

Hearing the voice of the child

Ron Davie talks to Ian Florance about his interdisciplinary life

Ron Davie started training in the commercial world, became a teacher and an educational psychologist, and now in his mid-eighties is enjoying retirement in the beautiful Cumbrian countryside. In between he had a long and distinguished career in, among other areas, the National Children's Bureau. I can't reflect the full richness of Ron's experiences in one piece, but I'll try to give a flavour of his interdisciplinary life.

Ron was brought up on a council estate in Birmingham: 'Aston Villa is still my football team!' His father worked as a master cutter for Swallow Raincoats; his mum was a Prudential Insurance agent during the war.

Ron was a bright child, passing the 11 plus, but feels he really found himself when his school was evacuated to a large manor house in Ashby de la Zouch. 'In effect I got a boarding school education, and I returned to Birmingham when the bombs stopped a very different boy.' He had no thought of university and, since he was good at languages, started working in an export merchants specialising in South American markets. 'I'd had tuberculosis at 15 and that precluded me from National Service. But two to three years into the job I began to feel that I wasn't going to be producing anything useful. I thought about going into the church but decided to do a first degree in psychology and then make my plans for the future.'

Ron claims he had no particular motive in studying psychology

other than a desire to work with people. 'In my final year, I met a teacher-training postgraduate who enthused me about the challenge of working with deaf children. To become an educational psychologist I needed teacher training and teaching experience. I was able to do teacher training and a specialist course in teaching deaf children at Manchester – probably my first venture along an interdisciplinary path, because these two fields can feed off each other. So, for the next five years I taught both deaf children and mainstream primary and secondary children. My year's postgrad training in educational psychology at Birmingham prepared me for my first job as an educational psychologist on the Isle of Wight.'

A game-changing career move

'I'd got on well with my Birmingham course tutor Dr Mia Kellmer Pringle. By this time she was the first director of the National Bureau for Co-operation in Child Care, later re-named the National Children's Bureau (NCB). She encouraged me to apply for the post of Senior Research Officer of a new national study – the National Child Development Study (NCDS) – to be based at NCB. This study assessed the attainment, health and development of all the children in Britain, born 3–9 March, 1958 (some 15,000 in all, at this point). It was funded by money from the Plowden Committee whose 1963 terms of reference were to consider primary education in all its aspects and the transition to secondary education.'

Ron got the job, moved to London and set about delivering a report to Plowden in 18 months to a budget, later revised upwards, of £26,000. The study had to liaise with every director of education and school medical officer in Britain. 'Perhaps most challenging was the fact that I had to lead an interdisciplinary team with knowledge and skills of which I had little or no previous experience – questionnaire design, critical path analysis, advanced statistics, large-scale



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data analysis, and the tools and concepts of the demographer. But we managed to deliver the report, though with just a few hours to spare.'

I asked Ron why, given his lack of relevant experience, he got the job. He shrugged his shoulders. 'I really don't know. I'd been a hands-on educational psychologist, but this was very different work, requiring very different skills. Both the interviewing group and later the steering committee comprised giants in this field! They must have concluded that I could rise to the challenge. I found the prospect exciting and enthusing, but not a little daunting and stressful at first.'

Ron worked at the NCB for nearly a decade, rising to be Director of Research and Deputy Director. His many publications included his best-known work *From Birth to Seven* in 1972. Its most prominent, and politically relevant, conclusion was that substantial social class differences in the attainment, health and development of Britain's children were clearly evident as early as seven years of age. Ron's work at NCB also brought him into close and working contact with the whole of the voluntary, statutory and professional worlds in the children's sector.

And another!

Ron's next big change was to move into an academic role. 'I'd never held one or thought of applying for one, but friends and colleagues encouraged me and I was successful at the second attempt with a Chair in Educational Psychology in Cardiff. I was delighted when, within the first few months, a number of interdisciplinary opportunities developed. I had been worried that this role would narrow my focus, but it didn't.'

