Shanghai Foster Care Project

Evaluation, May 2000

1. Introduction

1.1. The following is a summary of an evaluation undertaken by Professor June Thoburn and Mr Chris Beckett (from the University of East Anglia, Norwich) in consultation with Mrs Vivian Shen of the Shanghai Children's Medical Centre and Professor Zeng Fanlin of East China Normal University, Shanghai.

1.2. The evaluation was undertaken over a week in May 2000. During the course of the week we:

➢ met and interviewed a foster-family from the scheme

➢ spoke to teachers at a school attended by their fostered child

➢ attended the inaugural gathering of one of the five geographic support groups now being set up for foster carers in the scheme

➢ saw the care arrangements at the Children's Welfare Centre (the residential centre from where children are placed in foster homes by the scheme)

➢ examined files which had been translated for us – and read background documentation relating to the history of the project and its relationship with the charity Care for Children

➢ read Robert Glover's report of the research he carried out using a questionnaire to elicit the views of foster-parents

➢ engaged in several extended discussions with Mrs Lu and the other project staff and with Mr Glover and his assistants from Care for Children – and examined data compiled at our request by Mrs Lu and her staff

> ➢ met with Mr Shi, the Director of the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau and Mr Li, the Director of Shanghai Social Services

1.3. For the remainder of this report, we will firstly briefly describe the project and its achievements and finally make some suggestions about possible lines of development in the future. It is hoped that this report may be of some use to others contemplating setting up a scheme on the Shanghai model. For the staff of the Project and the managers of the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, we will also be appending a more detailed supplementary report.

2. The Project – General Comments

2.1 The project is the result of an interesting collaboration between the British charity Care for Children which provides advice, consultancy and training, and the Civil Affairs Bureau of the Shanghai municipal government which directs and provides the foster care service. The purpose of the project is to provide an alternative to institutional care for children who, for a variety of reasons, have been abandoned by their own parents. The project workers' task is therefore to recruit, assess and support foster-parents, to match foster-parents with children (who are selected by the management of the Children's Welfare Centre) and to support placements.

2.2 Children are also *adopted* from the Centre (both internationally and within China) so the children placed are those who are unlikely to be adopted. These include children with disabilities of one kind or another, or with disfiguring conditions, or with behavioural and emotional problems. Children with *severe* disabilities do not fall within the brief of the scheme, however, and at present it is anticipated that they will remain in residential group care (the Shanghai CAB is currently building a new

specially designed residential establishment for this purpose, to supersede the present Centre).

2.3 Within the project there are seven workers, who have a background either in medicine or teaching. They are headed by Mrs Liu, whose own background was as a teacher within the Children's Welfare Centre. We were impressed by the calibre of the staff involved, their personal commitment to the project and their interest in developing their own knowledge and expertise.

2.4 Mr Glover, of Care for Children, and his two assistants are now based at the same office as the project workers, and they work closely alongside the project staff in an advisory and developmental capacity. Clearly such an arrangement has the potential to cause conflict or misunderstanding, but as far as we could tell the working relationship between the Care for Children staff and the project staff is a positive and constructive one.

3   Children, Foster-Parents & Matching

3.1 Recruitment of foster-parents has been highly successful, to the point that there is now a substantial waiting list of applicants. (Around 500 have expressed interest though the assessment and training process in some cases has not been started. With this level of interest there may be a problem in managing waiting lists.) The assessment process involves two home visits, looking at the circumstances of the family concerned. There is now also a training program for all new foster-parents, using adapted British materials.

3.2 As already noted, the actual *selection* of children to be placed is outside of the control of the project workers.   The children placed have been a very varied group. Of the first 220 placed, 82% are girls and 18% boys, reflecting the proportion of girls among children that are abandoned and have to enter institutional care. They range in age from under 1 to 11 years old, and have spent periods of time in institutional care ranging from a few months to eleven years.   They have had varying levels of disability.   (Significantly, some children who were identified as having learning disabilities in the Centre have subsequently seemed to develop normally on being placed with foster-parents, reflecting research findings which show that institutional care can result in developmental delay (Berridge and Cleaver 1987[1])).

3.3 The rate of placement for the size of team is very positive and the rate of placement breakdown (15 or 7% of all placements made) compares well with placements of similar children in other parts of the world, whether "in country" or "inter-country" for long-term fostering or adoption. Of the children whose placements broke down, 2 were aged 4 at placement, 1 was 5 when placed, 4 were aged 6, 2 were aged 7, 3 were aged 8, 1 was 9 and 2 were placed at the age of 10. In all countries, children placed when older are more likely to experience placement breakdown.

