

Therapeutic Education: Working alongside troubled and troublesome children

Cornwall, John and Walter, Craig
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The authors are a university lecturer in SEN and the Principal of a special school. They have trialled and researched school strategies, in a PhD project, in which all staff are encouraged to apply 'therapeutic' insights to their school relationships. It is a case study of a single school, and seeks to make some generalisations. Although this limits the insights, it is a book I would recommend students and teachers to read.

The book polemically contrasts the constant managerial pressure in education to meet targets with the need for less pressure and for better relationships. The book charts possibilities for 'therapeutic education', and locates this within the demands and pressures of school life. It claims that this has the potential to make school more enjoyable and meaningful both for pupils and staff, by focussing on well-being and personal development, supporting growth in self-confidence, self-esteem, interpersonal relations and study skills (p.168). The demotivation caused, the authors argue, by not prioritising these is evident throughout the education system. Schools ignore at their peril building a strong social and emotional foundation on which both academic and personal success ultimately depend.

Therapeutic education requires a move from "a punitive, blame-based, unfairly competitive and deviant-defined culture" to "one that celebrates diversity and cultural differences" (p.11), from a deficit model of SEN and deviant model of challenging behaviour to "a more humane and therapeutic approach to education and learning generally (p.12). Therapeutic education is holistic and encourages agency and responsibility. How adults relate to learners is viewed as more important than what is taught. The authors invite this to be a model of whole school change, and indeed of a fundamental review of the values of the whole education system. "This book promotes a bio-psycho-social standpoint" (p.49).

The definition of 'therapeutic' draws a little from Carl Rogers (pp.27, 31), Abraham Maslow (p.30) and George Kelly (pp.31f). This is clearly a general notion of therapy, within the capabilities of adult educators largely untrained in therapy. It provides an humanistic approach to schooling based around student-centred teaching (Rogers), self actualisation (Maslow) and personality construction (Kelly). It cannot replace the various therapeutic disciplines where expertise is built up through lengthy training and focused practical experience, whether these be talking therapies in psychology and psychoanalysis, or physiotherapy, occupational therapy or speech and language therapy. This book focuses more on 'talking therapies' than the others (speech and language for example), although it could be argued that teachers/education staff have an generalist role to play in these also, and that "therapeutic education" might be wider than is described in this book. The authors warn against attitudes of discipline protectiveness and preciousness towards therapeutic expertise. Indeed there are only enough trained therapists to deal with acute cases.

On self-efficacy, the book draws on the work of Albert Bandura, encompassing self-belief, self-regulation and self-reflection. This chapter asks whether 'respect' can be systematic in an educational institution (p.51) and indeed therapeutic education cannot exist without it. Bandura's emphasis on self-reflection provides some content to a therapeutic enterprise. This includes ways of symbolising self, forethought learning to generate understanding of alternatives, learning through story, and thinking through consequences to promote thoughtful self-regulation. My recent work with the Tranquillity Zone has focused on these using visualisation, metaphor and story as strategies for developing self-understanding, agency and self-regulation (Bigger, 2008).

This book is a generalised discussion and "not primarily intended to be a handbook of practice" (p.72). This is a pity and a weakness. The appendices

do give practical tips, but these are in the main behaviourist. There is constant reiteration of such fine sentiments as “a learning environment that is inspirational, motivating, enjoyable and inclusive could be deemed therapeutic” (p.73). Teachers have to relinquish control and view their relationship with the troubled pupil as “an alliance” (p.75). The sermon is fine and pertinent, but the classroom professional wants desperately to know, What can I do? And especially What can I do tomorrow? Both staff and pupils need to kick-start the new order – staff to move away from the need for control, pupils to change the picture they have of themselves (self concept) – as worthless, unintelligent, victim, villain, rebel, self-centred, or whatever it is – by being placed in the position of having to confront and deal with these thoughts. In the Tranquillity Zone (mentioned above) this is done through a structured six week programme which for staff and pupils marks the end of the old and the beginning of the new. This is what this book calls “alternative skills” (p.81). It requires, as with all the ideas in this book, a deep-seated will of school staff to change their ways of working. It resembles too “restorative practice” (Strang and Braithwaite, 2001), a link not made in this volume. A greater concern for the practicalities of staff development would have been helpful. The ingredients are all there, but buried deep in dense text. It does not deal with resilience for reasons of space – this is a pity and a weakness, as the space could have been created by removing repetitions. Another weakness is that it is not clear whether the approach as described actually succeeded in changing the children’s life trajectories. What is the evidence in children’s lives that this approach is effective? The pupil questionnaires are very general, a tokenistic use of pupil voice.

The current knee-jerk reaction to promote “behaviour management”, normally with rewards and punishments, needs to be replaced by a professional concern, drive and indeed passion for “behaviour *development*”. Teachers and other professionals should never forget – and this applies to further and higher education also – that their confrontational actions may be the root and heart of disruptive behaviour, that they indeed may be the real

cause of classroom disruption. This book takes a hardline view that exclusion reveals a school as inadequate – that is, has not the competence to deal with motivation and behaviour. It provides an alternative strategy in which learning is at the heart of schooling, including learning to self-regulate behaviour. Punitive behavioural programmes do not allow such learning to get off the starting blocks. This is a worthwhile book developing alternative ideas for working with troubled adolescents. Such ideas also have a place in our thinking about mainstream teaching and learning.

References

Bigger, Stephen (2008) *Report on the Work and Effectiveness of the Swindon Youth Empowerment Programme, 2001-2008*. Project Report. University of Worcester, Worcester. Available on <http://eprints.worc.ac.uk/380>

Strang, H. and Braithwaite J. (eds) (2001) *Restorative Justice and Civil Society* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press