

# A community building bridges for children who are islands

DAVID DEAN, the charismatic head of Raddery therapeutic residential school, describes his pupils as suffering from "a sense of self so impaired, distorted or tormented that some have not achieved a basic identity - the unintegrated child". Continuing to borrow the words of the psychoanalyst Barbara Docker-Drysdale, he likens the children to archipelagos - islands of self never joining to make a mainland.

Raddery deals with 40 such children each year. Some are the victims of neglect or sexual or physical abuse. Others have experienced various difficulties and deprivations and failed to thrive at conventional schools.

Aged 9-17, they come from all kinds of backgrounds, their parents ranging from high-ranking education officials and church ministers to psychotic criminals. What they share is a mental and emotional chaos associated with a past so unhappy that it has arrested their development. Their own schools, constrained by the demands of the normal school day and the needs of their peers, have been unable to cope or help.

Raddery, set in 27 acres amid beautiful forested countryside near Inverness, attempts not only to educate these children but to heal them. Ten years after its birth, recognition of its success is growing at home and abroad.

This weekend the Soviet Union will mark its blossoming admiration for the school by welcoming a party of Raddery pupils and teachers to Leningrad Special School. This privilege follows a visit to Raddery earlier this year by the Leningrad school's principal, Yuri Nepomnashi.

The dialogue between the schools is a sign of Soviet eagerness for outside ideas to help the "problem" children it only recently admitted existed. Later this year Mr Dean will become first Westerner to address a new Soviet special-education forum which will shape Russian provision in the next century.

What, then, does Raddery offer which has gained the confidence of sceptical local education authorities and moved Mr Nepomnashi to claim that it "can restore souls"? Firstly, it is more than a school, it is a community: the first to which most of these youngsters will feel they have belonged. Here, staff attention does not end with the 4 o'clock bell. Trained social workers, youth workers, psychotherapists and teachers live at or near the school. The consistency of care and education offered here is impossible at a state school.

Raddery adopts a psychodynamic approach, believing it is

**Mary Braid visits Raddery school, which has won praise at home and abroad for treating severe emotional problems**

JOHN PAUL



David Dean, with pupils: the approach centres on community responsibility

possible to give children insight into how early unhappy experiences have taken control of their lives. It is believed that deeper understanding of themselves, and others, will help them reshape their personalities and overcome the past.

A disciplinary meeting for eight boys in the headteacher's office following a nasty fight gives some clues to the school's approach. Mr Dean begins by reminding each boy of his responsibility to the Raddery community and of previous pledges of good behaviour. Surprisingly, only one half-heartedly denies involvement. Most of the time is spent analysing individual motives and the group dynamics at work. The boys are persuaded to recognise weaknesses and admit mistakes. While

the children are encouraged to recognise the reasons for their problems, they cannot use them as an excuse. The debt to the Raddery community - a miniature and more understanding version of the community they will eventually join - must be met.

Each boy proposes his own punishment. A deceptively angelic 12-year-old called Danny is lucky. His suggested penance - a two-mile run and an hour's woodchopping - is quickly accepted. The others have to improve initial bids before Mr Dean will "buy" them.

Meetings, discussion and negotiation are as much part of Raddery as the classroom. Relations between adults and children are open; the therapy often painful, demanding not only of the children but also of the staff. The

authoritarianism adopted by some conventional teachers is inappropriate here. Such teachers, says Mr Dean, have further to travel at Raddery than the children.

The teachers who do come here tend to stay. Alf Smith was a science teacher in a conventional school, frustrated by his inability to help disturbed children in mainstream classes. "I thought I could communicate with these children, but in the traditional setting there are so many barriers. Here, the children call you by your first name. You don't just teach them, you put them to bed and you get them up for breakfast. You have time to talk to them."

Traditionalists might ask where the three Rs are among all this self-discovery and development. Mr Dean is unequivocal. While the sitting of eight Standard Grades (Scottish equivalent to GCSE) is helping the progress of one pupil, traditional schooling is inappropriate for others.

Daniel, aged 9, is articulate and intelligent but suffers profound psychological difficulties. An unhappy childhood has left him nervous and plagued by ghoulish nightmares. A solution to his psychological distress is essential to future academic achievement.

Raddery believes that parental involvement is crucial in such cases, but first, distrust must be overcome. Mr Dean says: "For some parents it is extremely painful to have children go away because someone says they must, not because it is a family decision."

While Raddery's reputation continues to grow, hard statistics on its effectiveness are hard to come by. Ten therapeutic communities, including Raddery, claim jointly that their approach reduces physical aggression in children by half, and chronic behaviour problems, criminal offending and suicide bids and threats by two-thirds.

While some of Mr Dean's past pupils are now in prison, others have become good parents, embarked upon promising lives and achieved professional success. Not all want to be reminded that they had to come to Raddery and, unless they get in touch voluntarily, the school does not monitor them after they leave.

At a time when local authorities are closing children's homes and institutional care is out of fashion, Raddery goes against the grain. The need for it, however, has not diminished. Mr Dean believes many other disturbed children would benefit from what therapeutic schools have to offer. While the Soviet Union is eager for advice from the Raddery, lessons from the school should not go unheeded nearer home.