3.4 Clearly, nothing can be done to avoid late placement for children who arrive at the orphanage when older. However, we would suggest that in selecting/prioritising children for placement, the staff of the Children's Welfare Centre should bear in mind that placements are much more likely to be successful if children are moved on as rapidly as possible from institutional care. We would predict this in any case from what we know of the research in this area, and our prediction is confirmed by data

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[1] Berridge, D. & Cleaver, H. L. (1987) *Foster Home Breakdown*, Oxford: Blackwell.

from the Shanghai project. As the following table illustrates, there have as yet been
no foster-home breakdowns for children who were in the institution for less than a
year. Among children who entered the institution under 2, *all* the breakdowns that
have so far occurred have been with children who were in the institution for more
than 2 years. (Please note: This is *not* to suggest that the staff in the institution are
not caring or do not do their best, merely that an institutional environment - however
well run – is not good for children's long-term psychological development, including
their ability to relate to other people and live in families.) In contrast, for those
entering the orphanage when 5 or over, speedy placement was **more** likely to be
associated with placement breakdown. It may be that for these older abandoned
children, a period of stability in residential group care facilitates settling in foster
care. This was found to be the case in the English study of Berridge and Cleaver.

CATEGORY OF CHILD	NUMBER PLACED (AND PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL PLACEMENTS)	NUMBER OF BREAKDOWNS (AND PERCENTAGE CHILDREN IN THIS GROUP WHOSE PLACEMENTS BREAK DOWN)
Entered institution under 2 and placed before age 2	32 (14.56%)	0
Entered institution under 2 and placed aged 2 or 3	61 (28%)	1 (2%)
Entered institution under 2 and placed aged 4 and over	80 (36%)	9 (11%)
Entered institution aged 2, 3 or 4 and placed after less than a year	12 (5.5%)	0
Entered institution aged 2, 3 or 4 and placed after more than a year	21 (9.5%)	2 (9.5%)
Entered institution aged 5 and over and placed after less than a year	7 (3%)	2 (29%)
Entered institution age 5 and over and placed after more than a year	7 (3%)	1 (14%)

3.5 What the above figures also suggest is that, where children enter the orphanage as
infants (and have no experience of life in a family home) and are being placed after a
long period in institutional care, some preparation work needs to be undertaken with
the children to enable them to make the difficult transition to family life. (Mr Glover
has recently introduced the concept of "Life Story Work", which would be one
element of this process.)

3.6 Matching children to families is undertaken by the project staff.   This process cannot be an "exact science" of course, but the project workers attempt to match academically able children, for example, with educated parents, and children whose behaviour is difficult with parents assessed to be able to set limits and provide appropriate controls.   We would suggest however that in assessing foster-parents and in matching foster-parents to children, it is important to pay close attention to the *motivation* of foster-parents. (For example: *What psychological needs do these foster-parents hope to meet by fostering?   Is it likely that fostering will in fact meet those needs, or will this parent be disappointed? What kind of child will best meet those needs? Conversely, what needs do the children have - over and above the need for good parenting - and would parents with particular skills and motivations for fostering be more able to meet those needs?*)

4.   Supporting Placements and Foster-Parents

4.1. Unlike in the UK, where separate workers take responsibility for supporting the child on the one hand and the foster-parents on the other, in the Shanghai project a single worker supports each placement (each project worker supporting approximately 30 placements).   It is not practice for children to be seen separately from their foster-parents on support visits (again: unlike the UK) and this was thought likely to cause offence to foster-parents.   (The problem with this is that workers may not pick up early signs of difficulty or stress on the child, and miss the opportunity of providing extra help or advice to the foster parents.   More seriously, they may not pick up that a child was very unhappy in the foster-home, or was being mistreated.)   A pattern of regular supportive monthly visits and telephone calls to the foster-parents is undertaken by the project staff.   There is an annual review of children's progress.

4.2. A new development has been the establishment of five geographically based support groups for foster parents and a system of lead foster-parents to whom other foster-parents can turn for support.   Mr Beckett attended the inaugural meeting of one of these groups (which took the form of a restaurant meal). It was very well attended, though it is obviously too early to know how this arrangement will work in the future. British experience suggests that this is a good model however, and that foster-parents particularly value the advice and support of fellow foster-parents.

5.   Placement Problems

5.1 Clearly a very important role of the project staff is dealing with problems as they arise.

5.2 As has already been noted, all except 15 (7%) of the 220 children placed to date are still in their placement. This is a track record which many British fostering agencies would envy – and this is very much to the credit of the project staff and the Shanghai foster-parents. But it is worth adding as a cautionary note that this is still very early days and that, on the British experience, many placement breakdowns take place after a child has already been living in a placement for several years – and particularly at the onset of adolescence. (Of the 220 Shanghai project placements, many of course are quite recent and fewer than 50 have yet lasted for two years or more.)

