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Short Article

From vulnerable children to socially instrumentalised objects of policy: Greenlandic children in a colonial 'development' experiment

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Abstract

In 1951, 22 Greenlandic children were separated from their families and sent to Denmark through an initiative presented as humanitarian, educational and beneficial to Greenlandic society. Danish authorities, Save the Children Denmark (Red Barnet) and the Danish Red Cross sought to prepare Danish-speaking children to contribute to Greenland's modernisation. Drawing on published Danish-language research, reports and first-person testimony, including archival material reproduced or discussed in these sources, this article examines the initiative through perspectives on children's rights and colonial governance.

The article analyses this colonial development experiment as a form of social exploitation in which children's welfare was subordinated to objectives set by adults, whether or not harm was intended. As its aims and arrangements changed, educational ambitions and administrative priorities overshadowed family relationships, cultural continuity and belonging. Participants' accounts link prolonged separation, language loss and, for those who returned to Greenland, institutional upbringing to enduring difficulties with identity and belonging. Their later lives followed

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different paths, and educational or occupational achievement could coexist with lasting estrangement from family and community.

While taking account of the historical context, the article considers the implications for contemporary residential childcare. It identifies participation, informed consent, relational continuity and opportunities to use a child's first language as safeguards when placements are proposed or reviewed. The practical responsibility is to consider what children may lose as well as what they may gain, and to sustain the relationships on which their sense of belonging depends.

Introduction: Humanitarian intentions and structural harm

In 1951, 22 Greenlandic children were removed from their families and sent to Denmark. The group comprised nine girls and 13 boys aged five to nine. The original selection criteria called for healthy, highly intelligent children who had lost both parents. As the criteria widened, children with a surviving parent were also selected, and family circumstances, including illness and poverty, played an increasing part in deciding which children were chosen (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 29–37). The initiative was presented as humanitarian, educational and progressive. The children were expected to learn Danish, and the newspaper *Nationaltidende (National News)* reported that they might form *'a kind of core'* in Greenland's new bilingual schools (as cited in Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 38). Press accounts reproduced in the historical inquiry portrayed the initiative favourably, describing the children as happy during their stay at Fedgården in Denmark (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 38–39).

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Photograph 1 – Queen Ingrid greeting Greenland children at Fedgården, Denmark, in 1951

Yet the purpose of the initiative, the arrangements for the children and the reasons given for those arrangements changed repeatedly. Officials had already described the proposal as an experiment in 1950, while plans for the children's return to Greenland were still taking shape (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 22–28). Over time, the children were positioned less as

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individuals in need of care and more as instruments within a broader project of colonial reform and development (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020).

Helene Thiesen (2011, pp. 41–46), one of the 22 children, recalls running into her mother's arms when she returned to Godthåb (now Nuuk) in 1952. As she tried to tell her mother how much she had missed her, she realised that they could no longer understand one another. She was then told to say goodbye to her mother and board the bus to the children's home.

This article examines the 1951 initiative as a case of social exploitation embedded within humanitarian ambition and welfare governance. Here, exploitation refers to a structural process in which children's welfare was subordinated to objectives set by adults, whether or not harm was intended. The analysis adopts a contemporary children's rights perspective (United Nations, 1989), while taking account of the historical context of Danish child welfare (Faye Jacobsen, 1989). It concludes by considering the lessons this history offers for contemporary residential childcare.

A persistent tension runs through the historical record. Danish officials and humanitarian organisations justified the initiative in terms of care, development and future opportunity. In practice, it involved selecting and relocating children, documenting their lives and managing their family and cultural connections. These arrangements revealed significant failures in care, protection and accountability. Drawing on postcolonial perspectives (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978), this article uses 'benevolent governance' to describe how the moral authority attached to improving lives can obscure unequal power relations and make intrusive interventions appear necessary and beneficial. Goffman's (1961, 1963) work on institutions and identity also informs the analysis of how children were treated as 'cases' and 'projects' within settings where adults defined what counted as normal, promising and socially valuable.

The historical analysis draws on published Danish-language research, reports and first-person testimony, including Thiesen's memoir. It also draws on archival material and interview accounts reproduced or discussed in these sources. The article connects this material with international debates about children's rights and residential childcare. My longstanding involvement in Greenlandic society, together with my ability to read sources in both Danish and English, informed my reading and interpretation of the material.

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Colonial reform, developmental temporality, and the ethical rationale for intervention

The initiative emerged within a colonial framework. In the years leading up to the 1950 reforms, the two provincial councils in West Greenland, one for the north and one for the south, provided forums in which Greenlandic representatives could raise concerns and press for change. Their role was primarily advisory. Greenlandic politicians had long called for greater equality and a stronger voice in decisions affecting Greenland, but the Danish authorities in Copenhagen retained the power to accept or reject their proposals and often resisted the pace of change that representatives sought (Kjær Sørensen, 1983; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 8–10; Rosing Olsen, 2005).

The Second World War disrupted Greenland's links with Denmark. American military bases were established, and new trading links with North America changed how goods reached Greenland (Kjær Sørensen, 1983). After the war, Greenlandic politicians renewed their calls for reform. A visit by Danish journalists in 1946 brought poverty and illness in Greenland to wider public attention in Denmark. The Greenland Commission, appointed in 1948, subsequently documented overcrowded housing and economic inequalities between Danes and Greenlanders. Its 1950 report provided the basis for a wide-ranging programme of reform (Grønlandskommissionen, 1950; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 9–13). In this context, 'development' was presented as both a practical necessity and a moral obligation. Danish standards of housing and schooling provided measures against which conditions in Greenland were judged.

