerially competent at the higher levels if they are to devise appropriate criteria for making judgements in which one child or family is allocated resources and another is not. This has not always been handled well.

At present, there are major efforts being made to improve practice at an individual level and in terms of organisational effectiveness. As

with much else in the public sector, targets and objectives have been the watchwords. There is still, however, an uneasy feeling that the 'top down' forces pushing change are failing to empower practitioners, as Clare would have wished. Furthermore, there remain very thorny issues of agency responsibility and accountability as quasi-parents for some children. 'Corporate parenting' is the phrase word used by government to describe these duties; it is cold and uncomfortable! Clare and Donald would not have liked the phrase but it does identify a dilemma.

In conclusion: in my view, nothing that Clare has taught us has been invalidated or outdated. Nor has all been lost, despite the forgoing analysis. In particular, Clare was a part of what might be described as the discovery and promotion of the concept of attachment, which John Bowlby pioneered. As students, we saw the films made by James and Joyce Robertson about 'Laura' and 'John' which made a profound impression. The implications of such theory can be seen in many aspects of policy and practice, including parents staying with children in hospital and the closure of many large residential nurseries in the post-war years. Clare's writings and case examples helped us to

understand the power of the child's internalised image of parents and the role of the social worker in keeping it alive.

As a student of social policy as well as social work, I have come to accept (sometimes with great regret) that all kinds of extraneous factors can distort or deflect us from a vision, and a kind of mission, to improve the quality of the lives of deprived children. Child welfare policy is affected by political ideologies, by resource constraints, by professional self interests and so on. Looking back, I can see very clearly how the integrity of Clare's vision and how I - and many others - have used that vision, which we internalised, to steady us in times of confusion and uncertainty.

Olive Stevenson