

BCJ: Creating CHANGE

Reflective practice ✧

Last year, after the long Summer break, it felt like the right time for a period of reflection for us at Brent Care Journeys (BCJ). In the months that followed we have published blogs, podcasts and an impact report – all of which sought to move some of our internal discourse into external and broader spaces.

To kick this off I spent time with our **junior project workers**. These colleagues are employed on the basis of their lived experience; experience which, we are confident, enhances the mission of our project: namely to constructively disrupt some of what isn't working in the care system[1].

Part of our role as 'professionals' is to tap into their unique qualities, so that their experience becomes something which they can apply as expertise. We do this in a range of ways, from deeply attentive support and supervision, to the provision of bespoke training and learning. We get some of this right, but working in this way remains largely untrodden, so there are rich opportunities for learning as a result of all that we get wrong.

[1] The statutory powers used to remove children from their biological families for their protection, and aims to support them into independent life as 'care leavers'.

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Talking to Ali

BY ANNA WILLOW (PARTNERSHIP MANAGER)

It took a while for Ali to trust me. Things had to get to a tipping point before we had a pivotal conversation. Everything since that conversation has been hopeful, life affirming and exciting. But everything before it was tense, stunted and, to be honest, painful. Reflecting on this makes me feel a bit embarrassed because some small changes could have made a big difference.

Ali is very gracious about it all now. In a nutshell I had to push at the edges of my organisation's tolerance for employing him because of his criminal record. At the time I felt like I was doing my very best. However Ali's challenging response made me anxious about how he would be in the role. In retrospect, there I was, looking like I look and speaking like I speak; head-to-head, asking him about the detail of his offending and how we could mitigate against reoffending if he came into post; triggering numerous previous experiences of systemic and structural discrimination. Our breakthrough came later when I asked him to grace me with the benefit of the doubt; "try to assume that I want the best for you". His answer was blunt: "Why would I do that?".

Fortunately that is now in the past. Now, we get to hang out and work together and have open, interesting conversations which develop us both. We talk about the extent to which people don't understand the mentality and mindset of 'the streets'; the places and spaces in which young people are growing up. For Ali and his peers, being young in his community has been defined by learning to cope and how to curate experiences of trauma.

Barnardo's, like lots of organisations, talk positively about being 'trauma informed'. Working alongside young people at BCJ really elicits an alternate version of operating within traumatised environments. Ali characterises it as "muscle memory": helpful reactive behaviour which has aided survival, yet an instinctive response which doesn't continue to serve us well in more positive situations.

Ali told me that in his view, not being parented - or badly parented, has a lifetime legacy. When that interacts with race and poverty the impact is intensified. He was reflective about going into workplaces with mindsets that belong in previous timeframes or different settings

“someone might speak to you in a way which makes you feel degraded or you misinterpret them. This could set you off. The outcome would be bad.”

When we talk about what a workplace needs to be in order to employ people with lived experience Ali spoke about tolerance. He is grateful that he was in a work environment where, when he made a mistake, he was supported to understand what had gone wrong, how it needed to be different and then held in his growth through it.

Ali went on to deepen my appreciation of what it means to be young right now. He contextualised what he calls “living for appearances” and the essence of our uniqueness is worn away when everything is marketed or monetised. He said that the best thing about BCJ – for him and the young people who are part of it – is that, simply, we come as ourselves; we are (in his words) “genuine”. This juxtaposition between prevalent youth culture and the culture we are creating for young people at BCJ gave me pause. Offering people an opportunity to be their authentic selves, validating their experiences, seeing themselves represented – these are inexpensive, essential ways to create profound changes for communities of people.

Authenticity clearly implicates proficiency in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion. On this Ali was clear, signalling to the extent to which every organisation ‘bangs on’ about EDI without meaningful implementation or impact.

“Is it authentic or is it just words that sound good? What about me and my criminal record? For many jobs I was disregarded out of hand. That was different here. That’s what meaningful inclusion is.”