Language policy was central to this vision (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 10–11). Greenlandic had a long-established written tradition and was already the main language of instruction in schools (Berthelsen, 1979, p. 24). Greenlandic advocates of increased Danish teaching saw proficiency in Danish as a means of gaining access to further education and to posts largely held by Danes. They differed, however, over the place that Greenlandic language and culture should retain (Berthelsen, 1979, pp. 24–26; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 10–11).

Greenlandic aspirations for educational and social change included a clear concern for linguistic and cultural continuity. During discussions in the early 1940s, members of Kalâtdlit, a Greenlandic association in Denmark,

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supported learning Danish while insisting that Greenlandic should be protected. They also envisaged development grounded in Greenlandic conditions, with Greenlanders gaining education and helping to direct social change themselves (Lund Jensen, 1989, pp. 288, 292). This distinction matters when interpreting the 1951 initiative: support for Danish-language education should not, in itself, be treated as acceptance of the family separation and linguistic displacement that followed.

Under the 1950 school reform, bilingual schooling was initially planned for four towns. Pupils were to be taught together for the first two years, mainly in Greenlandic. From the third year, they were to be divided into two streams according to assessed ability, with an increasing number of subjects taught in Danish in one of them (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 11).

Tommerup (1979, pp. 41–44) describes how educational reforms promoted Danish-language teaching as part of Greenland's modernisation, while giving limited attention to the cultural and occupational needs of hunting communities. These reforms were contested at the time. Christoffersen and Melgaard (2020, pp. 37–39) document concerns raised during the 1950 parliamentary debates about the cultural consequences of modelling Greenland's schools on those in Denmark and about the future of the Greenlandic language. Against this background, the 1951 initiative can be understood as a welfare intervention that also served a colonial project of social and cultural transformation.

The distinction between the bilingual school and the Danish school matters for the children at the centre of this article. The 16 who returned from Denmark in 1952 had been expected to attend the bilingual school in Godthåb (Nuuk). By the time they returned, they had lost much of their spoken Greenlandic, and they were enrolled in the town's Danish school (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 62). Thiesen (2011, pp. 155–161) describes what happened when she and other pupils from the children's home moved to a new school in 1960. They went to a Greenlandic lesson, only to find that their names were missing from the register. When they asked the headteacher why, he told them that the school lacked the resources to teach them Greenlandic from the beginning.

A critical reading of these reforms leaves room for the different motives of those who supported them. Drawing on Bhabha (1994) and Said (1978), I

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use ‘developmental time’ to describe the assumption that Greenland and Denmark were following the same path and that Denmark was further along it. Fanon’s (1952/1967) analysis of language and colonial status helps explain why the choice of a language of instruction carried such weight. For the children selected in 1951, learning Danish was an explicit objective, and their progress was subject to observation and testing. Maintaining the language, they shared with their families received far less attention (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 43–45, 73–78). It is in this sense that the children became a means through which adults sought to demonstrate progress.

Humanitarian organisations and the authority of care

Humanitarian organisations helped shape how post-war reform in Greenland affected children. As their post-war relief work declined, Save the Children Denmark (Red Barnet) and the Danish Red Cross sought new roles. Reports of poverty and poor health in Greenland attracted public concern in Denmark and gave both organisations an opportunity to extend their work there (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 16–19; Strand, 2005) [i]. Their involvement in the 1951 initiative grew out of two initially separate proposals. One concerned visits to Denmark by Greenlandic children. The other concerned the establishment of children’s homes in Greenland.

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Photograph 2 – Queen Ingrid visiting Greenlandic children at Fedgården, Denmark, in 1951.

Both proposals initially met with resistance. In 1947, Eske Brun of the Danish administration responsible for Greenland questioned whether a children's home was appropriate, given the established practice of placing children with families. The following year, Kalâtdlit (association of Greenlanders living in Denmark), approached Save the Children about visits to Denmark for older children. Save the Children Denmark pursued the proposal, but the administration raised concerns about infectious diseases and difficulties with transport (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 17, 20–21).

At the Danish Red Cross's request, Kai Ludvigsen, a former district physician in South Greenland, travelled to Greenland in the summer of 1949 to assess where the organisation might offer assistance (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 18). In his report from that August, he gave priority to establishing children's homes. He argued that these homes could offer better living conditions and greater opportunities to learn Danish than the foster care available to the children. In his view, these advantages would better prepare them for life in an ever-changing Greenland.

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In September, the Red Cross Greenland Committee decided to pursue the proposal (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 18). Ludvigsen's reasoning brought humanitarian care and a 'civilising' ambition together. In judging what constituted good care, he gave particular weight to the children's future command of the Danish language.

By the summer of 1950, the Greenland Department in Copenhagen was asking Save the Children to arrange a stay in Denmark for a group of younger children. The Greenlandic provincial councils endorsed the proposal, although one member warned that the children might lose enough Greenlandic to struggle at school on their return. By December, the department and Save the Children were working on the assumption that the children would enter Red Cross homes when they returned to Greenland. The department retained authority over admissions (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 22–28) [ii]. What began as a proposal for a temporary stay had become a decision about where the children would grow up and which language they would use at school. In the process, the children's vulnerability took on a different significance. Their family circumstances helped to justify intervention, while decisions about their future were increasingly shaped by the contribution adults expected them to make to Greenland's modernisation.

The surviving records document agreement from a parent or relative in fewer than half of the children's cases and give little indication of what families were told (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 32–33). Thiesen (2011, pp. 4–13) recalls how the decision was explained to her when she was seven. After the priest's third visit, her mother crouched down and told her that she was to go to Denmark to learn Danish with other children. What concerned Thiesen was how far she would be from her mother and siblings. Her recollection gives a child's perspective on a separation that the adults planning the initiative understood in terms of care and future opportunity.

