Why providing a holding environment is important for all concerned – "A needs-based approach to leading and managing a Pupil Referral Unit"

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Introduction

Working with young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) can be extremely challenging. While it is easy to become immersed in the work, it is vitally important to keep in mind how essential it is for staff to feel supported – individually and collectively as a staff team – in order to sustain them in the work.

The emotional quality of the environment provided for staff has a direct effect on the quality of service offered to young people, and on the outcomes achieved by education provisions. "The quality of the holding environment for staff is the main determinant of the quality of the holding environment that they can provide for children" (Kasinski, 2003). This has been recognised by the UK's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), which recommended that secondary school staff should have "opportunities to reflect upon and develop their own social and emotional skills and awareness" (2009, p.14).

In this article we describe aspects of our work managing and leading a provision for young people with SEBD in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) for Key Stage 3 students, aged 11-14. We outline our approach of supporting students through supporting staff, based on **the idea that all of us - students and staff alike – have a range of needs that need to be met sufficiently in order for us to thrive.**

We use different ways of conceptualising needs, including Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), Bowlby's ideas of attachment and security, and psychoanalytic ideas of containment and holding. We outline some aspects of our practice, applying those theoretical ideas in the daily and weekly routines in the PRU, and we then highlight some of the implications for students' emotional and cognitive development.

Needs

When working with young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), we are well used to discussing the needs of students. However we have come to consider that the needs of all those in the system, including both students and staff, need to be

identified and met. We tend to consider what it is that people need to give of their best, and to apply this question to staff as well as students. **We would argue that students' needs can be best met through meeting the professional needs of staff, and that behavioural interventions by themselves are not sufficient, as they tend to ignore the experience of staff and the emotional impact of the work.** There are different ways of thinking about staff and student needs. We draw on the work of Maslow (1943), Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980, 1988), Bion (1967) and Winnicott (1987) to conceptualise what may be needed and how we might best meet those needs.

In terms of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, just as students need to feel safe and secure at a most basic level, and then need to feel that they belong and that their self-esteem can be supported, so to do staff have similar needs. It is possible to translate this hierarchy of needs into professional needs for staff, to inform practices for supporting and developing people professionally.

For example, staff require their more basic needs for safety and security to be met, in terms of thorough recruitment and selection, ongoing performance management and continuing professional development (CPD), and clear procedures for assessing and managing issues of risk. The more such structures ensure consistency, the more staff, and as a consequence students, are likely to feel their basic needs are met.

Staff also need to feel that they belong to a team, a collective that is more than the sum of its parts. Systems for clear communication and collaboration are key, together with individual differentiation and specialisation within the team, paralleling the individualisation of teaching and approaches for students. Staff also need to have opportunities to contribute to service-wide developments, and to have achievements recognised, again just like their students.

The more that staff feel secure and confident in their work, the more they can be sensitive and creative with students and with each other. This is never something that can be achieved once and for all – creating a safe environment for staff and students is an ongoing process.

Containment and Security

The emotional needs of staff and students can also be thought of in terms of the psychoanalytic ideas of containment and holding, as well as Bowlby's ideas of security and attachment.

Containment

Containment can be defined as the process in which difficult or painful thoughts and feelings can be tolerated, understood and put into words (Bion, 1967). This is an essential part of any comprehensive assessment of the needs of students with SEBD. The process of understanding the needs of such students and thereafter placing them appropriately for their future education relies on the capacity to contain, think about and understand students' and families' needs, anxieties and preoccupations. "For children's anxiety and disturbing feelings to be worked with effectively, both individual adults and the organisation of the school as a whole should provide emotional holding" (Greenhalgh, 1994, p.110).

In order for students to have an experience of feeling contained, staff need to feel sufficiently contained themselves. This can be offered through different types of leadership. A more nurturing form of containment can be offered by the process of listening to staff experience, putting difficult feelings and thoughts into words, and helping staff to feel valued, listened to, understood and have their experience validated. **Having the opportunity to think about and try to understand students' challenging behaviour is an essential part of working in a specialist setting, and yet can easily be overlooked.** In the course of the work, staff may feel anxious or stressed, hopeless or helpless, frustrated, angry or resentful. It is important to find ways of speaking and thinking about these feelings, in order to support and sustain ourselves and each other in the work, as well as contributing to our understanding of the emotional experiences of the students themselves.