In 1980 Ron went back to become Director of NCB, and set about a number of key tasks. 'I managed to negotiate moving the National Child Development Study out of the Bureau and into an academic setting, where it belonged. Also, the NCB adopted more of a policy rather than a purely research focus. However, the Bureau was seen by some as a government creature, and that had to be changed. There were many outstanding people at the Bureau to bring on as well.'

'We ensured that the Bureau operated in a more collaborative way with other bodies in the field. Early on, I responded very readily to the plea from Baroness Faithfull – NCB's President – for help in servicing the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children, which she chaired; I was appointed as the Group's first professional adviser.

'By then, I didn't think or feel or operate simply as a psychologist. I understood the subcultures of colleagues in child health, child psychiatry and social work/child care, and this complemented my professional roots in education and psychology. I was made a Fellow of the British Psychological Society in the 1970s, but also a Honorary Fellow of the British Paediatric Association and later a Founder Fellow of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health in the 1990s. In 1991 I was elected President of the National Association for Special Educational Needs.'

On leaving the Bureau Ron decided to return to his first love in working directly with children and families again. 'So I retrained at UCL. I wasn't going to be any use having been away from the front line for 25 years without that. Then I had to face working as an independent consultant in child psychology without a salary and the need to market myself – something I dreaded – in my sixties. But a close friend recommended me to replace him as an expert witness in the family courts working for the Official Solicitor. The Law Society added me to its database of expert witnesses. Social services departments used me, too.'

'I felt I could help children and families – and the courts. I knew the legislative background well and I had also become very familiar over this period with the worlds of paediatrics, child psychiatry and psychology, child care, adoption, disability and special educational needs. In family court situations, the most important piece of legislation was the ground-breaking 1989 Children Act; and I had been very closely involved in its formulation. At the same time I undertook some lecturing, training and consultancy; in 1994 I became a member of the newly constituted Special Educational Needs Tribunal, which considered appeals from parents about local authority provision for their child.'

I asked Ron which was the achievement that gave him greatest satisfaction. 'I had some influence on the ongoing debate on children's role as witnesses, in the 1980s. Through the All Party Group, I introduced the Cambridge academic lawyer John Spencer into this scene and his contribution was significant. Second, in the mid-80s a House of Commons Select Committee recommended a new Children Act. Through my position at the Bureau I was able to invite all the major stakeholders to meet regularly at NCB under my chairmanship and hammer out the framework of a new Act to which they could all sign up. I also invited the civil

servant with responsibility for shaping the Act to join us in these discussions. The resultant 1989 Children Act was widely welcomed, and stressed the importance of "ascertaining the wishes and feelings of the child" in non-criminal court proceedings (e.g. in the Family Court). Thus, in both these two contexts the linking thread was to take "the voice of the child" seriously. My personal satisfaction derives from my being on the spot to have a finger in both of these pies.'

Ron summarised our talk. 'All my work has revolved around two issues – the care of children and how we can bring together different professions to ensure we can improve that care. I think any psychologist needs to understand how medical and social science colleagues work – their ethos, approach and history. As regards my career, I didn't plan it. As you can see, it doesn't follow any identifiable arc. But gatekeepers and facilitators challenge you, open doors and can help you shape your career.'

I'll add one further issue I took from this discussion: by remaining open to other professions' experience and embracing new areas of work, Ron was able to influence policy at a very high level. Psychological research, practice and policy work together to affect real-life issues, and Ron's career is a great example of this.

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Life in a Ugandan slum

Shalini Raman reflects on some valuable professional and personal experience

In 2010 I travelled to Uganda to work with orphans with complex backgrounds. It was an eye-opening experience and incomparable to the news we hear from the Western world. There is something truly different between experiencing a country in the flesh, and reading and seeing it on the news. When you are there, you not only see, you feel, smell and taste the vibrance of Africa that no documentary can ever really capture.

At the time I was studying psychology at the University of Birmingham and was keen to gain more experience in working with children with complex psychological difficulties in developing countries. I currently work as a senior assistant psychologist in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and I have found that I often reflect on my time in Uganda and recall the events that have had such a significant impact on my professional and personal life.

