

A personal reflection: In for the long haul

Frank Ainsworth

Abstract

In the early 1970s Frank Ainsworth was appointed to a lectureship in social work at the University of Dundee. Shortly after, he met Leon Fulcher, an American, at a conference in Aberdeen. Fulcher was at that time a lecturer in social work at the University of Stirling. Their mutual interest was residential care for children and youth, and this is what they were hired to teach. This article documents their scholarship that commenced in Scotland. In some measure it also documents the relationship and careers of Ainsworth and Fulcher that have both coincided and diverged across the years. They met at a time when the education of residential workers was moving away from specialist courses and was being merged with mainstream social work education, the responsibility of the former Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work. For some this was seen as less than successful as far as the professionalisation of residential services for children and youth was concerned, at least in England. Ainsworth and Fulcher made important moves in career and country of residence in the mid-1980s: Fulcher to New Zealand as Professor of Social Work at the Victoria University of Wellington; Ainsworth to Australia as Head of School of Social Work at the Philip Institute of Technology in Melbourne. Both have retained an active scholarly role, together or with others, in relation to residential services for children and youth. Even after 40 years this continues. This article is a personal reflection on Ainsworth's and Fulcher's personal and professional journeys.

Keywords

Reflection, group care, residential child and youth care, global perspectives, formative experiences, witnessing change

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Getting started

Starting in 1981, Fulcher and Ainsworth produced three edited books about the residential care of children and youth (Ainsworth & Fulcher, 1981; Fulcher & Ainsworth, 1985; Fulcher & Ainsworth, 2006). The books included contributions from key residential services professionals from the USA and from the UK. In the first book, the field of group care was set out as embracing institutional care, residential group living and day care services that are found in all four major human service resource systems: health, education, social welfare, and justice (Ainsworth & Fulcher, 1981, p. 8). All of these were defined as group focused services, where practice is in the life space rather than in an office environment. In particular, the focus is on how residential childcare staff practise in a public arena where they are constantly under the gaze of fellow workers, hence the life space conceptualisation.

More recently, the group care field has been expanded to include, for example, university halls of residence (Islam & Fulcher, 2021, p. 14). In doing this the authors draw on the concept of group care as a field of practice, from the first Ainsworth and Fulcher book (1981).

Global perspectives

Leon Fulcher and Tuhinul Islam from Bangladesh have published four books since 1986 that document the use of residential services for children and youth in 71 of the world's less developed countries (Islam & Fulcher, 2021). This major achievement shows the extent to which residential services for children and youth continue to be a major source of care. Since the Stockholm Declaration (Stockholm, 2003) the push in Europe and North America has been to spread a policy of deinstitutionalisation. More recently Eurochild (2010) has promoted this concept in European and Eastern European countries, and Flagotheir on behalf SOS Villages is promoting deinstitutionalisation in Asia (Flagotheir, 2016). This is even though deinstitutionalisation is primarily a northern hemisphere concept.

Formative international experiences

In 1975-76, Ainsworth was awarded a Nuffield Social Science Fellowship, which enabled him to spend sabbatical time at the School of Social Work, University of Washington, Seattle. This gave him the opportunity to meet Henry Maier and Jim Whittaker, both stalwarts of residential care of children and youth. In 1987 Henry published *Developmental Group Care of Children and Youth* that many would regard as a monumental contribution to the field.

Whittaker remains active and was instrumental along with Jorge del Valle and Lisa Holmes in publishing *Therapeutic Residential Care with Children and Youth: Developing Evidenced Based International Practice* (2015). In 2022, Whittaker, with Jorge del Valle, Sigrid James and Lisa Holmes, will steer the publication of *Revitalizing Residential Care for Children and Youth: Cross-National Trends and Challenges*. These two books make a substantial contribution to the international literature on residential care for children and youth.

Whittaker also organised an invitation only International Working Group on Therapeutic Residential Care that had a first meeting in Loughborough, England in April 2016, attended by 32 participants from eleven countries. This meeting produced a Consensus Statement about Therapeutic Residential Care for Children and Youth. The statement was widely circulated and was published in Australia, UK, Holland (in Dutch), Israel (in Hebrew), Japan, Spain, and the USA. This working group continues to meet albeit in a virtual format due to Covid-19.

