

Lizzy: Understanding attachment and loss in young people with complex needs - Practitioner review

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This well-constructed paper describes a situation which is fairly common in the care of young people with disabilities; namely that even in a caring environment, there can be a tendency for these young people to be viewed as a homogeneous group with shared characteristics, rather than as individuals in their own right. As was the case with Lizzy, this can result in important issues being overlooked.

An interesting feature of the paper, and one which I imagine most residential workers would recognise as common, was the initial description of Lizzy. It was imbued with warmth and affection, but I was a little worried that she came across as a somewhat two-dimensional character. I could not help but wonder, for example, how she really felt about Dunfermline football team. Was she an avid supporter or had this myth been perpetuated to the point where it came to define her, regardless of other aspects of her identity? My worries were soon put to rest as I read through the rest of the paper.

For me, a real momentum and turning point in the paper was the description of the realisation by the staff of Lizzy's pain, and their subsequent change of approach. Lizzy became a unique complex being, and understanding her was going to take time and effort. This sends an important message to residential workers. We are better placed to observe, pick up and tune in than many other professionals because of the significant relationships we develop, through spending so much time in the intense milieu of the lifespace. This practice wisdom would not be so easily acquired in another setting, and this paper encourages us to use this professional expertise, as advocates for the vulnerable people in our care.

It was sobering to realise that Lizzy's salvation depended on the intense concern and initiative of a particular service manager, and her motivated caring staff group. Fortunately for Lizzy this was available, but there will be many young people for whom this will not be the case. In my workplace, understanding attachment and loss is of central importance, and Dan Hughes' work is particularly significant in informing and supporting this understanding. What this paper demonstrates is that theory only becomes truly potent and effective when we make the effort to internalise it, and then use it creatively in the best interests of the young people in our care.

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