'The theory doesn't work here': the teenage bedroom in a residential special school

Nick Pike

Abstract

Drawing on non-participant ethnographic observation, this paper explores some of the challenges for residential child care staff of operationalising an 'ordinary living' policy in a residential special school for children with complex learning difficulties and challenging behaviour. In particular, it explores the complex and multi-faceted uses made of teenage residents' bedrooms and describes a critical role for child care practitioners in making sense of competing priorities and constructing a workable practice framework.

Keywords

Corresponding author:

Nick Pike, nicholas.pike2@ntlworld.com

Introduction

This article draws on an ethnographic study of a residential special school for young people with complex learning difficulties and challenging behaviour (Pike, 2013). At the time of the research the school had 42 pupils residing in a rural area on the borders of England and Wales. The study involved 75 hours of non – participant observation carried out in the autumn term of 2010, in one of the school's residential units, a 7 – bedded unit which I call 'The Hawthorns'.

Ethical clearance for the research and for subsequent publication was given both by the research site and by the Social Science Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University. Unless otherwise indicated, all observations are taken from contemporaneously recorded ethnographic field notes. All names of residents and staff have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Social institutions that cater for people whose impairments or behaviour have led them to be excluded from the community mainstream can be thought of as 'liminal spaces'. 'Liminal' in this context means something which sits on the borders of mainstream society and instead of following expected social conventions is characterised by multiple anomalies (Murphy, Scheer, Murphy & Mack, 1988; Willett & Deegan, 2001). It is often argued that participants in such liminal spaces seek to reduce the anomalies by the creation of what Fox calls 'a social micro-climate' defined as a 'social environment' 'with behaviour patterns, norms and values that may be different from the cultural mainstream' (2005 p. 89; also: Spencer, Hersch, Aldridge, Anderson & Ulbrich, 2001).

Residential child care settings, including special schools are good examples of this process. Ironically, however, as in most child care settings, the 'social micro-climate' of a residential special school is based upon replicating as closely as possible, the routines and rhythms of what Ward (2004) calls 'ordinary living'. In the residential setting, though, such 'ordinary living' is simulated, rather than replicated (Ward, 2006).

Ordinary Living Philosophy

This article is concerned with just one aspect of the operationalising of simulated 'ordinary life': namely the way in which residents' bedrooms are conceptualised, used, decorated and furnished.

Research in the sociology and social anthropology of family life has identified what Morgan(1996; 2011) calls 'family' practices , the everyday taken-for-granted ways in which family members live their lives and develop their relationships (Smart, 2007). Central to these ideas are the possession and display of what Miller (2008) simply calls 'things' .

In this article, I discuss the school's attempt to replicate one aspect of those family practices: those pertaining to the individually decorated and furnished teenage bedroom equipped with appropriate furniture, clothing and electronic media, and suggest that the 'ordinary life' policy becomes distorted by the complex purposes and meanings that surround the part played by the bedroom in a resident's life in a residential special school.

In respect of accommodation, at the time of the research, the school adhered strongly to the 'ordinary living' approach, as the 2010 prospectus makes clear:

> Our students live in small group residential bungalows built
> around a central courtyard. We create homely environments that
> provide life skills training as well as having all the home comforts
> you would expect.

Even though 'ordinary living' in the residential child care setting is simulated, rather than replicated (Ward, 2006):

> the apparently simple concept of the ordinary, in fact turns out to
> be potentially problematic... For example, children who have
> lived for any length of time in families or other settings in which
> other people's behaviour is persistently confused, violent,
> bizarre, neglectful, abusive or otherwise distorted have learned
> that **that** [emphasis original] is the norm with the result that

> what we might call 'ordinary' or 'common sense' may be
> experienced by them as confusing, bizarre or provocative (Ward,
> 2004 p.213).

And if this is true of families where children do not have significant cognitive and developmental impairments, it is even more likely to be true where they do.

Bedroom Design and Equipment

Something of the complexity involved in the design, decoration and occupation of residents' bedrooms is revealed by initial observations on the decorations and furnishing of individual bedrooms. Each resident's bedroom had been decorated and furnished to suit their individual needs and interests, although this was mitigated where furnishings had not been provided because of the possibility that a resident might use them to harm herself or others. All wardrobes were built in.

> Amarjit's room had been painted pink and white, with
> representations of 'Rosie and Jim' on her wardrobe, pink and
> white bedding on the bed, and plenty of soft toys in the room.
> Colin's interests in 'space' and rockets had result in an
> imaginative painting of the solar system on a black background
> on one wall and a rocket shaped pyjama case on his bed.