5.3 The reasons given by foster-parents for placement breakdowns tend to be practical ones: changes of financial circumstances, having to go out to work and so on.   However the project staff agreed there may be other reasons which

foster-parents might find harder to acknowledge. Taking the main reason given, 8 breakdowns resulted from foster family related problems (involving hospitalisation of a parent or marital or employment problems) and 7 resulted from child related problems, such as inability to share or cope with jealousy of the birth child in the family, uncontrollable behaviour or lying.

5.4   A common problem, which on occasions was associated with breakdown of placements was over-optimistic expectations on the part of foster-parents. For example, the foster-parents interviewed by Mr Beckett, (whose placement was generally going well) were very concerned about their foster-child's limited progress at school. (His head teacher was likewise very concerned about this.) In fact the child in question had been in institutional care for seven years and had then experienced a previous foster-home breaking down. With this kind of record, long term difficulties in school can be predicted with a fair degree of certainty.   Foster-parents and teachers need to set themselves realistic goals if they are not to feel disappointed.

5.5   Another cause of problems identified for us by members of the project staff is a fear on the part of foster-parents that a child will be taken away from them.   This is an important point because it is more difficult to commit oneself emotionally to a child who may be taken away, than to a child who one can be certain will remain a part of the family.   We would suggest that attention needs to be given to the agreements drawn up with foster-parents so as to remove, as far as possible, this source of insecurity which can indeed have an undermining effect on the development of strong bonds within a foster-family.

6. Recording and Paperwork

6.1 Individual files are kept by the project on all children.   Language problems did not permit a comprehensive survey of files, but specimen files were examined. The main suggestion we would have to make in this regard is that the forms used for recording take more account of *psychological* factors as well as medical, physical and educational factors.   A fuller description of positive as well as negative attributes of the child's emotional and behavioural profile would be helpful to the staff in making the best possible match.

6.2 We would also suggest that some evidence be given to the gathering of more detailed statistical information, so as to allow – over time – some analysis of patterns and trends. The table above (section 3.4) perhaps illustrates how this kind of information can be used to inform practice.

7. Training for Staff

7.1. The training needs identified by project staff were, in particular, training in relation to child psychology (*for example: the behavioural/developmental effects of parental deprivation and disruption).* The project staff are well educated and highly motivated and are of course doing their own thinking about these topics but it seems they would welcome some more theoretical background on the above topics.

7.2. Other areas of training need might be: direct working with children and planning and policy development in relation to fostering work.

7.3. These are needs which this summer's training programme at UEA for five Shanghai staff (one from the project, one from CFC, one from the Children's Welfare Centre – and two other members of the Civil Affairs Bureau staff) will try to address.

Discussions are taking place with Mr Zeng of the East China National University with a view to providing a one year part-time post-graduate diploma which, in appropriate cases, could lead on to a further year at the University of East Anglia on their MA in International Child Welfare programme.

8. Achievements

8.1 The project is undoubtedly an impressive achievement on a number of grounds:

➢ The number of placements achieved in a short time, the number of foster-parents recruited (and the interest generated).

➢ The stability of placements for children who are generally considered 'hard to place' and 'hard to parent'

➢ The diversity of placements

➢ The creative interplay of British and Chinese experience (from which, we believe, both British and Chinese projects could learn in the future)

➢ The observed benefits to many of the children, who have progressed rapidly since moving from institutional care to foster-care.

8.2 The staff and managers involved are undoubtedly to be congratulated. As with any new project, they will want and need to modify the way they work as the project develops. Some of the issues that they may wish to address have been outlined above. The following is a brief summary of key points.

9. Points for the Future

9.1 In planning and recording, it will probably be useful to give further consideration than at present to psychological factors – as well as to factors such as health, education and finance - both in relation to children, and in relation to foster-parents.

9.2 Project staff may benefit from further training in this regard. A theoretical understanding of the impact on child development of neglect, maltreatment, rejection and institutional care may improve planning and help project staff to educate others (foster-parents and teachers) regarding realistic expectations and appropriate treatment of fostered children.

9.3 It is important that children who are to be placed are moved from institutional care quickly and this is especially so for those who enter as infants. Children who have spent some time in institutional care as babies and toddlers are harder to place successfully and are likely to require special preparation.

9.4 Data collection could be used more effectively to spot trends and identify needs.

Chris Beckett, BSc (Hons), CQSW, DASW

June Thoburn, BA (Hons), DSW, LittD

May 2000