

## The Michael Sieff 2009 Conference: The Reception Years

### Summing up and commentary by Michael Little

#### **The contribution of the Sieff Foundation**

The great contribution of the Michael Sieff Foundation has been to bring people together who would not otherwise meet and persuade them to talk about subjects they might otherwise avoid.

For 20 years, thanks to the skill of its founder Elizabeth Haslam, the Foundation has made a virtue of listening closely to a range of opinion and incorporating it into a single coherent perspective.

Arguably, in a period when government that has been self confident in its attitude to providing solutions to problems, the full benefit of the Foundation's work has been felt less. Now, with financial constraints impending, and a change of political administration increasingly likely, the time is ripe for more reflection and collective problem solving.

#### **Progress during the last decade**

The conference has captured the significant progress made in the last decade. The focus on child outcomes, for example via Every Child Matters, has provided a strong conceptual framework. The greater attention given to children's rights, notwithstanding the limitations on the contribution of the Commissioner for Children, has also been welcome. Major inroads have been made into child poverty, although we remain some way off achieving targets.

At this conference much attention has been given to children's centres. The government is on target to build 3,500 by 2010. We heard from Derby where there are 18 serving 16,000 children. We heard about their modest, positive impact on child well-being. Again, challenges remain, relating for instance to the considerable variation in provision and the failure in many cases to reach children who can most benefit.

#### **What is the point?**

We have considered the objective of better early years provision. In some parts of Scandinavia children do not learn to read until relatively late, but in the UK reading and writing early has become a primary goal. We heard that in China they are using early years to boost the cognitive abilities of the population, to make the country economically competitive. In Singapore they are investing in social and emotional regulation to create another sort of competitive edge. As conference presentations reminded us, development is neither linear nor uniform. In places where there are high levels of difficulty - in a country where levels of childhood disorder exceed those in competitor countries- what amount of change can be achieved?

#### **The workforce**

The conference has highlighted the significant difficulty in getting the best people to work with children, and getting the best from those people. This is an emerging science. For example, we are beginning to understand from experimental studies that a small proportion, maybe ten per cent, of practitioners delivering interventions that are known to improve the health and development of children actually leave their clients worse off.

At the conference we have reflected on the low status of parts of the children's workforce - hardly surprising given the extraordinarily low pay some receive. Much has been done to address this issue, but much more is needed.

## Systems and outcomes

Emphasis - but still not enough - has been placed on the science of what works, for whom, when and why. Better outcomes for children will also require understanding of the behaviour of large systems. They manage a high proportion of expenditure on children. A large local authority will spend over £1bn per annum on the children it supports, but only a tiny proportion of local authority activity is based on high quality evidence.

Cost-benefit analysis is one of several areas of science that combines what works evidence with an understanding of system behaviour. It demonstrates for example (i) how the cost of some effective interventions, such as HeadStart, exceed the economic returns, (ii) that some interventions with good returns on investment can only be applied to a small population, (iii) that some interventions with modest returns on investment can reach a universal population, (iv) that some interventions supported by policy makers are not effective and are a huge drain on the public purse.

This confluence of systems and science may persuade local authorities to invest more wisely in high quality evidence. Intelligence functions that offer local epidemiology, reliable cost-benefit analysis, systematic reviews of what works, service design to promote fidelity of intervention and experimental evaluations to estimate the impact of local pilots may become a priority among local authorities that seek to use science to improve child well-being.

## Public health

Like most multi-disciplinary meetings these days, this year's Sieff conference has focused on targeted prevention and intervention. Harvard public health specialist David Hemenway's *While We Were Sleeping* is a reminder of the power of public health in saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of children, and improving the quality of life of millions more. He provides a striking catalogue of what can be achieved by backing up often quite small technological advances with a change in the law. In the relationship he describes, the law does not inflict a change in behaviour; rather it gives people permission to change their behaviour. (Car makers wanted to put seatbelts in cars, and we the public wanted to wear them; changing the law permitted companies and individuals to do what they wanted.)

Ted Melhuish explained the potential impact on child outcomes of a healthy home environment. What can be done to alter behaviour to promote such an environment?

## Conclusion

It is important to build on the successes of the last decade and to be more franker failures and continuing challenges. There is also scope for deeper reflection on what we want to achieve for children, nationally, locally and within families. Are we trying to use early years initiatives to compete with China or Singapore?

Our deliberations should incorporate the people who lead large systems such as local authority children's services. We need to know more about how children's services operate, to pay more attention to the realities facing children's services staff, to be more realistic about what can be achieved in different jurisdictions, and to be more respectful of the efforts of leaders who try to steer these supertankers of provision on a more fruitful course.

I hope we can pay more attention to the workforce, and establish why practitioners do not always do what is asked of them (and with what result), why some practitioners achieve good outcomes regardless of the training and support they are given and why others make the lives of children worse, even when they follow a prescribed course.

Finally, I hope that the Sieff Foundation, guided by Elizabeth Haslam, will continue to play a key role in bringing together people who do not normally meet and, in the process, usher in a new period of well considered collective action.

