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## *FROM THE EASY CHAIR*

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### A First Look at Residential Work with Maladjusted Boys in the U.S.S.R.

David Dean

“Special Education is an organic part of the public education system and has exactly the same tasks of the normal school. It creates the most favourable conditions for the correction of developmental abnormalities through principles of correctional education that are applied throughout the educational process.”

With these words Professor Vladimir Lubovski, Director of the Research Institute for Defectology of the Academy of Pedagogic Sciences of the USSR opened his speech to last year's international Child Care Conference in London. His subsequent description of special schools in the USSR setting standards of high achievement for children who are temporarily or permanently impaired was impressive. The facilities for and the results achieved by the mentally retarded, deaf, hard of hearing, blind, partially sighted, physically disabled, those with severe speech disorders and those with delay in mental development in segregated special schools where almost all

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pupils can be taught the full curriculum should at least cause our Department of Education and Science, Scottish Education Department and some hasty LEAs to consider their options carefully.

Where, though, in all this striving for excellence within the Soviet system, was the provision for maladjusted or emotionally damaged children? A visit to the USSR in the closing weeks of 1988 allowed me a rare opportunity to discover at least a part of the answer. Whilst I guessed that several schools would be a part of Inter Bureau's plans for our group, I knew from seasoned educational travellers to Russia and from several Russian citizen delegates to the international conference "The Individual and the Collective—Politics as if the whole Earth Mattered" held at the Findhorn Foundation in October, 1988 that gaining entry to any institution vaguely comparable to our own would be problematic.

So whilst we were enchanted by School 23 in Vladimir with its sixteen year old pupils' rendering of 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' 'The Clerke's Tale' (in readiness for their forthcoming visit to the Simon Langton School in Canterbury) and outstanding singing, it did not surprise me to discover that this school had regular visits from foreigners three times weekly and that Mrs. Kenneth Baker had been a recent VIP there. Similarly the kindergarten and school for young sailors in Novgorod were clearly well used to such invasions. Each was at the peak of its functioning and outstanding in its hospitality, however frequently apparently it was required to extend it.

By contrast my lonely 5.00 a.m. rise in freezing Leningrad and the long haul across the awakening city to the northern boundaries left me all too aware of the protracted negotiations which had taken place leading at first to outright refusal to my Russian intermediary and then agreement only after an official higher in the bureaucracy had been approached, perestroika banded between them, the particular school telephoned, the local communist party permission received and so on. . . .

The Leningrad Special School had never before received a non-Russian professional visitor. Larissa, my interpreter and fellow delegate at the Findhorn conference and I arrived at the gatehouse at 8.00 a.m. to be met by three well turned out boys in blue school

uniform who were under the eye of a 'Regime Man,' the term given to 24 of the staff of 107 for the school of 270 boys. The boys were aged from 11-15 years with a few staying on to 16.

Principal Yuri Nepomnashi received us in a crush hall of one of the three buildings and we were taken to the café. One of the innovations Yuri introduced when he started to change this old reformatory into a therapeutic education centre in 1981 was the prized café. Nearby, above a doorway leading to a staff area, hangs a picture of the young bearded Anton Makarenko known in Britain and widely respected in the USSR for his work in Gorky in the 1920s with traumatized delinquent and violent youths, the product of 'The Great Socialist October Revolution of 1917.' In his residential community Makarenko, like David Wills and Homer Lane in Britain, saw shared responsibility among all community members as a fundamental part of the whole educating process. His special position as a protégé of Lenin's wife, Kiupskayai then Deputy Minister for Education gave him an opportunity open perhaps to no other worker. He was exceptionally well qualified as a conventional teacher but this work was quite different and exhausting in its requirement for pioneering inventiveness and personal stamina. A devotee of Makarenko, Yuri Nepomnashi uses the café at the school to give those pupils who can make use of it a real life situation to pioneer and in which to decision-make. Several therapeutic community leaders would argue that such communities are most alive when there is genuine opportunity to be creative, either by the setting up of the new, or by being a part of a metamorphosis in which new and exciting processes result and replace that which is tired and outmoded. The Director of Café, at 14 years old and elected by his comrades, had the Samovar singing and ready to give us hot water for our coffee. The chocolate cake and buns were brought in by the staff from their homes. In more usual circumstances the café was used for birthday parties each month, celebrations of all kinds and other special events. It also has regular use by elected pupils. All construction, decoration and furniture making had been undertaken from the school's extensive workshops in which each boy spends 2 1/2 hours a day. The workshop staff numbering 26 and the boys together generate an astonishing 300,000 roubles a year from items

they produce and market. Thirty-five percent of the profit goes to the boys for when they leave school.