Danish child welfare already gave public authorities and private institutions considerable influence over children's placements (Bjerre, 2020; Faye Jacobsen, 1989). In this case, the authority attached to humanitarian care also helped make a colonial policy objective appear to serve the interests of the individual child (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978). The councillor's warning shows that the risk of language loss was recognised before the children left. Later accounts describe what that loss

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meant for family relationships and for the children's sense of belonging (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 73–82). Fanon's (1952/1967) account of language and colonial belonging, together with Goffman's (1961) work on institutional life, helps explain why decisions about where the children lived and which language they spoke had such a profound effect on their lives. Fanon draws attention to how the language of a colonial power can become a measure of status and acceptance, while the language of the colonised population is devalued. Applied here, his analysis raises questions about what prioritising Danish meant for the children's relationships with their Greenlandic families. Goffman helps explain how institutional authority could make these priorities part of everyday life, placing decisions about the children's conduct and relationships in the hands of staff.

Thiesen (2011, pp. 64–77) provides an example of how these processes came together. She recalls asking a Greenlandic member of staff to teach her and other children some Greenlandic words. The head of the children's home stopped the exchange and instructed the staff member that the children were to remain Danish speaking. Thiesen describes her distress at the thought that she would therefore be unable to speak with her mother and siblings again. Seen through the perspectives of Fanon and Goffman, this episode illustrates how a hierarchy between languages could be enforced through the authority of residential care. The restriction limited her opportunity to recover the language she needed to communicate with her family. Decisions made within the institution thus reached into relationships beyond its walls, making it harder for her to reconnect with the people to whom she felt she belonged.

From policy proposals to a de facto experiment

Two initiatives initially developed in parallel. One involved sending children to Denmark, the other involved building children's homes in Greenland. The two were gradually brought together in the expectation that a group of Danish-speaking children would come to play a leading role in Greenland's development. Of the 22 children sent to Denmark, 16 returned to live in the Red Cross children's home in Nuuk, while six remained in Denmark and were subsequently adopted by their foster families (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 22–28, 49–54).

At the Greenland Department's request, Save the Children agreed to arrange a stay in Denmark for around 20 Greenlandic children. The school

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and health authorities in Greenland would oversee selection, with local priests and district doctors helping to identify children. The plan was for the children to live together under medical supervision before joining Danish foster families. The minutes of 6 July 1950 recorded the expectation that the children would 'form a core' (*danne kerne*) on their return. In the submission it prepared for the councils later that day, the department gave this ambition a more specific educational purpose. The children were to learn enough Danish to enter the new bilingual schools (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 22–23, 27–30).

On 28 July 1950, the Greenlandic provincial councils endorsed both proposals and called for suitable living conditions for the children on their return. One councillor warned that the children might lose enough Greenlandic to struggle at school. The chair, Eske Brun, replied that they could readily relearn it. By December, the department and Save the Children were planning residential care for the returning group (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 24–28). For the children, this changed who would bring them up. Thiesen (2011) recalls lying awake in the home, wondering why she had to live there when she had expected to return to her mother and siblings. Schooling also took a different course. When the children returned in 1952, they had lost so much Greenlandic that they were enrolled in the Danish school in Nuuk (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 62).

These successive decisions reveal the experimental character of the initiative. Adults repeatedly revised the aims and arrangements, with little indication that the children had a say. Their health, conduct and command of Danish could later be presented as evidence of the initiative's success, while the loss of everyday contact with family and language carried less weight in those judgements (Bhabha, 1994; Goffman, 1961; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 67, 85–86; Said, 1978).

Children as objects of optimisation

The selection process illustrates how vulnerability was reframed as potential (Bryld, 2018; Walling, 2004). The original criteria called for healthy children aged six or seven who had lost both parents and were judged to be highly intelligent. When too few children were put forward, the authorities widened the age range in West Greenland to between five and eight and began to consider children with only one surviving parent or guardian. The Greenland Department was reluctant to relax the

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intelligence requirement substantially. It also pointed to the agreement already reached with Save the Children Denmark and the publicity the initiative had received. The need to find 20 children therefore shaped decisions about eligibility alongside the expectation that their educational progress would demonstrate the value of the initiative (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 29–31, 37).

Telegrams and correspondence reproduced in the historical inquiry show how these shifting criteria were applied locally. Parish priests, who were also responsible for the local schools, were instructed to nominate children in consultation with district doctors. Their recommendations almost always recorded the children's family and support circumstances, while the information they gave about health and academic ability varied considerably. One priest asked whether a child whose surviving parent was too ill to earn a living could be considered. The instructions also distinguished between mothers and fathers. A child whose mother had died could be nominated if the father agreed to placement in the children's home on return. Priests were initially discouraged from nominating children described as fatherless because officials believed their mothers might want them back. Children from both groups were eventually selected (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 30–34, 37). The prospect that a mother might wish to resume care of her child was thus treated as a possible obstacle to the experiment.

The question of how far participation was voluntary extends beyond whether physical force was used. Most of the children selected had a living parent. The surviving records document agreement from a parent or relative in fewer than half of the cases and give little indication of what families were told. The circular sent to priests described a year in Denmark followed by placement in a children's home in Greenland. How much of this was explained in conversations with families is harder to establish (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 29–33, 84).

