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# Raising Standards of Training, a Therapeutic Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The Mulberry Bush, in the UK, has always placed high quality training at the heart of staff development but sixty years into our history we reached a point where high quality training did not meet the government requirement for residential child care staff. This presented the organization with a unique challenge; how to prove outstanding practice meant “Outstanding.” This paper outlines the development of our award-winning Foundation Degree in Therapeutic Work with Children and Young People, exploring the complex relationship between a learning cohort and a working cohort and how the organization managed the tensions and benefits of both. The paper highlights how practice developed, how students gained a deeper understanding of the needs of children and families and how students developed their sense of self-reflection through work-based learning. Using evidence from students, their written work and their colleagues, examples are given of how students have learnt to use theory to underpin their day to day work with traumatized children, making sense of their emotional pain and the impact on the staff team. The paper concludes by considering the wider implications for therapeutic organizations in developing their own training programmes.

## KEYWORDS

Therapeutic; residential care; therapeutic child care; training; Mulberry Bush; staff development

## Practice implications

- Residential staff require additional training to address the increased complex needs of those children placed in residential settings.
- A work-based learning model of training is required to ensure staff can link theory to practice.
- Consideration is needed to address the challenges that arise when providing work-based learning for students, who are also employees.
- Reflective practice is necessary to prevent secondary trauma for staff due to the emotional impact of working with childhood trauma

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the development of a group-based Foundation Degree in *Therapeutic Work with Children and Young People*. The aims of the paper

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are to look back on the experience of setting up and sustaining the course over a fourteen-year period and establish the learning which may be applied across the child care sector as a means to develop standards of training and subsequently child care.

The Mulberry Bush (MB) is a charity based in West Oxfordshire, England, supporting children and families affected by early-life trauma. Within the charity sits the Mulberry Bush School (MBS), a non-maintained residential school and children's home. For almost seventy-five years the school has provided high quality therapeutic support for up to thirty primary aged children from across England.

The work of the school is based upon three core principles – psychodynamic understanding, reflective practice and collaborative working. A central tenet of the organization is that if we are able to reflect on our practice then we are more likely to be able to respond therapeutically to the children and be mindful of the impact of the work on ourselves (Barton et al., 2012; Price et al., 2018).

In what follows, the authors, who remain the principal tutors for the course, review what has been learnt by the organization, and themselves. The paper outlines the rationale for, and process of, establishing the course before discussing some of the challenges inherent in work-based learning and the wider implications for the child care sector.

The authors use their experiences to discuss how improved training for child care workers, particularly the development of reflective practice, supports and protects staff from the secondary trauma which can be inherent when working with the intense emotional impact of the supporting emotionally traumatized children. Thus, the authors propose that such improvements are essential in order to provide a therapeutic approach.

## Starting Dilemma

Like many professionals across the child care sector, in 2006 the charity was grappling with a mandatory set of training standards which had been laid out for the residential care sector. The NVQ<sup>1</sup> was experienced by the school as a bland and generic set of competencies, which did not, by themselves, ensure staff were equipped for their roles. The model did not need to involve any depth of learning; it required staff to develop a comprehensive portfolio of evidence, but at such a superficial level trainers felt it was redundant and unfit for purpose. Very importantly, the NVQ often encouraged practitioners to work in isolation, thus ignoring the key component of group work which exists throughout the MB and much of the residential child care sector. We wanted to foreground training that would therefore highlight the significance of learning in a group, mirroring the significance our organization placed on teamwork in supporting our child groups.

During an Ofsted<sup>2</sup> inspection this issue became a point of concern for the us. Our staff were involved in a model of training, yet as an organization we were failing to meet the national requirement that there would be “80% of staff trained to NVQ Level 3, or an equivalent.” The key phrase here was “an equivalent” and it was quickly apparent that neither Ofsted nor the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), were able to define what could be accepted. This posed a dilemma for both the MB and the inspectors; how a specialist provider could evidence the high quality of staff practice and its links to learning. In essence, how could we evidence that staff were “outstanding” in their training as well as their practice? Rather than the inspectors failing us for not meeting the regulatory standard, it was agreed that we would be allowed to explore other options, and this would be reviewed in subsequent inspections.