I travelled with a charity and volunteered as part of the group, who were mostly European. Over the weeks we familiarised ourselves with a local orphanage and met all of the children. We spent time socialising, playing games and visiting the local zoo. The majority of the younger children did not speak any English, and instead we communicated through our play and use of gesture. All of the children, despite having faced significant adversity and trauma in their lifetimes, greeted us with smiles and laughter. Many of the children in the orphanage had contracted AIDS/HIV from their parents, and the majority of them had become orphans due to parental deaths. Some of the children were no more than two years old and despite experiencing such devastation were still able to form secure attachments with the other orphans.

The first time I visited the orphanage, I felt a strong sense of community and family. Everyone responded to each other with respect, compassion and loyalty, regardless of age. I reflected on my own family interactions, and how spending more than a fortnight on holiday with my elder sister often resulted in an argument! Here, each individual seemed to respond to the other with empathy and compassion, and the two founders of the orphanage reported that disagreements

amongst the children were usually quickly resolved.

During the time that I spent in Uganda, I spent time getting to know each of the children and engaging them in play. They taught me games and songs, whilst I taught them British nursery rhymes. Another part of my role was to encourage the children to use creative methods of expressing their grief and trauma. For example, we spent time



painting different scenes with different themes, such as happy and sad moments, family, friends and their aspirations for the future. Each child then had the opportunity to describe their painting and what each part meant for them. This was a very powerful exercise and allowed me to reflect on my own childhood and consider how different my life might have been if I had not been born into a life of limitless opportunity. I questioned whether I would have the resilience and strength of character that each of these children had, to endure and overcome such adversity.

We also told the children the stories of local chimpanzees, rescued from poachers. Violet was a chimpanzee found when she was one year old, hiding under her dying mother in a forest trap. Caged, starved and abused by the poachers, when she was rescued and relocated to

the Sanctuary she had to be kept separate from the other chimpanzees, as she was in a very vulnerable state. Refusing to eat, she would sit in the corner of her enclosure and rock back and forth during the night. These stories gave the children an opportunity to talk about their own traumas or observe the similarities of their experiences. We used chimpanzee pictures to facilitate their recognition and expression of the emotions that they were feeling, alongside the emotions experienced by each of the chimpanzees.

These ways of quickly developing strong relationships with the children is something I remind myself of every day in my professional life. I try to use self-disclosure in sessions, whilst maintaining the boundaries of professionalism, because it allows the young person to identify and relate to you as empathising and understanding their position. It also allows the young person to gain real-life examples of how the psychological intervention works, whilst developing trust and motivation to engage with the work despite its challenging nature.

During my time working with the orphanage, the founders felt that it was important for us to see the slums where all of their children had come from. None of us knew what to expect, having never travelled to a slum previously. When we arrived, the founders of the orphanage suggested that we remove all jewellery from our body and empty all of our pockets in the bus. We began walking through the crowded narrow lanes of the slum and immediately people approached us. Our guide explained that women and young girls in the slum tend to hide within the mud huts during the daytime, in order to avoid physical and sexual abuse from men. This was very difficult to hear, and I remember feeling incredibly vulnerable as a woman in leggings and a T-shirt being poked and prodded with curiosity from various angles. I saw several people with severe physical health problems, including open wounds and many people missing limbs using sticks as crutches. The harshness of the situation caught me off guard, and I noticed guilt build within me as I considered the luxury and convenience of the NHS at home. I think this scene certainly made me value the health care

we are 'entitled' to in the UK. When I find myself becoming impatient that I can't get a GP appointment within three weeks, I remind myself of my visit to this slum.

Perhaps we can also take our education system for granted. People make statements about the importance of 'getting a job', but unfortunately the majority of government-funded schools in Uganda do not have reliable teacher attendance, making education a significant struggle for those with little resource to fund their child's path through school. Added to this, the unemployment rate in Uganda is high, which makes it very difficult even for college graduates to obtain jobs. The combination of poverty, trauma and limited access to good education and healthcare systems makes it a significant challenge for individuals to achieve a sustainable lifestyle.