Thiesen (2011, pp. 4–13) recalls wondering, on the day before her departure, when she would come home to her mother. She later learnt that some of her relatives had declined to send their children. Her account shows that refusal was possible in some families. It also preserves a distinction easily lost in the official correspondence. An adult's agreement did not establish that a child understood how long they would be away or whether they would return to live with their family. In a colonial setting

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marked by unequal authority and by the different standing accorded to Danish and Greenlandic, it matters how freely families felt able to question a proposal put to them by a priest acting for the school authorities. It matters equally whether they understood what agreeing might mean for their child's return to family life and continued use of Greenlandic (Bhabha, 1994; Kjær Sørensen, 1983; Rosing Olsen, 2005; Said, 1978).

The children arrived in Denmark in stages. The largest group, comprising 15 children, reached Copenhagen on 7 June 1951 and went on to Save the Children's holiday camp at Fedgården, near Faxe. There the children received medical and dental attention. In July, the school psychologist Knud Binzer assessed the 17 children then present. He acknowledged that the tests were unfamiliar to the children and that he lacked comparable material from Greenland. Even so, he judged six children suitable for the proposed Danish-language classes, seven possibly suitable and four unsuitable. When he returned in October, he assessed how the stay had affected the children. He reported little progress in spoken Danish but concluded that they had benefited physically and psychologically (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 36, 38–40, 43–45).

Thiesen (2011, pp. 4–13) recalls the uncertainty of her first night at Fedgården. The children slept in a room with 11 bunk beds, and she wondered how long they would remain there. Frightened by unfamiliar sounds and the older boys' stories about German soldiers, she hid beneath her duvet and whispered, *'Mam, Mam, come and get me'* (translated from Danish). She also remembers the beauty of the flowers, walking barefoot on grass and collecting snails with the other children. Enjoyment of these new surroundings could coexist with a longing to return to her mother.

Her recollections of Queen Ingrid's visit bring that longing into particular focus. She describes the preparations, including an extra cutting of the grass, and the children dressing in their best clothes. As they waited, she wondered whether she would be going home to her mother after the Queen had visited (Thiesen, 2011, pp. 4–13). Her account places the public importance of the occasion alongside a child's continuing uncertainty about when she would return home.

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Photograph 3 - Greenlandic children gathered around an open book with two adults at Fedgården, Denmark, in 1951.

At Fedgården, care and classification became closely connected. Adults attended to the children's health while also recording and comparing their behaviour, language and perceived abilities. Binzer's reports went to Save the Children and the Greenland Department, although their subsequent use in educational decisions remains unclear (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 44–45). Goffman's (1961) work on institutional life helps explain the significance of these judgements. The children's family circumstances had helped to justify their selection. Once in Denmark, their responses to unfamiliar tasks were used to judge their suitability for a particular educational route. In this way, the same children whose vulnerability had justified intervention could be presented as evidence of what colonial modernisation might achieve.

Denmark: Foster families, attachment, and adoption

In the last week of October 1951, most of the children moved from Fedgården to Danish foster homes for what was expected to be a stay of about six months (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 41). Some of the children later recalled warmth and affection, alongside uncertainty about when they would go home. Thiesen (2011, pp. 34–38) describes being unhappy

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in her first placement with a doctor's family and feeling welcome in her second foster home at Brøderup. When her foster siblings asked why she could not stay with them, their parents reminded them that she had a mother in Greenland. Thiesen also remembers continuing to wear the trousers she had brought from Greenland after they had become too short. Her foster mother, usually particular about clothing, did not object. Tove, her foster sister, later suggested that this exception reflected Thiesen's attachment to the trousers, which reminded her of her mother (Thiesen, 2011, pp. 34–38).

Such attachments mattered to the children, even as foster placement deepened their separation from family and culture. At Fedgården they had continued to speak Greenlandic with one another. In their foster homes, Danish became the language of everyday life (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 41–42, 85).

In early 1952, as it became clear that the children's home in Nuuk would not be ready on time, the Greenland Department received the first requests from foster parents wishing to adopt. Save the Children Denmark subsequently cited the longer stay and the attachments formed during it as reasons to support adoption. Six children remained in Denmark when the other 16 left for Greenland in September 1952. All six applications were eventually granted, the last in 1962 (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 47–53). For these children, adoption marked a departure from the stated purpose of the initiative. A delay in building the home had become part of the justification for a permanent change in who would bring them up.

The distinction between fostering and adoption is important here. In Greenlandic kinship traditions, children placed with other carers often retained contact with their birth families (Tróndheim, 2010). Danish adoption practice at the time generally separated children from their birth families through arrangements that restricted contact and knowledge of one another. However, five of the six adoptions were governed by the Danish adoption law of 1923, under which the children retained inheritance rights from their birth parents (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 46–47). The legal position must therefore be distinguished from the separation experienced in practice. The lasting rupture lay in the loss of everyday family relationships and the difficulty of sustaining ties across distance and language.

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The adoption records show why formal consent needs to be distinguished from what families understood that consent to mean. Consent was given by a surviving parent in three cases, by a Greenlandic foster father who was also the child's guardian in one, and by specially appointed guardians in the remaining two. The procedure required declarations in both Greenlandic and Danish (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 51). Yet one adopted person later recalled their father explaining that he had understood his signature to authorise long-term foster care (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 77). The other families' understanding and the freedom each felt to refuse are harder to establish. The colonial inequality lay in who defined the arrangement. Danish authorities determined what adoption would mean, while families in Greenland were asked to consent to those terms (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 50–53; Rosing Olsen, 2005).

Residential care, language loss, and controlled belonging

The remaining 16 children left Copenhagen on 25 September 1952. Their ship reached Nuuk on 5 October, and the following morning they moved into the newly built Danish Red Cross children's home (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 54). The home's diaries and reports, discussed in the historical inquiry, describe structured routines and careful attention to nutrition, health and hygiene. By these measures, the home appeared well run. Yet the staff also decided when children could see their families and how long visits could last. Six of the children had mothers and siblings living in Nuuk, but even for them recorded visits were occasional. Family contact nevertheless varied. Some children spent regular summer holidays with relatives, while others had only a single stay. For seven of the 16, the surviving records mention no holiday with their Greenlandic family (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 56–58, 61–62). In organising children's daily lives, the home also shaped which relationships they could sustain.