However:

> Some bedrooms were much bleaker, though, with little on the
> walls and only a bed base and a mattress in the room. Some
> young people destroyed mattresses (one, Bryn, liked to open his
> up and climb inside it!) and The Hawthorns had recently invested
> in some specialised mattresses with a blue thick polythene
> exterior – these lasted for several months rather than the hours
> and days of conventional mattresses.

and

the last room had bare walls except for a large painting of Disney's 'Peter Pan' on one wall, secured under Perspex and the room was empty except for a blue mattress on the floor. At home Callum slept on the floor in a completely bare room. Staff had tried putting a bed base and mattress in the room, but this had been destroyed and Callum had slept curled in a ball on the floor. Recently, they had succeeded in getting Callum to accept a mattress in the room, and he now slept (still curled up in a ball) on the mattress. The painting of Peter Pan was also an experiment as Callum liked Disney films but had not until recently accepted decoration on the wall.

Multiple Meanings of Bedrooms

The basic philosophy is clear. Teenagers in their home environment would expect to have control over their bedrooms, to exercise a degree of choice over their decorations and furnishings, and for their rooms to be equipped with a range of personal electronic goods, and the school sought to replicate this. But this is a situation where replicating ordinary 'family practices' does not easily apply.

The first reason is that in the residential special school environment, the bedroom serves more functions than the equivalent room in a family home.

It is:

- a place of socialisation between child and key worker;

- a place of quiet self – occupation;

- a place for assisted dressing and undressing;

- an enforced time- out facility when residents become distressed or aggressive, where their behaviour is seriously anti-social;

- as a last resort, it can become for the briefest periods, a place of restraint.

The following examples show the different range of meanings that can be attached to a bedroom in a residential unit. We start with the obvious. A bedroom is a place to sleep, rest and relax:

> Very quiet on arrival – Bryn had been up for a bath but had then gone back to bed; Amarjit was in her bedroom; Ryan had been up for breakfast and had then gone back to bed. Sandy was still getting up.

Secondly, a bedroom is a place for getting dressed and undressed – although unlike conventional teenagers, the residents in the Hawthorns all needed significant assistance with dressing and undressing. Here's Bryn again, after lunch:

> It was time to return to school. Casimir told Bryn that he was going on a trip. He took Bryn to his bedroom to get ready – which involved putting socks and shoes on and an old plastic anorak.

A bedroom is also a place of retreat, a place to get away from other people; in fact, in the Hawthorns, it was the only place to get away from others. One member of staff commented:

> 'the space available to young people is very limited and if one young person wants to get away from another, the only option is to retire to their bedroom'.

But as well as being a place of retreat, it is also a place to entertain and to build relationships. There were numerous examples of individual work between residents and key workers in the young people's bedrooms. One weekday, after school, the following was observed:

> Iona was supporting Amarjit in her bedroom and Nigel was drawing with Colin in his bedroom. Callum and Ryan were largely to left to their own devices, watching Disney DVDs in their room.

These latter activities were not untypical for any teenager making use of their bedroom as a centre of their personal and social life, albeit, these tended to be based on relationships with staff rather than with peers.

However, this is not the whole story:

> Amarjit entered the dining room, removed her tights, pants and incontinence pad and began to masturbate. Two staff intervened telling her 'you do that in your room'.

They then physically manoeuvred Amarjit along the corridor to her bedroom. Here the bedroom is being used, against Amarjit's own wishes, to enforce a view of what is socially appropriate behaviour, and the bedroom is therefore, at least temporarily, being used as form of behavioural control. This process is common in an establishment where there are no alternative facilities:

> Whilst pupils and staff were milling around, Amadi became very agitated and he began scratching, pinching and biting. Four members of staff encircled him, so that he couldn't run out of the lounge. Then two firmly held him by the upper arms and escorted him away to his bedroom.

What these examples show is that the concept of the resident's bedroom as being a private space, under the resident's control, subject to the resident's choice does not do justice to the complexity of the actual way in which bedrooms are used.

The bedroom that would be a 'private' space in contemporary Western family homes, and increasingly so as a young person enters teenage years, is here a public-private space. Willcocks and her colleagues, in a critical review of older persons homes, pointed to the disorientation caused to residents by finding themselves carrying out essentially private life practices in the public space of the care home and argued for the development of residential care practices that made a clear distinction between public and private with a choice as to how much of the resident's private life was lived in public (Willcocks, Peace & Kelleher, 1987).