### Designing the New Qualification

We approached a number of universities and higher education providers in England. Unfortunately, the fit between the MB and most of these was based purely on finance, rather than a meeting of minds and a shared understanding and commitment to developing standards.

Finally, we found a working partner in the University of the West of England’s (UWE) Centre for Psychosocial Studies. The center’s commitment to using psychodynamic and systemic ideas to “look beneath the surface” of organizational functioning as a means of understanding organizational success and failure (Clark & Hoggett, 2009; Cummins & Williams, 2018) was felt to be a good fit with the models of working used within the MBS.

The hope was that this would allow a partnership between two organizations, who were able to look beneath the surface, recognize unconscious processes and apply this to a learning environment. This would enable us to develop a work-based learning programme to meet the needs of staff working with severely traumatized children and their families, whilst ensuring we provided training which was not only equivalent to the required standards but could exceed them.

The mandatory requirements required us to train just our residential staff, but it felt important that we design a course which allowed us to include all our education, therapists and, where appropriate, ancillary staff, thus role modeling an integrated approach.

One of the missing key aspects of the mandatory training was a focus on the worker as a reflective practitioner. The phrase *reflective practitioner* is well-used across social care and education, with many organizations advocating this as a core aspect of their work and training. However, phrases such as *reflection* and *reflective practice* have been so over-used they have come to refer

to almost any form of evaluative, systematic and thoughtful process (Ecclestone, 1996).

We aimed to develop the reflective capacity of staff; not only their ability to reflect on their own emotional experiences and their experiences in relation to others (Bower, 2005) but to use this to understand and regulate themselves, their relationships and their practice.

Reflective practice is viewed as a way of developing professionalism through work-based learning. We wanted staff to develop their critical thinking, whilst promoting their competence through an evaluation of their learning from experience (Padadima-Sophocleous, 2006).

The ability to reflect is a vital tool in working with the intense emotions faced each day by those working with severely traumatized children. It is essential that staff are able to develop the skill of speaking the unspeakable – to be able to recognize, express and work with the intense emotions that arise, such as murderous feelings, which Winnicott (1949) referred to as *hate in the counter-transference*. Without this the impact of secondary trauma can lead to staff can become overwhelmed, burnt out or suffering from compassion fatigue, as often happens across the social care sector, (Eastwood & Eckland, 2008; Hopwood et al., 2019; Tullberg & Boothe, 2019). The skill of reflection can be used both in moments of crisis (Ward, 2006) and for processing feelings when away from the children – referred to by Schon (1991) as *reflection in action* and *reflection on action*.

Rather than relying on didactic teaching, we aimed to design a course that enabled a dialogue and relationship to evolve between all members of the learning community. As highlighted by Collie (2008), it is essential to give careful consideration not only to what is being taught, but also to recognize the more unconscious dynamics that emerged within the student group. This reflects the therapeutic ethos underpinning the work with the children and links to Ward's concept of the matching principle (Ward, 1998). For example, the structure of the day was carefully designed to enable students to feel nurtured, but with clear time boundaries providing a sense of structure and containment. The course was carefully planned to be spread over two years. It was felt this ethos would be beneficial in developing a reflective culture for the group.

Our first two cohorts of students were all employed by the MBS and had been in employment for between two and five years, giving a breadth of experience but also some reassurance that these selected students were committed to the organization and to the learning. The following year saw one of the key developments of the programme, opening the course to include students from other settings which has offered improved opportunities for shared learning.

## Up and Running

After the arduous process of designing the course and getting it validated, we welcomed our first students in April 2008. Each day began with sharing our preoccupations, the uppermost thoughts in our minds, in order to put these to one side and allow the group to focus on the work of the day. This process facilitates “a transitional space,” an extension of Winnicott’s (1953) idea of the transitional object. We aimed to create a social space between two states of mind, the work role and the learning role. This idea has proved important and one which is used in meetings and training sessions at the MB.