Thiesen's (2011, pp. 83–90) recollection of a visit to her mother's house shows what these arrangements could mean for a child. She and her siblings sat together on their mother's bed. She touched her older sister's plaits, her sister ruffled her short hair, and their younger brother tickled her. After an hour, the member of staff accompanying her said it was time to go home. For Thiesen, home was the house she was being asked to leave. Her account shows both the intimacy the siblings retained and how little say they had over the time they spent together.

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Danish dominated daily life at the home. On their return, the children had lost much of their ability to speak Greenlandic. The matron and the headteacher agreed to enrol them in the Danish school in Nuuk, although the original plan had been for them to attend the new bilingual school. Greenlandic lessons began at the home during their second school year. Accounts differ over how far the children were free to use the language outside those lessons. On 20 January 1956, *Grønlands Radioavis* (Greenland Radio News) reported that the home's acting matron, Terna Dahl, denied that children were forbidden to speak Greenlandic at the home (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 63). One former resident, however, recalled staff being reprimanded for teaching the children Greenlandic words (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 62–63, 73–74). A school placement made in response to language loss thus reduced the children's everyday opportunities to recover their language.

Thiesen's account of her 1955 summer holiday with her family in Egedesminde (now Aasiaat), in the Disko Bay region of western Greenland, shows how complicated returning home could become. An argument with her sister about washing up brought their difficulties in communicating into everyday family life. To her surprise, she found herself missing the children's home. By the end of the holiday, however, she was enjoying being with her sister and finding it easier to understand her family. She was deeply upset when told that she had to leave (Thiesen, 2011, pp. 113–132). Her account shows why a visit home could be both difficult and valuable, and why rebuilding familiarity required time together.

Language also shaped how the children were received beyond the home. Some recalled being recognised as Greenlandic by appearance, only to have their belonging questioned when they spoke Danish. In Nuuk, children who struggled to speak Greenlandic were sometimes told to go home (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 78–79). Fanon (1952/1967) and Bhabha (1994) help explain the colonial expectations behind these encounters. Fluency in Danish was encouraged as a sign of progress, yet it could also mark the children as outsiders in Greenland. In Goffman's (1959, 1963) terms, others could define the encounter before the children had much opportunity to present themselves on their own terms.

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The harm lay partly in the ordinary arrangements of a home that fed, clothed, educated and cared for the children. Some formed close attachments to staff and to one another, and some continued to visit after they had left (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 65–67). At the same time, decisions about schooling, visits and holidays limited many children's opportunities to share in the everyday lives of their own families. This distinction between how adults assessed an institution and how children experienced it also runs through historical research on residential care in Denmark (Faye Jacobsen, 1989; Grothe Nielsen, 1986; Rytter, 2011). In Nuuk, one former resident recalled being asked to perform for Danish visitors so that they could see how well the children spoke Danish and how well they behaved (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 79). What visitors could recognise as evidence of successful modernisation revealed little about whether a child could still hold a conversation with a parent or sibling.

Long-term consequences and fractured lives

The children's lives took different paths, some gained qualifications, found steady work and established families of their own. Others struggled to complete their education, remain in employment or sustain family relationships. Accounts of their adult lives describe alcohol and other substance misuse, mental distress, periods in hospital, homelessness and social isolation (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 69–72). Of the 22 children, 16 spent most of their adult lives outside Greenland, and 13 died before the age of 70 (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 69–70).

A recurring theme in the children's later accounts is the difficulty of feeling at home in either Greenland or Denmark. For many, losing the ability to speak Greenlandic meant losing the ease of everyday conversation with parents and siblings. Thiesen (2011, pp. 155–161) describes returning to live with her mother in Egedesminde at the age of 22 while undertaking a preparatory placement in a local kindergarten. She spent ten months with her family and remembers this as the best period she had with them. During this time, she tried to recover her Greenlandic by listening to news bulletins in both languages and asking her siblings about unfamiliar words. In time, she could follow most conversations, yet she still hesitated to speak in company. She remembered the looks she received when someone addressed her in Greenlandic and she could not reply.

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Other accounts reveal a similar form of double exclusion. In Greenland, some of the children recalled being teased by their peers for speaking Danish. In Denmark, some of those adopted recalled being stared at or questioned about where they came from and why they did not speak Danish fluently (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 78–81). Goffman's (1963) account of stigma helps explain how speaking Danish, an achievement the institutions had encouraged, could later be taken by others as evidence that the children were insufficiently Greenlandic. Fanon's (1952/1967) analysis of racialised experience illuminates a further difficulty. Others read the children's appearance as a sign of who they were and how they ought to speak, leaving them repeatedly having to explain a childhood over which they had had little control.

The distinction between identity and belonging matters here. Identity concerns how people understand and describe themselves. Belonging also involves feeling at home, being accepted by others and being able to take part in the everyday life of a family or community (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). A person could identify as Greenlandic and still struggle to join a family conversation or find that others questioned their place in the community. In a different context, Christensen et al. (2024, p. 78) describe the importance of these relationships in their research on homelessness in Greenland. One participant valued having a place where they could invite their children and grandchildren to visit. This account illustrates how a sense of home can depend on being able to sustain relationships with others.