The sabbatical year exposed Ainsworth to American residential programmes, and to other American scholars with an interest in residential services for children and youth. One such person was Anthony (Tony) Maluccio from the University of Connecticut, who was later to move to Boston College as the head of the doctoral program. In the 1990s Maluccio, recognised by his peers as an outstanding child welfare scholar, supervised Ainsworth's PhD and the required 1996 thesis titled *Family-Centered Group Care: Model Building*.

Subsequent to the 1970s sabbatical, international travel to conferences — in Canada, many European countries, Israel, North America, South Africa, and Australia — in the search for more knowledge about residential services for

children and youth, became an on-going mission. This continues today with an active research relationship with Boys Town, Omaha, an important American child and youth serving agency (Huefner & Ainsworth, 2020; 2021).

Fulcher made another international move in 2004, to an academic position and a period of residence in the United Arab Emirates as Dean of Students, before returning to New Zealand. This was an important formative period as he regards student halls of residence as forming part of the field of group care settings.

As can be seen, international experience and residence has, for Ainsworth and Fulcher, provided diverse experiences that led to a rich international perspective on residential care of children and youth. This perspective is now being taken up by others (Whittaker, del Valle & Holmes, 2015; Whittaker, del Valle, James & Holmes, forthcoming).

Witnessing change

Ainsworth's doctoral thesis was about putting the family of a child in residential care centre-stage, even when a child or young person was unlikely to return to live with their birth family because of child protection concerns. It emphasised the lifelong importance of family relationships and sought to maintain these as much as possible, rather than have them fragment through neglect. In that respect the concept of family-centred group care was a forerunner of the present-day emphasis by residential programmes on parental engagement (Small, Bellonci & Ramsey, 2015). It was also a move away from the then common house-parent model of residential care for children and youth, where a married couple tried to create an illusionary sense of family by claiming substitute status, when most children and youth in residential care at that time already had a very much alive, real family (Hansen & Ainsworth, 1983). Family-centred group care was, and is, an improvement from an earlier era when children and youth in care were encouraged to forget about their family of origin, even to the extent of being told that their parents had died. To forget about your family of origin, no matter how difficult that family may have been, was of course an unrealistic and cruel expectation.

The next improvement, which began in the 1970s, involved moving from large campus-based institutions to small community-based group homes with rostered staff as the preferred residential setting for children and youth, albeit primarily for an adolescent population. This move also meant that small group homes offered a less restrictive residential care environment, as residents of these homes invariably attended community-based schools. Under the older campus style institution there usually was a campus-based school only attended by children in care, which was increasingly viewed as undesirable. Group homes have however been increasingly criticised due to their lack of safety and pronounced instability (Clark, 1997; Ainsworth, 2017; Ainsworth & Bath, forthcoming). What the move to small group homes also allowed for was a growing conviction that the length of time children and young people spent in residential care should be kept to a minimum, although the research evidence to support this conviction is rather slim.

A final thought

Ainsworth and Fulcher have made numerous scholarly contributions to the worldwide literature about the theory and practice of residential care for children and youth. This has taken place while many social service organisations, in a wide range of countries, have tried, and continue to try, to reduce their reliance on residential care for children and youth. The recent Canadian scandal about Indian Residential Schools (Mackrael, 2021) will no doubt be used, by some, to further argue this position, even though the last of these schools closed in 1997, six years before the Stockholm Declaration (2003) on children and residential care. This policy is often supported by dubious comparisons between the outcomes of home-based and group care programmes (Huefner & Ainsworth, 2020).

Since the first Ainsworth and Fulcher publication in 1981 it has been necessary to hold fast to the view that residential care for children and youth is a necessary part of a continuum of services that a mature child welfare system must have.

Importantly, the firm view of Ainsworth and Fulcher is that 'no child or young person should be placed *unnecessarily* in residential care' (Islam & Fulcher, 2021, p. 10). But the companion view is that some children and youth can benefit from a period in a safe, well designed, professionally staffed and managed residential care programme. This should be for the few with behavioural and emotional issues, not the many. Empirical efforts to demonstrate this fact continue (Mastronardi, Ainsworth, & Huefner, 2020).

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Dr Fulcher read this article prior to publication.