Donald Winnicott (1987) described the importance of creating a 'facilitating environment' that allows care-givers **to provide 'holding' to those they care for in a way that is reliable, adaptive and secure.** Staff in education settings can create and provide a 'facilitating

environment' for students, so long as they feel sufficiently supported to remain resilient and thoughtful. Therefore we can think of the task of leadership and management in education settings for students with SEBD as **providing and maintaining a 'facilitating environment' for staff, to help sustain in turn their capacity to 'hold' students.**

The regular staff consultation meetings in the PRU do not have a pre-set agenda, and are an opportunity for all staff to share thoughts, ideas and feelings about whatever is currently most pre-occupying. Discussions may focus on particular students or classes, situations during the school day, or issues of difference or conflict within the staff team. Team members reflect on their experiences, facilitated by a clinician in the role of 'internal consultant' (Huffington & Brunning, 1994). "Teachers need to understand the emotions aroused in themselves by children's behaviour. As teachers become more self-aware, they develop greater understanding of their own and others' behaviours … **Working to understand the meaning and function of behaviour from a child's point of view allows the teacher to select intervention strategies more likely to influence that child's life in positive and lasting ways"** (Weiss, 2002, p.125).

Security

It is also **essential to have systems, structures and boundaries clearly and firmly in place, in order to help staff, and by implication students, to feel sufficiently secure**. These are vitally important in an organisation that must manage chaotic and out-of-control feelings and actions, providing containment in terms of clear routines and boundaries.

One way of conceptualising this is to think about the education provision as offering a 'secure base' (Bowlby, 1988) – for students and staff alike. John Bowlby identified a central feature of parenting as providing a child with a "secure base", to which a child can return "knowing for sure that s/he will be welcomed, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened" (1988, p.11). **In an education context, staff need to feel sufficiently supported professionally in order to offer nourishment, comfort and reassurance to young people in their care. Yet there also need to be sufficient structures to ensure enough consistency across a staff team and between individuals, so that students can really "know for sure" how adults are going to interact and respond to**

them. It is this combination of emotional and structural containment that gives students an experience of consistent care-giving and a "secure base".

Consistent approaches to behaviour management, teaching and learning, and communicating with parents and carers, form the basis of providing a sense of predictable, reliable security.

Clear and consistent approaches to behaviour management help young people to 'know where they stand' and to have a clear idea about what is expected of them. This helps them to make choices about their behaviour, with clear ideas about the consequences. This involves a combination of reward and sanction systems.

Engaging, differentiated and stimulating lessons help students to engage with the task of learning. By assessing and identifying students' cognitive strengths and needs, as well as their speech, language and communication needs, appropriate approaches to teaching and learning and to behaviour management can be tailored to individuals. We use a range of feedback processes to assess the effectiveness of the work at the PRU, using observation, self-report and other means from students, parents/carers and staff.

Even in early adolescence, parents/carers and families are the biggest influence on young people's lives. Young people and their families are faced with changes and challenges including puberty and hormonal changes, different perspectives on dependence and independence, responsibilities and boundaries. We have developed a range of systems that help to contain anxieties, to collect our experiences and to develop our work with our students. These include daily phone calls home from staff to parents and carers, to feed back on the child's school day, which can be particularly powerful for a parent/carer if they are receiving positive feedback about their child from education staff for the first time. By striving to communicate daily with parents/carers, and offering support either directly or through a network of colleagues, we aim to help families when needed during this period.

Attachment

When working with groups of young people with differing, complex needs, it is important to

combine universal approaches with the sensitivity and flexibility to respond to different individual needs. Achieving this balance requires constant monitoring, feedback, discussion, clear decision-making and regular review.