Underpinning all the teaching was the need to reflect on our own feelings, responses and motivations in relation to both theory and practice. In the first year, students were expected to keep a reflective journal which Best (1998) describes as

*...more than a record of events, feelings and insights; it is essentially a workbook, a dynamic working document intended for review, rethinking, re-vision, most effective when open to question and open to change (p.154).*

Although there was no requirement for the students to submit their reflective journal there was an expectation that they would draw on their reflections about the work to recognize themes and patterns that arose from day to day. As Rowling (2000) writes in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*:

*‘I sometimes find [...] that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind. At these times’ said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, ‘I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into a basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form.’ (p503–504)*

Throughout the course, our aim was that in taught sessions as well as in their written assignments, students would be able to demonstrate a move from simply describing events, to a capacity to reflect on the children’s unconscious communications, as well as the dynamics of their relationships with colleagues and children. This has proved to be the case.

*Having been very skeptical of reflective practice I have accepted that I can learn from it and will not become a good practitioner of therapeutic care unless I do and I should approach reflective practice with an open mind Foundation Degree Student*

As part of the design of the programme we also built in experiential reflective groups where students could safely explore, in a regular facilitated space, the emotional impact on themselves of the work and develop their learning about themselves and thus their work. Reflective practice and dialogue enabled students to take a step back from their direct work with children and families and to think and process what was happening. One student, Anna,<sup>3</sup> wrote about the impact of working with Carl, describing the *overwhelming sense of*

*sadness* she felt and the constant feeling of being *emotionally drained*, something many students related to.

During one of the group discussions Anna presented her work with Carl to the group. She later described the presentation as *unbearable*, as it brought to the surface the pain and sadness of working with Carl and his family. Through the reflective discussion in the group, Anna was able to see that these feelings of sadness were projections from Carl. These gave her an insight into the unprocessed grief from Carl and his family.

Anna's recognition of these projected feelings didn't diminish their intensity but did help her to make sense of them. This insight was a rehearsal for further discussion within her work team. Students sharing unresolved issues with their peers is an integral part of the course, but we had perhaps underestimated the power of these becoming rehearsals for subsequent workplace discussions.

### **Challenges of Work-Based Learning**

As with any work-based training programme, there exists a complex relationship between a learning cohort and a working cohort. This was apparent in our first cohort of students, which, being drawn exclusively from our existing staff group, meant that the students were also our peers and colleagues. The impact of this was manifold; strong feelings of resentment, unfairness and the perceived encroachment of study time on the working task emerged.

Taking a psychodynamic perspective, we would argue that any educational course for adults initially generates some anxiety; the task of going back to being a learner may raise awareness of pockets of poor practice which may previously have remained at an unconscious level. These anxieties were felt acutely across all departments. As an organization which also works within a systemic framework, we recognize that problems are best understood as located between individuals and teams (Dallos & Draper, 2010), we recognize that changes in one part of the system have an impact on the system as a whole. This was most clearly felt at the time of submission of assignments, where students' high levels of anxiety impacted on their capacity to contain the anxieties of the children. During the first term of the course, when anxieties were at their highest, there was a noticeable increase in behaviors from the children which staff found challenging. As noted by the director, in the first year of the course staff sickness was higher than the previous year, though attendance on the course was, and remains, exceptionally high.

*The Foundation Degree in Therapeutic Work with Children and Young People has had a profound positive impact on the quality of therapeutic care our children receive, and consequently on their outcomes. Although initially we experienced a period of high staff anxiety, mainly relating to assignments and students who hadn't studied before, this was overcome and now staff consistently feedback their gratitude for providing the course and*



*their appreciation of all that it has offered them professionally, but also personally. Staff feedback how much they feel they have grown during the course. Despite the challenges and struggles of running such an innovative course, it remains absolutely central to the way we wish to look after our staff. We know that if we don't look after our staff really well, we cannot expect them to do the same for the children and families in our care! The Mulberry Bush School Director*

As the MB is underpinned by psychodynamic principles and reflective practice, these feelings were explored in reflective spaces, a facilitated space without an agenda, where thoughts and feelings can be processed in a non-judgmental, non-punitive way. This is a safe space where dynamics within and between adult teams can be processed (Mulberry Bush School, 2007; Price et al., 2018). Rather than allowing these feelings to polarize teams and individuals, we are able to be thoughtful about such dynamics, and support both teaching staff and students to be successful.

For many staff working in the residential care sector, their own educational experiences have been negative. It was no surprise that one of the initial challenges we encountered was students' anxiety about failing the course, an anxiety faced with each new cohort.

