

PROMOTING NEW STANDARDS IN CHILDREN'S THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITIES IN THE UK AND RUSSIA

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INTRODUCTION

This short paper is presented to conference to demonstrate to delegates that whilst in the UK there is now a recognised requirement from government that education and child care should be largely 'inclusive' and 'mainstreamed', i.e that there is a supposition that children fare better in their development when included in provision made for all children – mainstream day schooling and family or surrogate family living, this is not always achievable. Nor, I suggest, is it totally true. This policy notwithstanding, where alternatives to family living and mainstream schooling are found to be necessary these projects, a number of which are in therapeutic communities for children, need to be able to demonstrate a professionalism second to none.

“ In the growing climate of regular scrutiny, The Commission for Health Improvement, The National Care Standards Commission and The Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection will expect to see evidence of good practice. These standards (in therapeutic communities for children) with their emphasis on reflective practice and ongoing evaluation provide an opportunity to uphold and demonstrate fundamental tenets of therapeutic community work including the creating of a culture of openness, enquiry and reflection.” (1)

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN MAINSTREAM?

Whilst governments in the UK – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have devolved powers with regard to children - insist they have right on their side in this debate, not all professional workers and parents would agree. Many schools and many of the children in them in the UK are failing to achieve in good enough measure as a result of poor discipline among a substantial minority of pupils, a culture of repeated academic testing imposed by government, a surfeit of administration tasks imposed on teachers and head teachers and a tailoring of the curriculum in such a way so as to deny children adequate spiritual, physical and cultural activity. Figures in 2004 show that one in five teachers in training in the UK leaves the profession within their first five years and the majority of teachers are over forty five years of age with recruitment dwindling.

Additionally, many critics would say that in order to protect children's rights and to stave off the threat of child abuse from inside and outside schools and children's establishments we have succeeded only on cocooning our children and wrapping them in a protective layer of so called 'care' which denies them their birthright. Part of this birthright is to be appropriately challenged and to accept that alongside this challenge there has to be an element of risk.

Children are so often taken to school by parents' cars, spend hours isolated with the TV or computer and risk joining the alarmingly high number of overweight or obese young people by taking nowhere near enough exercise for their good health. There are, of course, many examples of schools in the UK where mainstream pupils are achieving appropriately and, despite the

challenges posed by bureaucracy, can be seen to stand out against what might be described as a national malaise. Furthermore, children with emotional and behavioural problems are assimilated in a limited number of mainstream establishments most successfully. We are constantly exploring the possibilities and our media will often highlight good practice where it can be found.

AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

These observations on the dangers facing parents in the politically correct Britain of today are echoed for the USA by the American author, Robert Shaw in his new book, 'Epidemic – the Rot of American Culture', published in 2004. (2)

In it he describes children, in America at least, as emotionally stunted individuals whose every whim has been indulged to create a generation that has lost the capacity to appreciate the feelings and needs of other people.

All around us he says are whining, complaining, nagging young people who are brought up in the lap of economic luxury but without the moral input of parents who are either unavailable or too lax. The result, according to Shaw is an epidemic of joyless, selfish individuals moving through life without empathy or a sense of duty to others. It is a tragedy, he says, not just for families but, because of the scale of the problem, for society as a whole.

The problem he says is in four parts:-

- We are not bonding well enough with our kids – either in their infancy or through their childhood.
- We are letting them watch too much television – I was listening last week to Russian parents complaining that the cartoon characters now being screened in Russia are American in origin and not those of traditional folk tales of their childhood – another slant perhaps but demonstrating a regrettable cultural missed opportunity.

Was it not the poet T.S. Eliot who years ago warned that watching TV would have very serious repercussions for society? Shaw says to parents, 'Don't contract out your child's early reading to Sesame Street or any TV programme. Sit with your kids, cuddle them and look at the book with them – they learn far better that way'.

- Thirdly, he says, we are failing to give our children an adequate moral grounding. Kids are influenced more by their peers and by the media. Parents cannot therefore just assume there is no role for them.
- And fourthly, Shaw says, young people are being too pressurized to be competitive. They and their parents are obsessed with 'success' because we are cramming them from their earliest years.

If, like me, you are experiencing some discomfort at all this then maybe you too were at times almost oblivious of your children and their needs. If though, like me again, you are blessed with grown up children with whom your relationship is really great then you might assume that you were oblivious to them only rarely. Children are resilient and it would have had to be a regular and sinister pattern of parental abandonment which leads to our potential inadequacy as adults

My seventeen years as Principal of a therapeutic community for emotionally damaged teenagers in Scotland made me very aware that the issues raised by Robert Shaw together with others far more severe, like physical and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol misuse and

abandonment were the very ingredients for so many a referral of a young person to our community.

