**7 Up – Biddy Youell, Tavistock Centre, London**

My acquaintance with this remarkable series goes back a very long way. It has meant a great deal to me both personally and professionally.

Amazingly, it has taken me until now to realise that these people are just 5 years younger than me. I have worked out that I can’t have seen the first series when it came out…I would have been 11 or 12 and we didn’t have a TV, or maybe we had just got one. I must have seen a re-run of 7 Up when 14 Up was aired, by which time I was 19, and training to be a teacher.

Since then, I have been firmly convinced that these are people I know…such is the power of television and this kind of documentary that I really feel I do know them and would be rather surprised if I were to meet them, that they don’t know me! Of course, being of a similar if not exactly the same generation, I have much in common with some of them. I feel waves of nostalgia when I see their clothes, the streets they played in, the school playgrounds they lined up in, the desks they sat at and so on. I recognise their seven year old excitement about the world outside their immediate neighbourhoods, their hopes for the future and their uneasy awareness of social class differences and the fact that some children were more privileged than others.

I asked a “young” student the other day whether she knew the series and she said that she didn’t and that she supposed her version of the same thing would be the Robert Winston series “A Child of Our Time.” In itself, this is an interesting study but for me, it doesn’t have the personal resonance of the 7 Up series.

Having become acquainted with these children at 7 and 14, I was eager to see them at 21. By the time 28 Up was aired, I was teaching adolescent non-attenders in a truancy scheme in inner London. Our pupils were 15 and 16 years old…most came from families who did not work, had never worked and never thought of working. School attendance was not a priority. Some of the young people had unrealistic hopes of bright, successful futures but most were resigned to following in the same track as their depressed, deprived parents. We had the occasional middle class boy or girl who had fallen out of school through illness or as a result of bullying; or making a desperate bid for somebody to notice how unhappy they were because of parental mental illness or substance abuse. There were some young people from ethnic minorities , mostly Moroccan or Afro Caribbean in that area at that time. The hatred and suspicion that one group had about another was deep rooted and sometimes explosive. As teachers we were alien creatures, mocked for being “hippies” or “Greenham women.”

I can’t remember how it came about that we showed the 7 Up films. This was before the introduction of the National Curriculum so we probably just thought it would be a good idea. What I do remember is that that everybody became absolutely hooked on it. They loved it and it stimulated really important discussion and argument. We could not have addressed issues of social class, race or educational opportunity if we had tried to approach it through thinking about their own experiences in their own families and schools. Through looking at what had happened to the 7 Up population, it became possible to tap into all kinds of feelings, hopes and disappointments. The whoops of horror at the “stuck-up snobs” in the first series gave way to some expressions of sympathy as they saw just how depressed Suzy and Bruce were at 14 and 21. “Even rich kids can feel like shit” was the way one of them put it.

They were amazed at the life Nick was living on the farm and more amazed when he went to Oxford University and then to the USA and became “posh” in spite of how he talked! They identified most readily with the East End kids…especially Tony who they saw as one of their own. They were envious of him, but worried that he would “get nicked and end up inside” (exactly what they worried about for themselves)

But most preoccupying for them was Neil, the object of envy in series 1. At that time he seemed neither too privileged, nor too poor. He was good looking and full of life and energy, only to sink into depression and then mental illness. This they could not fathom…nor frankly, at that time could I.

I kept up to date with the series when I left the Truancy scheme, and began to use it again much more recently, as a tool for teaching psychoanalytically informed observation and also as illustrative material when teaching about different age groups in Personality Development seminars.

The films are full of wonderful material for introducing people to the task of observing; of giving close attention to what they see, whilst allowing themselves to reflect on their emotional response. Of course, it’s different from observing in a live situation, but it can be a very useful starting point. What did you notice? How much could you take in and remember? How would you describe it in detail? How did you feel? What thoughts and questions did it stimulate?

I just want to add a few thoughts about prediction. When can we make well informed predictions and when is it risky and wrong-headed to do so? What are the implications for clinical practice; particularly when the patient population are children? In other words, what are the limits of observation? It has been fascinating getting groups to watch some of the footage of the 7 year olds and then to invite them to speculate as to the likely developmental trajectory. Indeed, the original thesis behind Michael Apted’s project was to demonstrate the veracity of the Jesuit notion “Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man. “

When I teach about containment, (Bion) I always make a point of stressing that containment in infancy is not an inoculation against all future ills…and equally that all is not lost when early experience is less than perfect. Later relationships can be restorative and often are. The lives of the 7 Up individuals illustrate this in many different ways. I will say just a little about Suzi before focussing more fully on Neil.

You may remember **Suzi** from the introduction…she is the ballet dancer, visibly lonely and depressed as a seven year old at boarding school. At 14, she was sulky, hostile, lonely and depressed. At 21 she was chain smoking, cynical and hostile towards the film series which she felt was persecuting and pointless. At 28, she was transformed; much happier and married with two small children. She had resolved to bring them up herself, although she did acknowledge that they would probably go to boarding school at 13. When the children were older, she trained as a bereavement counsellor.

I find her story in many ways the most impressive. On the evidence we observed in the first three films, it would not have been possible to predict that she would have been so able to build a healthy family life for herself, her husband and children.

I remember being captivated by **Neil** when I first saw 7 UP. I thought he was much the most promising child; lovely looking and so full of energy and enthusiasm. At 14 he was less bubbly but I still assumed he was on track for a productive, successful career. I remember the shock when I watched the 21 UP series. How could it have happened that this lovely boy had dropped out in this way and was living in a squat? Where were his parents? Why didn’t somebody do something? At 28 we saw him wandering the Scottish highlands and speaking about his social isolation. At 35 he was in the Shetland Isles, anticipating that he might end up down and out on the streets of London. At 42 he had been helped by Bruce, another of the 7 up characters and was living in London. He was a councillor in Hackney. He has since moved to Cumbria where he is involved in local politics and has become a lay preacher.

Neil obviously has an on-going mental health problem. As viewers, we don’t know the details, we don’t know what treatment he has had and we don’t know exactly what precipitated the original collapse. What fascinates me is whether we could have seen any warning signs at 7 years of age. Looking at it now, I see a manic quality to his cheerfulness at 7. There is pressure of speech and some rather bizarre imagery. With hindsight we can see that he is troubled at 14…some of the life has gone out of him and he is rather burdened by secondary school life. If we had observed him in school or assessed him in CAMHS would we have predicted what happened to him…or foreseen the transformation in later life when he had settled into what is for him, a manageable way of But we would not have predicted what happened to him…nor the transformation in later years when he settled into a way of living which he could manage. Is this the end of the story or will there be further twists as he moves into old age?

What the series repeatedly teaches me is that we can never be complacent about the assessments and predictions we make. Ours is only a very small part of a very big picture…and one in which there is more cause for optimism than we sometimes feel when faced day after day with families in distress.