As the course is founded on work-based learning, to fail part of the course would in effect be demonstrating poor practice. Where practice concerns have been raised, these have been picked up by line managers, and supported by course tutors, as practice issues. Of the almost two hundred students we have trained, nobody has failed the course. More encouraging is the number of students who have significantly developed their practice and reflective capacity as their understanding of the work grows.

As well as the structure the tutors provided for students, it was necessary to recognize the legitimate dependency which might arise through tutor/student relationships (Collie, 2008). We paid attention not only to intellectual learning, but to the emotional learning of the students (often far greater than envisaged), whilst always aiming for students to graduate and become autonomous workers.

As tutors it was also important for us to be mindful of the potential dependence from the student group onto tutors, which perhaps mirrored the dependence of the children on the students when they were in their staff role. As the course progressed, from year one to year two, it would place less emphasis on teaching and required students to take greater responsibility for their own research, discovery and learning. This was something many students resisted, perhaps experiencing this as abandonment by tutors, or as persecutory (Collie, 2008). However, this emotional investment by the student group was key in providing a good culture for learning, in which students develop a group identity and sense of belonging.

An additional challenge emerged in subsequent years of the Award, in relation to staff who were not employed by the MBS. For some of these



students the course provided their only sanctuary to process often overwhelming feelings and make sense of a child's communication and needs. These were often taken back into work settings, though it would be naïve to think that these were always welcomed with open arms. Indeed, some students have expressed that in some cases sharing unresolved issues made things harder – a reality recognized by Kegerreis (2013).

A final challenge we had not anticipated was the sense of loss when the course finished. The focus on investing emotionally in the culture and belonging to the group has already been discussed. This led to students developing a strong sense of identity and, for some, resentment toward the MB when the course finished, or was felt to be taken away. This was projected onto tutors by the students as abandonment, and many spoke of their sense of loss. Although hard to acknowledge, it was felt, at least by tutors, that there existed some envy toward the new cohort, and the nurture which they would receive.

### **Reviewing the Development of the Course**

Developing a capacity for reflection both supports practice and supports individuals' capacity to manage the impact of the work and is arguably therefore therapeutic for staff and raises the standards of therapeutic care. Over time, the capacity for the organization to contain students' anxieties has also grown, in part as a result of a shift in expectation and in part due to the experience and knowledge held by a growing number of staff members who have successfully completed the course. Course completion is now a contracted employment requirement for all MB care and education staff. By making the course compulsory, our aim is to have a shared understanding and language and to provide consistent responses to the children. An additional benefit of the course is the mixing of staff from different departments and from external organizations, which helps forge a shared understanding as well as facilitating discussions between different roles and functions in different work settings.

Previously, senior staff members, (some of whom hold post-graduate qualifications), were looked up to for theoretical insight. As this insight was not fully held by all team members it was more difficult to challenge or to provide counter-arguments. Since the introduction of the Foundation Degree, 94.6% of our group-living and education staff who have been in post for more than a year now hold professional qualifications in therapeutic work and are increasingly confident in applying theory to practice.

Despite clearly expressing the mandatory requirement of taking the Foundation degree to all new staff, ambivalent feelings still do arise. It is important to consider the impact of such compulsory learning requirements.

Gibbs and Habeshaw (1996) state:

*To a considerable extent students get more out of learning tasks when they are fully involved in them. Being fully involved means that they (...) had a choice about which course to take (p10).*

As our internal students do not have a choice about undertaking the course, we involve them in other ways. Annual reviews of the course programme take into account feedback from the students, to ensure that teaching stays current and addresses changes that are being introduced in the landscape of education and social care, as well as new theoretical developments. Students are encouraged to bring live material from their practice to discuss and share with their peers in order to ensure links between theory and practice.

One of the key challenges faced was whether the work-based learning model could enhance the reflective capacity of practitioners. The course required students to learn experientially and work as a group.

One student, who had worked in other child care settings, spoke of his mistrust of the therapeutic approach, seeing nothing wrong in ignoring his own feelings and just reacting to each behavior as it occurred. He has now graduated from the course and recently spoke about the development of his own practice. He is now able to recognize some of the children's behavior as a communication and that his own feelings are linked to the work with the children. Moreover, his line manager spoke of his being mistrustful of the learning and his capacity to understand. However, with his training and supervision becoming joined up, he became more confident in understanding the basic concepts, especially around reflection and the unconscious. He began to enjoy the course, and his direct work with the children. By the end of the course, he was very proud of his achievement.