It can be useful to identify certain characteristics of some typical groups of students, for whom certain kinds of approaches can be most appropriate. One way of classifying some of the needs of students is by using the ideas of attachment styles (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988).Bowlby described attachment as the quality of an individual's tie to a caregiver – "a bond that ties". Through early experiences, we develop an internal working model of our expectations of ourselves and our relationships with other people. While research shows that early experiences affect neurological development, we also know that the brain is continuously developing and in early adolescence there is a period of rapid development in which new neurological connections can be made (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). **This gives young people opportunities to develop their own 'internal working models', based on a range of relationships and experiences of interactions with others at this time in their lives.** One way of considering how best to work with students with different kinds of needs is to bear in mind their attachment styles. These can be characterised by the different kinds of behaviours that people use to initiate interactions and to gain closeness to a preferred figure.

Application of attachment ideas

Identifying a young person's main attachment style is not straightforward. While it is based on observation of the student's behaviour, other family factors must also be taken into account, especially the early experience of the parent/primary carer themselves, and the current level and nature of emotional support they are receiving. In an educational setting, key questions to bear in mind include: How does the student relate to the task of learning? How does the student respond to expectations about their behaviour? To what extent does the student present any concerns regarding safety and risk? What can be said about the student's "relationship to help" (Reder & Fredman, 1996)?

Having considered these questions following observation, as well as meeting with parents/carers and identifying the extent of the surrounding support network, it may be possible to think about students in terms of these different attachment patterns (Geddes,

2006). **In each case, the aim is to make the environment as predictable as possible for young people, so that they can be supported to feel more secure.**

Bowlby stated that secure attachments are based on a relationship with a consistent, reliable primary care giver, while insecure attachments are based on a relationship with less consistent and reliable carer/s. For students with apparently secure attachment patterns, strategies may include shared agreements with the student and their parents/carers, with clear, shared goals and regular reviews.

Bowlby characterised three different types of insecure attachments. Anxious ambivalent or resistant attachment patterns arise when the individual is uncertain whether their parent/carer will be available, responsive or helpful. For such students, strategies may include clear and consistent boundaries, the use of transitional objects, clear reminders about the task/s of learning, and careful preparation and communication around change.

Anxious avoidant attachment patterns arise when the individual has no confidence that a carer will respond helpfully. Rather, the individual expects to be rejected or ignored, and so may try to become emotionally self-sufficient. For such students, strategies may include careful and consistent support with the task/s of learning with the aim of building up trust over time, the use of externalising stories particularly in a group setting, and careful negotiation around the offer and receipt of support.

Disorganised or disorientated attachments tend to arise from early experiences of abuse, gross neglect or severe parental difficulty, conditions now sometimes referred to as leading to chronic 'complex trauma' (van der Kolk, 2003, 2005), which can lead the individual to respond in inconsistent, disorientated or disorganised ways**. For such young people, the focus of strategies is often primarily around safety, promoting attendance and punctuality, helping students to feel safe and to behave safely in the unit, and where necessary to put together a risk assessment and management plan, that is then shared with the student, parent/carer and all staff, with the aim of making the environment as predictable as possible**. This helps to contain and manage anxieties for the child and adults, at home and in school.

Restorative Approaches

In addition to specific strategies for working with particular students or groups of students, restorative approaches are also embedded in routine practice in the PRU. The essence of a restorative philosophy is that relationships that have been disturbed by wrongdoing or conflict can be healed by a respectful process within a collaborative "community of care" (Morrison, 2002, p.4). In this process all parties are held accountable and given an opportunity to reflect on and repair the breakdown in relationships.

After incidents involving conflict, students and staff are offered the opportunity to take part in restorative enquiries and meetings (Hopkins, 2004), in which both parties describe their memory and experience of what happened, listen to the other party's point of view and consider how their behaviour impacts on others, before focussing on what is then needed to move on. This exchange is facilitated by a member of staff who sets a clear agenda and offers a containing framework of expectations. This approach offers young people an opportunity to experience alternative ways of resolving conflict, and experience has shown that it can make a significant different to how they subsequently respond.

However, restorative approaches are not just used in response to conflict, but are part of the regular routines in our day-to-day practice. We make extensive use of circles and classroom meetings in which students and staff share their feelings, ideas and concerns and problem-solve together on a regular basis. In circle time staff aim to create a non-judgemental atmosphere of safety and respect in which students are able to begin to help each other work through concerns that impact on their well-being, relationships and learning at school. Class agreements are created and reviewed by all students and staff, and are a reference point for expectations around relationships and behaviour for existing and for new class members.