The vulnerability and dependence of the resident group in the Hawthorns makes this challenge much greater. However, there is more to the complexity of bedroom utilisation than the question of bedroom usage, and this too reflects the gap between philosophy and reality when it comes to resident self-determination in their bedrooms.

Complexity of Choice and Control

In the Hawthorns, there was a genuine expectation that residents would exercise choice in the decoration and equipping of their bedrooms. What happens, then, if a young person cannot or chooses not to exercise choice over their bedroom's design and equipment? Or, if a young person's choice is radically counter-cultural to the extent that their preference is for four bare walls and a bare floor? Which takes precedence, the culturally normal bedroom even if that causes distress, or respecting a young person's 'choice' even though the reasons for that choice may arise as a consequence of their particular cognitive impairment?

A very good example of this followed a decision of the school, in the wake of an OFSTED report, to comprehensively redecorate The Hawthorns. The manager asked for a list of each resident's choices for his or her bedroom:

The principle of encouraging choice and control was clear; in practice it was much more difficult:

> Diane said 'Amarjit was very clear – she wanted her room pink
> and you know how keen she is to follow Sikh tradition; well she
> has asked for the sort of headboard with curtains that are
> common in Sikh rooms'.

> Tony described his attempt to engage Bryn more ruefully: 'I kept
> patting the wall and asking what colour, but all he kept replying
> was 'mini roll' so I'm putting it down as brown and beige!'.

In practice, then, however committed to the principles of choice and control, given the severity of impairment of some young people, staff had to improvise

and at times decide for themselves how rooms were to be furnished and decorated. In doing so, they could easily find themselves in situations of conflict.

For example, staff discussed the possibility of experimenting with unlocked drawers in Sandy's room, so that she could have access to more of her own things. Sandy's mother was very concerned about this proposal when she came to visit:

> Sandy's mother spoke to her keyworker about the renovation of The Hawthorns. She was happy with the plans for redecorating Sandy's bedroom, but very concerned about the plan to leave Sandy's drawers unlocked and accessible. They had done this at home, and the result had been broken and flying furniture. She strongly recommended keeping all storage areas locked.

Staff must take note of parental opinion, which can be based on long experience of caring for the young person. The complexity of following parental advice was, however, not always straightforward:

> Halina said that it was good to get Amarjit out of the house as she had been very angry this morning and had thrown her television on to the floor and destroyed it. She talked of the dilemma of allowing Amarjit access to her TV, even though she destroys it. Halina told me of Amarjit's mother's request that Amarjit have access to her computer – apparently, she has one at home that she has never attempted to destroy. 'Perhaps the thing is to allow access and let the items be destroyed'.

Here we have advice from one parent that runs in complete contradiction to that offered by the parent of another resident; here choice and control is fundamental even if the outcome is distress and possible injury to the child, and inconvenience for staff. But Hawthorns' staff didn't just have to deal with parental input. In respect of the same incident:

> A new TV had been delivered but had not yet been installed. Halina was saying that she understood that staff had been

> instructed to allow young people full access to their TV's, DVD
> players etc. on the understanding that all breakages would be
> swiftly replaced.

So, we have here a complex set of conflicting ideas, principles and instructions from a variety of different sources. We have a starting point of trying to create a homely environment, broadly aimed at cultural normality for adolescents, which is now to be reinforced by instruction from within the school's management chain; this approach can sometimes be alarming and distressing for some residents who can react to it by destroying the fixtures and fittings that they do not want; often perceived as slightly impractical by staff, it is supported by some, but not all parents, and as a consequence, staff members will need to negotiate in respect of each child, each family and each bedroom a compromise solution acceptable to everyone.

Conclusion: Conflict and Creativity

In practice, then, however committed to the principles of ordinary living, of choice and control, given the severity of impairment of some young people, staff had to improvise and at times decide for themselves how rooms were to be furnished and decorated. Rather than a unit wide child care philosophy, individual staff teams developed local solutions for specific rooms, specific residents and specific staff. In doing so, they could easily find themselves in situations of conflict, requiring creativity and improvisation amongst child care staff as they sought to operationalise the whole philosophy of 'ordinary living'. One shift leader summed it up:

'The theory doesn't work here'.

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About the author

Nick Pike has recently retired after 25 years as a practitioner and manager in childhood disability services (including a residential special school), mostly in the voluntary and independent sectors, and extended periods teaching disability studies and social work at Winchester, Gloucester and Oxford Brookes Universities. The research underpinning this article formed part of a professional doctorate in social work at Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences.