St. Andrew's Project: Building inclusion using 'Outcomes that Matter'

Chris Walter

Abstract

The article will describe how Camphill, an independent residential school for children and young people with a variety of complex needs, began a new project (St. Andrew's) by applying its experience in using relationship-based approaches to work positively with vulnerable individuals. The children and young people we work with do not fit in any standard programme being either too able for a special school or too complex for mainstream schooling.

'The origins of the St. Andrew's Project lie in the original vision of Camphill as a place of mutual learning, where each individual's spiritual uniqueness is promoted through meaningful relationships. This core belief resonates with the Circle of Courage model of meeting four fundamental growth needs for belonging, mastery, independence and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg and van Bockern, 1990). Therapeutic support is negotiated with children, their families and supporting agencies following a comprehensive ecological assessment. The intended outcomes for any short or medium term intervention are then agreed with those involved using the Outcomes that Matter © framework (Fulcher and Garfat, 2012). Weekly discussions with each young person then form the basis of an outcome based intervention plan.

Key words: inclusion; connection; achievement

Introduction

It has been argued in recent years that current care practice has over emphasized standardized assessment frameworks in its quest for evidence based practice (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Thomas and Loxley, 2007; Cameron and Moss, 2011). These are usually framed in general terms and often are not directly relevant to the immediate concerns of young people and their families. Consequently they can easily feel disempowered when an individual's development is discussed, as the professional picture appears to only focus on their child's lack of ability and misses out many other complex aspects of their experience. This can in turn create a situation in review meetings where professionals (whether social workers or residential workers) can be unreflectively assumed to be the experts on a young person's needs. This article will describe how Camphill St. Andrew's Project makes use of an assessment framework entitled Outcomes that Matter[©] (Fulcher and Garfat, 2012) that resonates more closely with our core pedagogical values. The scope of the article does not permit a detailed exploration of this framework, however, and interested readers are directed to the bibliography for further reading.

Camphill School in Aberdeen is an independent residential school that currently caters for 70 children and young people, aged 3-18 years old and with a wide range of needs, who attend the school as boarders or as day pupils. From its inception in 1940 it has become an increasingly valued provision in Scotland due to its distinctive way of seeing children and young people's vulnerabilities, where adults place immense value on their potential, fostering close and trusting relationships. It has historically been recognized that Camphill offers a social pedagogical ethos, an environment of acceptance where children and young people can feel that they are seen and heard as unique human beings above all.

St. Andrew's Project grew out of Camphill's recognition that many young people do not fit in any standard programme being either too able for a special school or too complex for mainstream schooling. Again and again parents have contacted Camphill asking whether we could meet their children's needs that are not being met in their current situation. For the last three years its team of trained staff have worked inclusively with children and families to support their wellbeing and resilience. We realised that it would be important to adopt an assessment framework that reflected our person-centred and inclusive values.

Early on in the development of the project several team members became inspired by the ideals underpinning the 'Circle of Courage' framework (Brendtro, Brokenleg and van Bockern, 2002; Brendtro and Larson, 2006). Founded on positive psychology (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) and resilience science, this framework moves the focus from deficits to strengths, considering four fundamental growth needs that all human beings share:

Belonging: the need to establish trusting connections
Mastery: the need to solve problems and meet goals
Independence: the need to build self-control and responsibility
Generosity: the need to show respect and concern

We soon found that one of the advantages of using this framework is that it not only rests on solid research evidence but also feels intuitively right as a description of universal human needs. It is simple without being simplistic and can be appreciated and understood by young people and their families without use of complicated psychological jargon.

Although it is true that it is based on solid research, Brendtro and Larson (2006) stress the importance of practitioners also developing other meaningful standards of evaluation, based on whether practices contribute to positive growth and wellbeing. In line with sound social pedagogical practice, we can draw on this framework to trace where the positive circle between a young person and their environment has been broken so that they have been cast emotionally and morally adrift. We do not only focus on the young person's weakness but look rather at the interaction between the individual and the society of which they are part. Issues in young people's lives have arisen through the interaction between individual and environmental factors; consequently we need to look at both these aspects in order to facilitate change.

One of our fundamental beliefs is that the environment becomes truly inclusive when children and young people feel contained and respected and are aware that it is a site of

mutual learning. All carers (including family) need to constantly reflect and adjust their approaches, realizing that often it is the systems around an individual that need to change rather than the other way round. No human being will engage in a change process unless they feel well and have a sense of belonging built up through the development of trusting relationships. This is no easy matter, however, and asks for authenticity and commitment from carers as well as a willingness to accept that they may never truly understand another human being's complexity. As Fewster (1996, p.3) long ago stated:

> Unfortunately, our technological world bestows expert and professional status on those who seem to possess clearly delineated methods or techniques, backed up with abstract knowledge. Those who know about kids are generally considered to be more 'expert' that those who have taken the more complex path of trying to know and understand the kids themselves.

Our work using the Circle of Courage then led us on to use 'Outcomes that Matter'© (Fulcher & Garfat, 2012). This assessment framework draws on research carried out by the Search Institute with three million young people and then adapted with permission for use with children and young people in out-of-home care (Fulcher, McGladdery & Vicary, 2011). Based on Circle of Courage principles, 10 external outcomes are identified which provide opportunities for growth and 10 internal outcomes are intentionally developed in daily life caring interactions. Fulcher and Garfat (2012) argue that these are the outcomes that matter to young people and their families, focusing as they do on small daily achievements.

The 20 outcomes are listed below (with E indicating external outcomes and I indicating internal outcomes):

Belonging
(E) Safety
(E) Positive Communication
(E) Caring Relationships
(E) Carer Support
(E) Boundaries for Daily Living

Mastery
(I) Actively Engaged in Learning
(E) Supportive Environments
(E) Carer's Involvement in Learning
(I) Motivation to Achieve
(I) Making Use of Learning Opportunities and Homework

Independence
(I) Planning and Decision-Making
(I) Personal Power
(I) Responsibility
(E) Activity Programmes

(I) Positive View of Personal Future

Generosity
(E) Service to Others
(I) Peaceful Conflict Resolution
(I) Caring
(I) Honesty
(E) High Expectations

Perhaps one of the most innovative aspects of this framework, however, is the focus it places on the subjective experience of the young person and of the carer who involves them in completing the assessment. The carer is asked to think together with a young person of a significant moment in the last week that captures the quality of each of the 20 outcomes. Once this has been visualised they should reflect together on how often such a moment has been repeated over the last week. This is not a quantitative evaluation but rather a consideration of the quality of such interactions: in this way it asks for an emphasis on meaning making and on the carer's recollection of significant moments. For example, a carer might reflect on moments in daily life during the last week when they felt that a young person engaged positively with others. This may have been a brief moment of connection, of more relaxed body language or open conversation. It is these daily life 'micro-events' that then become the focus of the assessment rather than a standardised outcome format that can too easily occupy carer's time in current practice. In our experience the 'Outcomes that Matter'© framework also directs the team's attention to the relational and interactive moments that occur between a young person and their carers. This is because it does not focus exclusively on the individual but considers the influence of the care environment, enabling us to trace direct connections between an individual's social ecology and their wellbeing.

Weekly recordings are then built up into Achievement Profiles that can graphically plot individual progress across the four dimensions and can then be used in reviews for better communication with families and professionals. We have used the Outcomes that Matter© framework and accompanying Achievement Profiles with a 14-year old young person we have worked with over the last year. For reasons of confidentiality I will use the name Dylan in this article. He came to the project with a history of school exclusion and failure, compounded by a situation where there was little positive communication between family and school. There were a large number of professionals involved with his situation, each with their own opinion on his needs and yet we noted that little was known of his own views. Our assessment was that Dylan lacked the fundamental basis of a sense of belonging, having experienced a range of negative interactions with other pupils and teachers over the last years.

As stated in our initial ecological assessment:

> The main aim of our intervention initially would be to provide an environment where Dylan could develop greater self-worth and a sense of belonging. In order to achieve this we propose the following intervention plan:

a) We would need to reduce the complexity of his current situation. This could be achieved if Dylan attended Camphill on a daily basis for a limited period of time.

b) At the same time we would work regularly with his mother in weekly sessions.

c) Subsequently we would work with whichever school is identified as suitable for meeting his educational needs.

It is important to emphasise that all of this work would be undertaken with the intention of reintegrating Dylan back into mainstream schooling as soon as is appropriate.

An example is included below of one of the Achievement Profiles that we compiled after working with Dylan and his family over a 24-week period:

Belonging

4=Achieving
3=Mostly Achieving
2=Some Achieving
1=A Little Achieving
0=Not Achieving
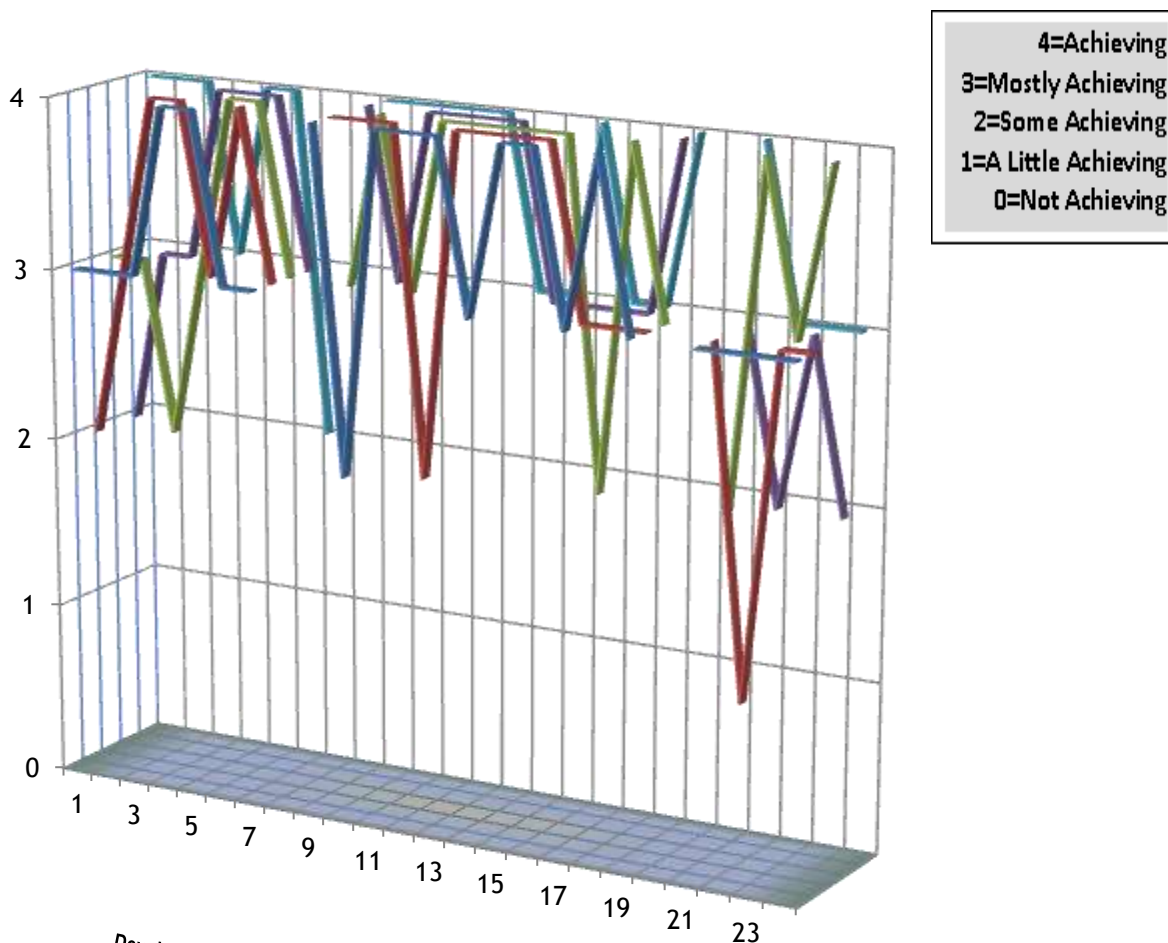
Developmental Achievements Weeks 4 Nov to 11 May 2012
Outcomes that Matter Achievement Profile©