Together, the aim is that the use of restorative language and other practices help to prevent harm and conflict occurring, and help to build a sense of belonging, community, safety and collective responsibility.

Implications for students

So what might be some of the implications of these approaches for the students we work with? **Our aim is to provide a sufficiently secure, reliable, containing and reflective working environment for staff, so that they feel supported enough in turn to offer a safe,**

facilitating environment for students. It is possible to consider some of the implications for students in terms of their emotional and neurological development, their capacity to mentalize and in terms of building their resilience.

Neurological and emotional development

As mentioned above, while early experiences affect early neurological development, we know that the brain is constantly developing, **and neurological functioning can continue to be influenced by experiences throughout the lifespan**. Early adolescence in particular is a time of rapid neurological development (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006), and so consistent experiences during this period can help to shape neural pathways and connections before they become more set in adulthood. Through repeated 'pruning' by the adults around them, young adolescent brains can be helped to develop and mature**. This presents an opportunity for consistent reinforcement, containment and positive experience to influence young people's neurological development, and to help bring about sustainable, longer-term changes for their future lives.** For staff this means that it is important to inform students about their own brain development, to offer healthy and safe contexts for students to explore decision making and risk taking, and to help students to manage their gut reactions through experience – by being helped to 'apply the brakes' when necessary. Such consistent guidance and reminders can help students to 'use it' (new neurological connections) rather than 'lose it'.

Students' emotional maturity can develop alongside such neurological changes. Students can be helped to experience their education setting as a 'secure base' as a result of experiencing some of the staff strategies described earlier**. These help students to have a repeated sense of their environment as predictable, reliable and consistent. Also, in terms of the development of their capacities for interpersonal relationships, students have repeated experiences of being supported to manage distress, upset and anxiety, so they can become better able to internalize some of those experiences that they have found helpful. It becomes more possible for students to begin to make some choices about their behavior, often for the first time in their lives. Over time they can begin to make, maintain and repair relationships with others.**

Building mentalising capacity and resilience

Using restorative approaches provides structures in which students can be helped to develop their theory of mind – the idea that other people have their own thoughts and feelings that can be different to one's own – and can also develop students', and staff's, capacity to mentalize. Mentalization has been defined by Holmes as "mind-mindedness" (2008, p.428), the ability to see ourselves as others see us, and others as they see themselves. It is possible to link the use of restorative approaches in education to developing the mentalizing abilities of staff and students. In particular, the practices of class agreements, circle times and restorative meetings provide structures in which staff and students can hear and come to understand the perspectives of others.

For young people with difficult attachment experiences, their capacity to mentalize may be inhibited because their primary caregiver may have lacked mentalizing abilities themselves. For them, therefore, to have the chance to experience being thought about explicitly, and to have structures in which they can experience seeing, hearing and understanding multiple perspectives, can be extremely important in developing their theory of mind and abilities to see others' points of view. This can serve to protect them from psychological adversity in the future (Fonagy *et al.,* 2002), and to help build their resilience.

Resilience is the ability to 'bounce back'. It involves doing well against the odds, adapting or recovering in the face of severe adversities and circumstances that are challenging or threatening. Consistent support from staff in the ways outlined here can provide and enhance factors that promote resilience such as developing a sense of mastery, having a more positive experience of education, having a committed person from outside the family who takes a positive interest in the young person and promoting social support networks.

Conclusion

By emphasising the importance of meeting the professional needs of staff, we aim to ensure that what Winnicott called the 'holding environment' is good enough for all staff and students**. The organisation and management of any education provision, particularly those working specifically with students with SEBD, needs to provide emotional holding for staff in order for those students themselves to feel sufficiently contained (Greenhalgh, 1994).**

We have outlined some of the ways we support staff to provide a sufficiently holding environment for the students we work with. We have also highlighted some of the implications for how students benefit from such an approach, in terms of their neurological and emotional development, and the development of their capacities for mentalizing and being resilient. This is 'work in progress' for us, and we continue to try to review our practice and develop ways of supporting staff to support students.

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