If we were to have any real optimism for positive outcomes for our children we needed to develop practice with rigour and scrutiny and to ensure that encompassed within whatever psychodynamic work we attempted there was room in plenty for indulging a cultural, physical and spiritual overlay to our lives. To be able to cross reference our ideas and practice with other therapeutic communities and to go further even by engaging in critical practice by which we asked ourselves just why we were doing what we did with children only served to strengthen our performance. It was out of this need for evaluation of our work in the therapeutic communities that the work on new and revised standards was born.

My understanding of the issues in education and child care in Russia lead me to suspect that what is happening in the UK is not mirrored in Russia except perhaps in the most affluent circles where fears for their children's welfare in a largely less moneyed society persuades parents to be very protective towards their young.

THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

For those children whose emotional and behavioural difficulties outstrip even the most able mainstream provision, and many of us would assert that there will always be such children, the therapeutic communities arguably provide one alternative route to providing for their care and education.

In 2002, The Charterhouse Group of Therapeutic Communities published the results of an exercise it had been conducting to establish a current code of practice for the communities. It demonstrated a healthy recognition of the political climate of scrutiny and accountability and at the same time provided a timely opportunity to re assert what therapeutic community work is all about and to bring this to a wider audience.

A Russian children's community, 'Kitezh' in Kaluga Region and now ten years old was last year elected as an International Associate of The Charterhouse Group. There is soon to be a second 'Kitezh' nearer to Moscow suggesting that the children's therapeutic community movement in Russia may be about to launch. I must emphasise that in the UK the movement is and always has been small. Yet the influence exerted by some eminent pioneers within the movement since the 1950' have influenced a good deal of current forward looking mainstream school and children's establishment thinking. This will surely be the case in Russia too. It is the ideas which are significant and they are free for the taking by any practitioner who wishes to make use of them.

Without a transformation of provision and training within mainstream, I suggest, it is highly unlikely that an emotionally damaged child with both learning and behavioural problems who is unable largely to live adequately with their own parents or successful foster parents will be anything but further damaged by a mainstream school experience. They may also significantly damage others – pupils and teachers - in mainstream if no alternative provision is made for them.

WHAT ARE THE 'STANDARDS' FOR THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITIES ?

and do they mark out the therapeutic community strategy as being distinctly different from other forms of provision – or have the central themes been adopted by mainstream educational and child care services in order that the drive towards inclusiveness be not just optimistic rhetoric? (3)

Briefly and in summary –

1. These communities are defined by their being a group of adults and children who live or meet together regularly and participate in tasks which are therapeutic, domestic, organizational and educational.
2. There should be intimate, informal, non-hierarchical relationships.
3. There needs to be regular frequent sharing of information amongst all members of the group.

It is not yet a therapeutic community but will begin to be so if there is

4. a shared commitment to the goal of learning from experience of living and working together.
5. Put another way, when we are planning our therapeutic community where both the formal and informal curriculum are seen as essential therapeutic tools, we must realize that every minute of every hour of every day is to be recognised as part of the therapeutic endeavour.
6. Together in our non hierarchical structure we are seeking to empower the disempowered, laugh and play with some extremely hostile or vulnerable young people, love the unlovable and address the issues of lost parenting where no real attachments were made. This resulted in children being starved of interrelating skills and going into adolescence as unintegrated beings.
7. There will need to be a shared commitment to open examination and resolution of problems, tensions and conflicts within the group – establishing in the community a culture of enquiry.

And we are really making progress if on top of all this we can –

8. Bring a psychodynamic awareness of individual and group processes in the task we have accepted for ourselves.
9. Around all this should be appropriate boundaries offering containment and holding by the group of any situation which arises for an individual which might, if not processed successfully, lead to them having to leave to community prematurely.

FINALLY

In my own work with young people I would often talk of us encouraging there to be periodic 'legitimate chaos' in the community. This would be countered by an overall stability, climate of creativity and evidence of useful progress for individuals and for the group. But deny the inner feelings and experiences of chaos of the young people and all you do is to create yet another boot camp culture. All administrations in most countries have resorted to them at some stage, often repeatedly. Britain has had three waves of them in the last forty years; Russia is said to be launching one now - in the name of patriotism. In Britain, successive governments saw the heavy deterrent as the best way to persuade youth to stop offending. It didn't work but then perhaps we are destined to swing crazily between hard and soft options for our children who don't fit in with our vision of what they should be. Also, be assured, the therapeutic community, functioning properly, is no soft option. Accountability to one's peers can be exceedingly demanding.

Working on and off throughout many regions of Russia for the last twelve years with the Ministry of Education, the Department of Correctional Institutions, this university and a non governmental organization has allowed me to compare practice with elsewhere in the world. The therapeutic community model is not followed extensively in the UK, USA or anywhere else.

However, it is alive and fairly well and some of its tenets, particularly the one which replaces top down hierarchies with something more resembling a flattened pyramid administration is more in evidence in all kinds of organizations.

Therapeutic communities' greatest advocates, apart from those who pioneered each community and their closest colleagues, are many of the now grown up young people who exposed their souls and risked so much to learn how to manage themselves and their adult relationships. They also received an education tailored to their needs at the time. That is the right of every child.

Bibliography

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