- Safety
- Positive Communication
- Caring Relationships
- Carer Support
- Boundaries for Daily Living

Through converting the information gathered into a three dimensional graph it was possible for people to trace the dips and spikes in Dylan's progress but also to note where he had remained consistent despite changes happening in his surroundings. In the profile above one can note the impact of the birth of his baby brother in week 8 which influenced all five strands related to Belonging, the visit to the new school in week 17 and the moment in week 20 when he was told he would begin to attend with support from the Project. Positive communication dropped significantly at this point as Dylan reverted to former ways of coping in response to the anxiety of impending change. However, despite these dips in the profile it is also noteworthy that his progress remained reasonably stable over the majority of this period, ranging from (3) Mostly Achieving to (4) Achieving in all five strands of Belonging. The picture was roughly the same in the other three areas (Mastery, Independence and Generosity) although his achievements dropped noticeably when a new school had been identified for him.

These dips in Dylan's profile stimulated us to ask ourselves reflective questions about what this was telling us about his understanding of his situation and possible adjustments we might need to make to his programme. It was clear from our work with Dylan that his anxiety about his reintegration back into mainstream education was affecting him negatively. Whilst we wanted to support this move we were convinced that the timing and pace of this transition were crucial. Drawing on the data that was summarised in the Achievement Profiles it was possible for the professionals in the review to see a graphic representation of the negative impact of a hasty transition. Whilst all those involved were convinced of the need to progress with school inclusion, they were also able to be persuaded of the need for caution in making these changes.

An essential aspect of this process was the weekly meeting that one of the team members had with Dylan's mother. In order to work pedagogically with the Circle of Courage we had identified a need for a 'reflective space' in work with families, a supportive environment where problems could be thought through and new possibilities considered. Our intention was not primarily to teach parenting skills or strategies for managing behaviour but rather to find inclusive ways of understanding Dylan's needs and those of his family. As part of this work, we were able to use the Achievement Profiles as pointers towards changes within the family system. For example, it was possible to consider together with one of his parents how they might respond differently when Dylan presented challenging behaviour so that they could divert and thus diffuse potential conflict situations. The parent came back the following week and reported that they had successfully tried a different approach. In this way we drew on Outcomes that Matter[©] to identify the unmet needs underlying Dylan's anxieties and the adjustments that all those involved in his care needed to make so that he could feel more positive about his life situation.

St. Andrew's Project is still in the early stages of working with Outcomes that Matter[©] and there is still much to learn about how to use it in an inclusive manner with young people with a range of needs.   Clearly its pedagogical value will depend on the trusting

relationships that we are able to form with them and the degree to which we learn from them and adjust our approach in consequence. There is also still a lot to learn about how to communicate the Achievement Profiles most effectively to the young people and families with whom we work. The framework's real strength lies in its potential to be an inclusive way of involving young people in weekly recording, noting down what they consider to be real achievements.

Although the framework itself is relatively simple, people need to take time to understand the data contained in the Profiles and to appreciate its relevance. Without taking this care we can end up reinforcing our professional position as experts, leaving individuals and their families confused and powerless once more. However, we have made sufficient positive experience with this framework to realise its pedagogical possibilities: the opportunity to record young people's achievements and to work collaboratively to meet a young person's needs.

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