The men of the workshop staff and the regime men who undertake live night duty and generally patrol the buildings make up almost the whole male presence. Nearly all the seventeen teachers are female. A pediatrician attends the school regularly and a psychiatrist does so daily. There is no psychologist and the school regrets this. At the same time as lauding the attributes of visiting specialists, Yuri produces a wry smile and says, "However too often they don't understand their task: they write their theses."

Each classroom I visited had twenty boys. Teaching was formal, collective and subdued. Had I not given a lecture to mature students in one of Leningrad's higher institutes the night before, I might have wondered at the sight of pupils standing up to answer questions put by the teacher. Like the uniform which is common to all Soviet pupils under 15 years of age, the habit of rising to one's feet to answer questions is universal throughout educational establishments. There was no shortage of materials but computers and other sophisticated technology was no more in evidence for the pupils than was a photocopier for the teachers.

The Academic Board which decides upon and monitors the programme is chaired by a pupil. Recently the school was offered the opportunity to continue following the full curriculum common to day schools throughout the country but not to have to submit to examinations. The boys voted to continue taking the examinations explaining to me that they would need to go on to vocational or technical schools afterwards. Listening to them explaining how this decision was taken left me in no doubt that there was more than a trace of appropriate pride in the outcome and, as one who is highly critical of the whole business of examining and proscribing from the results, I could not deny the self-esteem gained by the achievers.

The number of lessons of 45 minutes duration allocated to each subject in the full curriculum matches that number prescribed in ordinary schools with two lessons a week added in most instances. Physical training time, for example, amounts to four hours a week.

The quality of physical provision for the pupils was high. Decor was attractive and colourful and space plentiful. Pictures on the walls were either created in the art rooms at school or presented by

art students and by the Leningrad Pioneers' Palace (young communists).

The school is divided into two "collectives" or houses and these are in constant competition with each other. The same twenty boys who are in class together sleep in the same dormitory, the beds some six inches apart and with little evidence of personal property. This level of conformity and institutionalization reappears in other areas of the school's practice. The meritocracy surrounding the impressive "Activists' Council," an elected group of seventeen boys with an additional seven reservists is clear and one wonders again what feelings are experienced by those who are not elected to the Council which steered by the Principal and the Director of Studies is the main decision-making body in the school. Otto Shaw whose earliest educational mentor was A.S. Neill evolved a system of self-government at Redhill School which resulted in a workable interweave of intelligent boys and staff which influenced all aspects of the curriculum and the institution's corporate life. As I see it the problem for many British special schools for the maladjusted today, especially those which suggest they are residential but which find themselves limited to the point of professional non-viability by unhelpful staff shift systems, a preponderance of non-resident staff, day pupils thrown in to confuse the dynamic and even a five-day week is that there is no corporate life they can grasp or be grasped by. Other considerations like "campus thinking"—attempts to make the service provide all things to all men effectively dilutes and disperses the identity. Neither Shaw, Makarenko nor Yuri Nepomnashi suffered or suffer these intrusions and yet in the case of the Leningrad Special School the figures of boys achieving eventual reintegration to vocational or training schools at 15 and 16 years of age is above 90%. Without the skilled and holistic intervention of the Russian school, the quality of life and prognosis for the pupils would be as low as for any other group of children who are not offered the appropriate experiences for the meeting of their needs. For sometimes, despite assertions to the contrary from some quarters, temporary and, for the very few, longer term immersion in a residential programme which attends to the child's educational, social, emotional, spiritual and physical needs is arguably the only responsible course of action possible.

A day at the Leningrad Special School is structured as follows:

7.00	Rise, run of 1km, cleaning of school, breakfast
8.00	Lessons
8.50	Break
9.00	Lessons
9.45	Break
9.55	Lessons
10.40	Break, run of 2km round the stadium within the compound
11.10	Class
11.45	Break
12.05	Lessons
12.50	To dormitories, change and wash
1.10	Dinner
2.00	Workshops
4.30	Walk/outdoor games/sometimes out of school
5.00	Afternoon tea
5.30	Private study supervised by boys and houseparents
7.30	Discussion/reading of newspapers/film
8.00	Supper
8.20	Self-evaluation, reporting back to the class group
9.00	TV national news programme
9.30	Cleaning of school, boys and houseparents
10.00	Bedtime

Supervision of meals is by boys with houseparents of whom there are seventeen in all in a nearby room. The absence of a significant number of domestic workers suggests a considerable input by boys and houseparents. As a variation to this routine there are weekly meetings for the Activists' Council to be accountable to the whole school and for other groups to report progress on tasks they have undertaken.

"Does your school have self-control?" asked Deputy Com-

mander in Chief, Alexir in my 1 1/2 hour session with the Activists' Council. We discuss self-control and self-determination and he definitely means self-determination. Makarenko's portrait has a quotation from him written alongside.

"Everybody in this country is faced with the necessity to participate in the common building of the state and the better he is prepared for it the more useful he will be to the whole Soviet society and to himself."

Couple this with the motto of the school "one for all and all for one" and then spend just a short time with the staff and Activists' Council and it becomes clear that, despite differences, and my reservations centred around the meeting of individual needs and the limitations of such large numbers of boys being worked with in a single sex unit, here is a school which works.

The boys identify closely with the returning Afghansi—Soviet soldiers returning from Afghanistan—"we feel close to them, as brothers," says Konstantin, the school's Commander in Chief "some of us do have our own brothers there." "We would like the problem solved in a peaceful way" says Alexir. "The sacrifices will have been in vain if outside interference ruins it all. The US is making peace impossible by continuing to supply the Dushmen—the rebels. The propaganda tells many lies about the USSR." "Britain does not have a big finger in this pie and it is good that Thatcher and Gorbachev are in accord" says Andrei. There is general concern about the recent election of George Bush as the next president of the US.

Meanwhile Chief Houseparent, Svetlana, appears and another discussion around the leisure activities of one of the two collectives ensues. She tells me that parents may visit once a term for two hours but that Yuri and the houseparents make frequent visits to homes.

I am wondering where in all this competence and sense of achievement is the child who is really traumatized and disturbed but get no opportunity on a short first visit to discover more of an answer other than that he is accommodated sympathetically within his collective and that the strength of his treatment comes primarily from that source.

Each year there is a Makarenko prize. On the great man's birth-

day the boys salute his portrait. I was told he would be proud of Yuri. Alexir won the prize last year by a unanimous vote of all the school. He wrote about his own personal situation at home and of his experiences in three years at the school. As Director of Studies, Nina Vasilevskaya says, "Our children are generally more dependent on family unity than in the west. To be child centred is not uncommon in Russia but our efforts must be met by respect, obedience and compassion from our children."

Before I leave my meeting with the Activists' Council, Sasha tells me I am the first westerner they have met. They hope I will return and want to know my impressions so far. I find it easier at that stage to show photographs of the children I work with in Scotland and to tell them they have made me think more deeply than ever about self-determination.

All boys who attend the Leningrad Special School have offended. In the USSR specialist help is not extended to disturbed children who have not broken the law and they remain in ordinary schools helped as far as they can be with the school authorities in conjunction with the parents' employers and even the militia—the police. Most day schools wish to part company with difficult children as they are expected to share in the accountability for the problem.

Minors' Committees in each district eventually decide on an offender's future and, if the militia is involved, then a child may well find himself sent to a "colony," a fairly heavy institution run by the militia and guarded by the army. With perestroika, all this is under active review and the new Russian Journal "Family" has printed calls for a turnabout in the way Soviet society makes family unity difficult to achieve. Alcoholism is the acknowledged enemy and yet the existence of child abuse is denied hotly at all levels. The new wave of planners at a national level are now in post. My meeting in Moscow with the Deputy Director of the Department of Orphanages and the Preservation of Children's Rights of the State Committee for Public Education and his Chief Adviser convinced me of their determination to move beyond the confines of the present system.

Clearly Yuri Nepomnashi is a pioneer of work with maladjusted boys respected by his pupils, colleagues and chiefs in both Leningrad and Moscow and yet eclectic enough in outlook to relish the

thought of a visit to the UK. His school is one of only five in the USSR.

The girls' school near to Moscow is in difficulties and Yuri sees the need for support to be extended to all his colleagues whose work owes much to that tireless worker of the bloody postrevolutionary years. Like millions of others he was discredited and silenced by Stalin but not quite. His work lives on in his book, "The Road to Life," and despite the harassment, he died peacefully of a heart attack on 1st April, 1939. With the coming of significant changes in Soviet lifestyle further forward moves in therapeutic education should be inevitable.

To my friend, Melvyn Rose, Director of the Peper Harow Foundation in London, an inspired pioneer of the current age and one who published a paper on the Russian teacher, I wrote a postcard "Makarenko alive and well in Leningrad but looking over his shoulder at Glasnost."

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

David Dean grew up in the South of England and gained his teaching qualification at Shenstone College of the Institute of Education of University of Birmingham. He was the founder warden of the Nantmor Mountain Centre which operated in North Wales for student teachers, young people in trouble and various school groups. For ten years he worked at Abbotsholme School, the first of the independent progressive schools in England where he taught English and organised the Outdoor Education Department. It was during this period that he became aware of the work of several pioneers in education—Kurt Hahn of Gordonstoun, A.S. Neill of Summerhill, Otto Shaw of Redhill School—and was himself influenced by the two headmasters of Abbotsholme during his time, Robin Hodgkin and David Snell.

In 1975 he was appointed to the headship of a new special school in North Wales and in 1979, with his wife Valery, co-founded Raddery School/Therapeutic Community on the Black Isle in the North of Scotland where he has been Principal for the last ten years encouraging a holistic workforce to develop along psychodynamic, yet eclectic, lines with the 39 difficult children who are in residence there.