As we moved further through the

slum, I quickly lost my bearings, which was a frightening experience. But generally, we were greeted with curiosity and a warm welcome, so my memories of this experience and the people are positive ones. I would not trade it for anything, and I constantly reflect on my time spent there, to remind myself of the strength, resilience and motivation those children had, in order to overcome these significant challenges. In my professional work I believe that my experiences of different cultures has allowed me to develop strengths in empathising with others experiencing poverty of mental health regardless of their unique past experiences and cultures. Establishing rapport and being able to identify with clients with different life experiences from yourself can be challenging, but my time in Ugandan orphanages and slums has certainly positively impacted on my

ability to do so with respect and sensitivity. I learnt a lot around how effective communication expands so much further than speech alone, and actually facilitates a connection to that other person in the interaction. I was able to communicate with each and every one of the young people in the orphanage, whether they were two years or 18 years old, speaking English, or speaking Luganda. I use these essential skills – relying not only on speech, but also gesture, facial expression, posture, mannerisms and appearance – every day in my work with children and young people with varying presentations, from learning depression and anxiety disorders to learning disability. I would urge people to visit Africa: I can say with confidence, having visited nine African countries, you will fall in love with its beauty, people, culture, wildlife and cuisine.

Hearing loss and my career

Naomh Fox writes about the effect of a hearing impairment on her work and aspirations

At the age of 24 I was diagnosed with a hearing impairment. I was in the final year of my PhD, finishing my data collection and writing up my thesis. While this had a huge impact on me emotionally, I successfully passed my viva a year later.

Two years on from completing my PhD I have been working as an Assistant Psychologist (AP). The transfer from working in isolation during my PhD to working with multidisciplinary teams required considerable adjustment. My work is based in a very busy environment that involves engaging with colleagues during team meetings, working one-to-one with clients, assessing children with behavioural issues and leading a number of psychoeducation groups.

Losing my hearing has been a huge struggle for me at times. I felt embarrassed, self-conscious and terrified about informing my colleagues and supervisors that I had a hearing impairment: I found it very difficult to even say the words. I decided that it would be easier for me to talk to colleagues individually rather than address groups of people. I then had to adapt my communication style in work and in social situations to follow conversation effectively. This had involved: reminding colleagues that I am hard of hearing and asking them to face me during conversations, asking people to repeat conversation during meetings and speak slower and louder during phone calls, and ensuring I sit closest to the main speaker during meetings.

I am in the process of setting up a support group for individuals with hearing loss who experience tinnitus. Through this, I plan to share my experience of hearing loss and tinnitus with others. I have developed my confidence and assertive skills by joining a local lip-reading class (even though I was the youngest member), and finding opportunities to talk about my hearing loss to improve my self-esteem. Over the past year,

"I have not let this affect my focus"

I have worked hard to develop my confidence and ability to talk freely about my hearing impairment. I am still in the process of accepting it, but talking to colleagues has inspired me to give a presentation to them on how to support people with hearing loss in the workplace: mainly by reducing social isolation and increasing self-esteem. Tips include:

1. Make sure that you face the hearing-impaired individual during conversation and, if possible, that you do not sit with your back against a window or lamp. This makes it easier for individuals to lip read.
2. Do not whisper or lower the volume of your voice, but do not raise your voice or shout. This can distort the sound and make conversation more difficult to follow.
3. Be attentive to others during conversation to ensure they are not having difficulty listening. A puzzled or confused look may indicate the individual has not heard you.
4. Say the individual's name before starting a conversation. This can help the individual to concentrate and reduce the likelihood of words being missed.
5. If the hearing-impaired person has difficulty understanding you, try to rephrase rather than repeating the original words over and over.

Although my hearing loss has been unexpected and life-changing, I have not let this affect my focus on obtaining my dream career. Instead, I have become more aware of and developed my strengths and abilities, which I believe has made me more confident. If you have a disability or impairment – sensory, physical or otherwise – don't let it stand between you and your goals and dreams.

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