In their own accounts, the children repeatedly linked the loss of Greenlandic and the restrictions on family contact to grief, isolation and uncertainty about where they belonged. Their adult circumstances varied, and the extent to which these childhood experiences contributed to later difficulties remains hard to establish for any one person. What the accounts show more clearly is the persistence of grief and estrangement. Even when people sought out relatives or began to relearn Greenlandic, rebuilding the familiarity that comes from years of talking and living together could remain difficult many years later (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 73–82; Thiesen, 2011).

Educational selection also brought personal costs for some pupils in later years. In their study of Greenlandic schooling, Christoffersen and Melgaard (2020, pp. 51–52) describe how one former pupil, Marianne,

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saw her parents only once a year after moving to boarding school in Nuuk at the age of 11. She linked that upbringing to difficulties with her sense of identity. Other pupils recalled the pressure of joining a more advanced class or meeting teachers' expectations in Danish. These later accounts provide a wider context for examining how an educational opportunity appeared from a child's perspective.

Later school stays, adoptions and public recognition

Educational stays in Denmark continued in the decades after 1951. One later initiative, the *præparandarrangement*, was a preparatory school scheme that operated from 1961 to 1976. Approximately 1,530 Greenlandic pupils in the fifth, sixth or seventh year of schooling spent a year living with Danish host families and attending school in Denmark. Teachers' assessments and tests informed selection, although school staff could differ in how they understood and applied the criteria. From the 1965/66 school year, all pupils on this preparatory route were sent to Denmark. A local option became available again in 1971/72, when preparatory classes were re-established in Greenland. For pupils seeking to continue along this route during the intervening years, declining the stay therefore carried an educational cost (Holleufer & Ydesen, 2023; Jensen, 2001).

These pupils were older than the children sent away in 1951. They generally had a firmer grounding in Greenlandic, and their stays were planned to last a school year, with a return to their families afterwards. Accounts of later school stays nevertheless describe homesickness, tensions with host families and uncertainty about identity. Returning home could also be difficult when a year apart had altered relationships on both sides (Jensen, 2001; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 88). Age, the expected duration of a stay and continuity of family contact all mattered. So too did the practical freedom to decline a place. The later school arrangements differed in important respects from those of 1951, but the sources discussed here do not establish whether those differences reflected lessons consciously drawn from the earlier experiment (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 87–88).

Adoption from Greenland to Denmark also continued during these decades and followed a different course from the school stays. In her review of adoption files from 1964 to 1979, Tróndheim (2010b, pp. 45–46) identified 164 children sent to Denmark for adoption. She counted

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cases for which she could establish that an adoption had been granted. She notes that children could already have been living with prospective adoptive parents, in a children's home or in hospital before the legal arrangements were completed. The distinction matters here. The expectation that pupils would return to their families at the end of a school year cannot be extended to children who left Greenland for adoption.

For the 22 children sent away in 1951, a formal apology from the Danish state came decades after the event. By then, survivors had already spoken publicly, and Bryld's interviews had brought their experiences to a wider audience (Bryld, 2018; Thiesen, 2011). On 8 December 2020, alongside publication of the joint Danish–Greenlandic historical inquiry, the Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, issued a written apology. In February 2022, the state agreed to pay DKK 250,000 to each of the six surviving participants. On 9 March 2022, Frederiksen apologised to them in person in Copenhagen. She described the consequences as inhumane and acknowledged that adults had put their own needs and plans ahead of the children's need for security and stability (Statsministeriet, 2020, 2022; Synnestvedt & Sørensen, 2022). Speaking to KNR before the ceremony, one survivor, Kristine Heinesen, explained that hearing the state acknowledge its mistake would give her a measure of peace (Synnestvedt, 2022). Her words convey what recognition could mean to someone who had waited much of her life for it.

Children's rights and uneven protection

A defining feature of the 1951 initiative was how little say the children had in decisions that shaped their lives. Adults selected them for the journey to Denmark and decided where they would live on their return. The historical inquiry found evidence of consent from parents or guardians in fewer than half of the selection cases. The surviving records give little indication that anyone asked the children themselves what they wanted (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 29–37).

Thiesen (2011, 'Mæslingeepidemi' (Measles epidemic) section) recalls looking forward to moving to Egedesminde with her mother and siblings. She had already begun to imagine the town and their new home when the matron called her into her office and told her that she would not be going with the rest of her family. Her account illustrates a wider feature of child welfare practice at the time. Adults assessed children's needs, abilities

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and future prospects, while children had few opportunities to question what adults decided on their behalf (Grothe Nielsen, 1986; Faye Jacobsen, 1989).

By 1951, the League of Nations' Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924) had set out adults' responsibilities to care for children and protect them from exploitation. It carried moral authority but imposed no binding obligation to hear children's views. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989 and in force from 1990, gave participation a firmer legal basis. Article 12 recognises the right of children capable of forming their own views to express them freely on matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight according to their age and maturity. Article 3 requires the child's best interests to be 'a primary consideration' in actions concerning them (United Nations, 1989, arts. 3, 12).

These protections took effect at different times within the Danish Realm. When Denmark ratified the Convention in July 1991, it initially excluded Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Greenland's parliament endorsed the Convention in March 1992, and Denmark withdrew the territorial exclusion on 11 May 1993 (Denmark, 2005, paras. 428–429). A similar sequence followed when Denmark ratified the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography in 2003. Greenland and the Faroe Islands were again initially excluded. Denmark withdrew that exclusion on 10 October 2016. The Protocol's obligations concerning prevention, the criminalisation of specified offences and assistance to children who had suffered exploitation then extended to both territories (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2003, 2016).

Individual complaints follow a different legal route. A separate Optional Protocol on a communications procedure allows complaints to be brought by or on behalf of children before the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. When Denmark acceded to this Protocol in 2015, it excluded Greenland and the Faroe Islands (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2015). The current UN treaty record continues to list that territorial exclusion (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). This distinction has a practical consequence for children in Greenland. The Convention recognises their right to be heard, but the additional procedure for bringing alleged violations before the Committee has not been extended to Greenland.

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Read alongside the 1951 initiative, this later history raises a recurring question about who can call welfare institutions to account. The circumstances differ, and the treaty decisions cannot explain the earlier treatment of the children. In 1951, officials and humanitarian organisations could describe a placement as beneficial while giving a child little opportunity to explain what separation from family meant to them. It was only in 2019 that the Danish and Greenlandic governments agreed to commission a historical inquiry into the initiative and its consequences (Naalakkersuisut, 2019; Lund Jensen et al., 2020). For contemporary residential childcare, the practical question is what happens while a decision can still be changed. Children need to understand what is being proposed, to speak in a language in which they can express themselves and to know whom they can turn to if they believe their views have been overlooked (United Nations, 1989, arts. 12, 20).

What this history asks of contemporary residential child care

The 1951 experiment raises an enduring question for residential childcare. Whose hope for the future is a child expected to fulfil? The adults who planned the initiative saw the children's acquisition of Danish as a means of widening their educational opportunities and advancing Greenland's modernisation. The children themselves had little say in either ambition. For practitioners, the case invites scepticism when the benefits promised for a child's future receive more attention than what the child stands to lose in the present (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 68–69).

Children's participation, the continued use of their first language and the stability of their closest relationships are safeguards in residential care. Each has practical implications when a placement is proposed or reviewed. A child needs an opportunity to say what matters to them, to use the language in which they can best express themselves and to see how the adults making the decision have taken their views into account. A promise of better schooling carries a particular cost if pursuing it leaves a child unable to talk with a parent or sibling (Thiesen, 2011; United Nations, 1989, arts. 12, 20(3)). Article 20(3) of the Convention requires decisions about alternative care to give due regard to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background (United Nations, 1989, art. 20(3)).

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A further lesson concerns what residential institutions record and how they judge their work. At the children's home in Nuuk, staff recorded the children's health, school progress and behaviour in considerable detail. The historical inquiry found much less systematic information about their lives after they left care (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 67–68). Thiesen's recollections show what a school report could easily miss. She remembers winning a prize for diligence. She also describes her relief when she left the children's home and could live and study alongside young Greenlanders from across the country (Thiesen, 2011, pp. 155–161). For residential services, this raises questions about whose account of progress enters the record and what staff can learn by listening to young people after they leave care (Goffman, 1961; Faye Jacobsen, 1989; Rytter, 2011). Such follow-up matters because the social and emotional conditions of childhood can shape health and well-being much later in life (Diderichsen et al., 2011).

Young people from Greenland continue to choose educational stays in Denmark under substantially different circumstances. In the 2020/21 academic year, 228 pupils from Greenland began a stay at one of 79 Danish *efterskoler*, independent residential schools for young people (Efterskoleforeningen, 2021, p. 1). Pupils often use the school year to strengthen their Danish, develop greater independence and prepare for further education. Efterskoleforeningen (2021, pp. 1–2) identified better guidance before the move and closer cooperation with advisers in the Greenlandic Houses in Denmark as ways to help more pupils complete their stay. The distinction from 1951 lies in the pupils' age, their choice to attend and the agreed educational purpose and duration of the stay. Even where a young person welcomes the opportunity, maintaining contact with family across the distance deserves explicit attention.

For practitioners in both Greenland and Denmark, this history also calls for care in how language and kinship are understood. As Danish became increasingly important for access to further education, proficiency in Danish shaped the opportunities open to Greenlandic pupils (Berthelsen, 1979; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 10–12). In residential childcare today, a child's first language and relationships with extended family can sustain a sense of belonging through a change of placement (Forsoningskommissionen, 2017; Tróndheim, 2010b). A care plan should therefore identify the people the child wants to stay close to, how they

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can continue to speak their language together and who will take responsibility for making that contact possible.

Conclusion: From experiment to afterlife — ulnerability, learning, and ethical memory

The relocation of 22 Greenlandic children to Denmark in 1951 stands as a distinctive episode in the history of child welfare and colonial reform. Six of the children remained in Denmark and were adopted. The other 16 returned to Greenland in October 1952, where they entered the Danish Red Cross children's home in Nuuk. The initiative was never repeated in this form. Nor did it produce the group of bilingual pupils whom its organisers had expected to play a leading part in Greenland's modernisation. For many of the children, the most enduring consequence was a loss they could describe in much more personal terms. They had grown apart from their families, and some found it difficult to feel at home in either Greenland or Denmark (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 54, 68–72, 86–88; Thiesen, 2011).

The experiment emerged from the post-war drive to modernise Greenland at a time when decisive political and administrative authority still rested in Copenhagen. It brought together humanitarian concern for children, the search by Danish charities for new fields of work and a political commitment to expanding Danish-language education (Bryld, 2018; Grønlandskommissionen, 1950; Strand, 2005). Its purpose and arrangements continued to change after the initial decisions had been taken. The organisers widened the selection criteria, extended the stay in Denmark when the home in Nuuk was delayed and accepted applications from foster parents to adopt. When the remaining children returned to Greenland, their loss of Greenlandic became a reason to place them in Danish-language classes. What one decision had helped bring about became the justification for the next (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020).