As positive as it is to hear this, I asked ‘what would you change about your experience of working with BCJ?’. He replied:

“..it took too long. When I applied I thought it would be a week. It was six months of processes and checks etc. I get it now for charities, but at the time I could have given up, been disheartened. When someone like me applied for a job it’s because they need a job and they need money – now not in six months time. You should say at the point of interview, clearly, what the time span can be like.”

When I asked ‘what has changed you?’ his answer was refreshing.

“I have more gratitude – feel less alone, I have more in common with more people. I’m grateful to be in community with people who have such important shared experiences.”

Ali’s final message for us is that it is essential for us to live and grow in a society which offers mentorship. He is passionate about the need for essential youth services and strongly believes that a decrease in crime would be dramatic if this investment was adequately made. In an ideal world Ali would have liked to see BCJ begin with a primary investment in youth provision which, in time, could have developed groups of young people who are enabled to create change. I think he’s onto something. There is discomfort in having to create community and solidarity with and between people whilst simultaneously pursuing their power to enact change.

I look forward to shared projects with Ali, and when one day we don’t work together I will be the poorer. There is a truth and a vibrance about his work which is energising and inspiring. His skills for engaging young people and putting them at ease are like treasure. This kind of raw talent is a blessing for us all.

Talking to Kyron

BY ANNA WILLOW - PARTNERSHIP MANAGER

In continuation of the reflective period, I facilitated an interview with another of our Junior Project Workers, Kyron. Below is a transcript of our conversation.

We are meeting to reflect on what it is like working with BCJ, because I think it's different for each of us.

If I had to describe why we're here and what we're all doing together in one word, I'd probably say 'change'. That's what we want for young people and simultaneously it's what happens to each of us working on this project; we're creating change, but I think we are also a bit changed by it on a personal level. So I wanted to start by asking you how you respond to that.

I'd definitely say we create change - even just by the small little events we put up. The small meetups we do, the one to ones we do with the young people; that's definitely implemented change even if it's through advice or taking them to see a different scenery, that's something they wouldn't really do in their day-to-day or back home where they were living before they lived in the UK. It might not be a big but I'd definitely say it's a change; a small aspect which could turn into a big aspect in the long term.

So, small changes on individual levels might amount to bigger changes for more people overall?

Most definitely. With me, I'd say it's not changed from a big perspective who I am as a person - because I tend to adapt to new environments, but I can definitely say in terms of a work perspective, my routine has changed in a good way, I'm learning how to balance things. Also working with young people as well. I can definitely say that's made me more understanding.

Can you say more about how it's made you more understanding?

Before, I wouldn't really understand other people's situations, but I think working with young people has made me have deeper empathy, I'd say.

Is that because, usually, when you socialise with people you don't necessarily ask or get to know them on the level that we get to know our young people?

Pretty much, yeah. It gives me a new way of interacting.

Did you know you'd be interested in people's lives or were you surprised by that?

I think I was kind of surprised by it. Something I was learning as I went on, you know...

Was that you cared and you were interested?

Exactly, yeah.

That's really interesting. So prior to working with BCJ, you wouldn't necessarily have got involved with people in that way?

No. I tend to.. I don't wanna use the term 'mind my business', but I don't really ask people what they got going on in life. Working with young people, I realise you kinda have to learn how to meet in the middle and try to understand other people's circumstances.

Would you say that it has been positive? How would you say that's been?



Definitely positive because the young people speaking to us is like... almost a way of them relieving themselves, if they don't have anyone to speak to. So, depending on their circumstances.. if they don't know how to problem solve, they know they can speak to us and we can give them the best advice.

How do you know when you've helped somebody and what's the impact on you?

It makes me feel empathetic but also I have to look at it from a professional view and not move off my emotion, so maybe give the best advice I can from a professional view.

If you engaged with it emotionally, what do you think would happen?

I think it would mean I'm not fit for the job because I realise in a job like this, you know, you're not supposed to really show your emotions too tough. You can show your emotions, but you kind of also have to be able to separate your personal emotions.

So, say that you've been leading an evening session and people have opened up a bit and you got a bit of insight into their lives, experiences and challenges... If you knew that they were leaving feeling better than they'd arrived, how would you be feeling when you went home?

I'd be very happy if everyone is satisfied with the service we've provided and they go home happy.