*I think I have started to be more open to the whole idea of reflective practice and realize reflection can help me understand my strengths and weaknesses and help make me a better practitioner, though I realize this is not an easy process for myself. Foundation Degree Student*

## **Wider Implications**

The development of the Foundation Degree has clearly benefited the MB but it has highlighted wider implications for the child care sector. If therapeutic settings are to continue and develop as a core component of the child care sector, they need to address the potential contradictions between their theoretically-orientated practice models and the models of training set out for them by regulatory bodies. We would argue that the model of staff training in England requires considerable development with the recent proposals made to further train managers of children's homes (in Josh MacAlister's review of England's children's social care system) not going far enough (MacAlister, 2022). Given the centrality of teamwork in group residential care and

education, practice models need to be group-based and to have a matching, robust theoretical base. As this report has hoped to show, we have found a psychodynamic and systemic psychotherapeutic understanding goes some way to provide this.

Models of therapeutic training are not necessarily straightforward and without risk. It is a huge undertaking to develop a reflective staff culture that is able to look at itself, to recognize its ability to do the work, and understand the impact the work can have upon each member. It is necessary to be able to work with complicated feelings that arise through transference, countertransference and projection. But we would argue that a staff team in touch with these feelings will be more able to contain the emotions of those with whom they work and be able to develop therapeutic relationships when working with those who have experienced trauma. However, there is a risk that staff will become more aware of their own backgrounds and feelings, and for some this can be overwhelming and unbearable. Within the MB we believe we have seen a significant improvement in the reflective capacity of our students, but this has also led to a small number of staff getting in touch with unbearable feelings which have needed to be further explored in staff support spaces. At times we have had to support staff to reach a conclusion that the time to do this work is not quite right for them, which has led to a small number consequently leaving the school.

Finally, we need to find new ways to measure the success of our students, as we have done with the children and families with whom we work. Training isn't about obtaining a certificate or the highest mark, but about the ability to apply oneself to the work, to recognize the impact we have on those in our care and the impact the work has upon ourselves. Whilst individual organizations can look to develop their own ways of measuring impact, a sector-wide approach is needed.

*I used to be confused all the time but doing the Foundation Degree helped me make sense of why the children behave like this and why it impacts me so much... Foundation Degree Graduate*

In the fourteen years since our course was developed a lot has changed in the sector, including training requirements for staff. The new Diploma in Health and Social Care has gone some way toward alleviating the inherent difficulties of the NVQ, but it falls short in providing the theory and practice needed for those working with the most traumatized children.

At the time of writing, The MB Foundation Degree is enrolling its fourteenth student cohort. Many of the students have continued at the MB (some in positions of leadership and management) but a number have gone to develop therapeutic cultures in settings such as fostering or mainstream schools.

For organizations such as the MB to develop and thrive we must invest in the training of our staff teams, not to meet externally required standards, but to meet the high standards we set ourselves, and thus ensure we offer the highest quality of work to the children and families who depend on us.

All students passed the course, many with grades significantly above the undergraduate level at which they were studying. Nevertheless, it has proved difficult to measure the development of their reflective capacity and its correlation to improved child care practice. Whilst anecdotal evidence indicates an improvement in reflective capacity at the MBS, we currently have no tool to measure this. However, the MBS has seen improved outcomes for children, including reduced levels of aggression and improved educational attainment. While these improvements cannot be exclusively linked to our Foundation Degree we believe these have, in part, been achieved by having an integrated and more stable staff team, who have trained together. This has enabled them to be able to reflect, collaborate and work psychodynamically to look beneath the surface of the children's behavior; in essence to bring to life the core principles of the MB.

*I cannot express my gratitude to you enough. This was so much more than a Foundation Degree to me and I am beyond proud! It has not only enhanced my work as a professional but has given me knowledge and confidence that I can share with others... Foundation Degree Graduate*

## Notes

1. NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) Level 3 was the government required qualification for the child care sector in England.
2. OFSTED - (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) are a non-ministerial department of the English government, with responsibility for inspecting a range of educational institutions, including state schools and some independent schools.
3. Students' and children's names have been changed to protect their identity.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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