The Danish Red Cross records discussed by Lund Jensen et al. (2020, pp. 54–68) describe close attention to the children's health, nutrition, hygiene and schooling in Nuuk. Accounts of the Danish foster placements give a more varied picture. Thiesen (2011, pp. 34–38), for example, recalls how unhappy she was in her first foster home and how warmly she came to regard her second foster family. Both experiences belong in the history of her stay. Affection for people who cared for her in Denmark could coexist with grief over separation from her mother and siblings. For the children who returned to Nuuk, the home's visiting arrangements and the predominance of Danish gave them few opportunities to recover the

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everyday intimacy they had once shared with their families (Bryld, 2018; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 73–82).

For the six children who remained in Denmark, adoption gave what had begun as a temporary foster placement a different legal status. The inquiry records instances of parents or guardians agreeing to adoption, alongside correspondence that raises doubts about what those involved understood the agreement to mean. A family's willingness for a child to remain with foster parents did not, in itself, establish that the family understood what this would mean for future contact. This distinction mattered in a setting where Greenlandic arrangements for bringing up a child in another household had often allowed relationships with the child's family of origin to continue (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 49–53; Tróndheim, 2009, 2010).

The children's adult lives followed different paths. Some gained qualifications found steady employment and established families. Others experienced prolonged social isolation and difficulty in education, employment or family life. Of the 22, 16 spent most of their adult lives outside Greenland (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 68–72). Educational achievement and steady employment could coexist with lasting estrangement from family and community. Several participants described how others recognised them as Greenlandic by their appearance yet questioned their belonging when they spoke Danish. The inquiry describes a kind of 'double homelessness', in which a person could feel estranged both from family and from the wider Greenlandic community (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, p. 87). There were also efforts to recover those ties. Thiesen (2011, pp. 155–161) recalls visiting her aunt and cousins after leaving the children's home. She describes the joy those visits brought her as she came to know relatives with whom she had previously had little opportunity to spend time.

It is impossible to know how any individual child's life would have unfolded had they remained with their family. The evidence is clearer about how particular decisions affected the relationships available to them. The children left Greenland at an age when they were still acquiring their first language. By the time many of them met their families again, ordinary conversation had become difficult. Regulated visits then limited the time in which parents, children and siblings might have grown familiar with one another again. For those adopted in Denmark, the distance and the adoption arrangements presented further obstacles. These consequences can be traced to decisions about where children lived, whom they saw and which language they were expected to speak. The colonial assumptions of the period help explain why adults regarded those decisions as reasonable and why the costs to the children received so

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little attention (Brun, 1985; Bryld, 2018; Kjær Sørensen, 1983; Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 86–87; Rosing Olsen, 2005).

The contrast between the extent of the documentation and the limited follow-up is striking. Staff recorded the children's progress in considerable detail. In 1955, the matron noted a further assessment intended to establish whether the children had changed since they were assessed in Denmark. Yet the historical inquiry found little evidence that the responsible organisations brought this material together to assess the experiment or followed the children systematically after they left care. When the Greenlandic councils discussed further stays in Denmark in 1959, the earlier initiative and what might be learnt from it went unmentioned (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 87–88).

Taken together, these findings show how children identified as vulnerable were expected to fulfil educational and political ambitions over which they had little influence. Danish officials and humanitarian organisations could take a genuine interest in the children's health and schooling while giving far less weight to the relationships on which their welfare depended. This is the sense in which the article understands the experiment as a form of social exploitation. The children's progress was expected to demonstrate the promise of reform, while the children themselves bore the consequences when its demands came into conflict with their need for family, language and belonging (Bryld, 2018; Kjær Sørensen, 1983; Rosing Olsen, 2005; Strand, 2005).

For contemporary residential childcare, the ethical responsibility begins while a decision can still be changed. A child offered an educational opportunity away from home needs to know where they will live and for how long. They also need to know how they will keep in touch with those who matter to them and what will happen if they wish to return. Practitioners also need to hear what the child thinks they might lose. A placement may look successful in a school report while a child is gradually losing the language in which they speak to a parent. Taking that possibility seriously gives practical meaning to participation, protection and continuity of care (Forsoningskommissionen, 2017; United Nations, 1989, arts. 12, 20(3)). The responsibility for keeping those relationships possible belongs to the adults who arrange and oversee the placement.

What does a placement allow a child to keep?

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Photograph source credits

Photograph 1:

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About the author

Kevin Perry is an Associate Professor of Social Work at Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland, in Nuuk. He has more than 30 years' experience in social work practice, teaching and research in Britain, Denmark and Greenland. Before entering academia, he worked in open and secure residential childcare settings in County Durham, followed by street-based youth work and crime prevention in Denmark. He holds a PhD in Social Sciences from Roskilde University and a master's degree in social work from Aalborg University. His research explores trust and distrust, stigma, social exclusion and the relationships between professionals and people experiencing marginalisation, particularly in intercultural encounters. His current work focuses on homelessness and outreach in Greenland, combining qualitative fieldwork with teaching and professional development for social care practitioners.

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[i] Save the Children was founded in Denmark on 14 March 1945 to assist children affected by war outside Denmark. As its relief programmes came to an end in the late 1940s, it considered a merger with the Danish Red Cross and even dissolution. The Danish Red Cross had established its Greenland Committee in 1946. The two organisations were represented on one another's committees and organised joint collections. Officials from the Greenland administration also sat on committees concerned with the organisations' work in Greenland (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 16–18; Strand, 2005).

[ii] The minutes of a meeting between Save the Children and the Greenland Department on 6 July 1950 already described the proposed stay as an 'experiment'. The selection criteria and plans for the children's return continued to change. The earliest surviving record identified in the inquiry that explicitly refers to placing the returning children in Red Cross homes is the account of the meeting on 1 December 1950. Its wording suggests that the matter had been discussed earlier (Lund Jensen et al., 2020, pp. 22–23, 26–27).

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