We often talk about being employed on the basis of having experience which is lived and working alongside people who might not have lived experience, but have learned it professionally.

I just wondered what it means to you to be employed on the basis of lived experience?

I'd definitely say it's a greater way to express the experiences that occurred in your life when you were in the same position as the young people that you're working with right now.

Not just in this industry, but in most industries, most people tend to listen to the person that has the experience in what they're doing - because they feel like they can gain more better advice on how to go about things.

I agree - there's a sense in which that person's better informed.

You just used a brilliant phrase - 'expressing what you've lived through'. So was there a way in which it was helpful for you to make use your experience in a positive way?

Definitely. Yeah, and I think some people who might have gone through the same stage as me (in terms of having this lived experience) might actually find doing a job like this very hard because it's almost like you're going down memory lane so it can be a bit, you know, hard for some people to go down this type of route and work with young people because it almost reminds them of the times that they grew up in these experiences. So for me to kind of do a job like this where I'm working with young people, it shows how much healing I've done and how much growth I've come through to get to where I am.

Do you feel like you were already there, or did you have to do certain things to look after yourself or protect yourself when you came into the work?

Id say, the way I did come in, I was just participating and then as time went on, you know, I started getting to know you better. You told me you had a position. So I said 'Why not?' But I think, yeah, I was literally just participating at first. So the way I did go into it was very natural. I didn't really feel like I would be good at working with young people but it happened to be so.

What made you give it a go if you didn't think you were going be good at it?

I'm that type of person... I like to give things a go before I give my final conclusion about whether it will work out or not. It's best you give it a try first. It doesn't work out for you then it doesn't...

How did you look after yourself, how did you make sure it would be a positive experience?

I think the way I looked after myself was by keeping myself level headed. Also, seeing other people that have lived experience - those that are working with us and our peers and stuff - even though not all of us within this environment have gone through exactly the same thing, still.. having people who have gone through similar.. can help you.

So being in a community of similar experiences gives you strength?

Yeah, exactly.

Do you think you changed BCJ? Do you think you offered something unique?

I hope so. I think I offered ideas and different ways of looking at things - it doesn't need to be from big, massive spectrum, but as long as it's productive..

I think you really did. I don't think there's many people who would have started a creative well-being group for men. I think that's quite bold.

What did you learn from working with BCJ?

A lot of things, one of them being how to balance things and how to take something from a work environment and apply it onto yourself. Those are the main two things. I'm still learning as as I go now, to be honest. I've never worked with a charity before, I think you have to learn how to go about things. There are strict ways of looking at things.

What has been the best bit?

There was there was loads.. Like when I set up [my group] and loads of people came and getting to know you for the first time as well.

Yeah, I liked that as well. If we hadn't met at BCJ, our paths might not have crossed.

Yeah, exactly. Because Brent is very big, so you don't run into everyone if you don't have a reason to. So yeah, if I didn't work for you now, I don't reckon I would have met you.

What is it about us knowing one another that has stood out to you?

Just learning from your role, applying it to mine. Learning tips, hopefully getting a good reference, you know...

So there's something about the future in that isn't there, now that we know each other? If you need something you can come back to me and I can continue to help, even if we're not always working together.

It's a helpful connection. I'm not gonna say life as a whole is about that, but it's definitely about building connections and maybe working your way up the ladder in different ways. For me just doing this type of job, even though it was, it's not my long term goal, the experience itself is nice to have, you know.

I think that's that really stands out as well; it's what you necessarily exactly what you want to do in future, but you've used it as a way to develop and build relationships.

What was your greatest challenge?

To stay consistent, I think. Like, every week... not giving up or not putting less in, but keeping up your standards.. also planning what to do every week as well.

That's really really honest. What did help you to keep your pride in your work? What stopped you from giving up?

We already had young people participating, so I was thinking to myself 'OK, they must at least find it a bit fun or interesting, otherwise they wouldn't be here so... let's just find a way to keep them attending'. It was a sense of responsibility.

Last question, if other organisations employ people with lived experience in future, what should they do the same and what should they do differently?

They should do the recruitment process the same - basing it off experience rather than qualifications