

Teaching lifespace working by using the lifespace in teaching

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Introduction

One of the most useful, fruitful and illuminating models I have found of understanding the work of residential child care has been that of lifespace. When I was undertaking my own social work training I remember struggling, at times, to use the methods I was being taught to help me to understand and develop my work within a group environment. Often these models were based upon the assumption that working one-to-one was the norm. It was not that I was unable to amend what I was learning to make it more relevant, but that I had to struggle to make the models fit the complexity of working within a residential setting. The teaching which I received on the concept of lifespace provided me with a theoretical base which drew upon the wider range of teaching on child development and group dynamics. It also provided affirmation of the work I had undertaken, in that it confirmed the effectiveness of working within a group setting as an effective and valid option rather than as a poor substitute for individual work. As Keenan (2002) states:

Life-space work is neither individual casework nor group work, nor even individual casework conducted in a group context but is a therapeutic discipline of its own (Keenan, 2002, p.221).

As I have moved from practice into training, I have continued to draw on lifespace working as a model. In residential work, lifespace is the deliberate and focused attempt to promote individual growth and development within the context of daily events. In teaching about lifespace to groups of residential workers during a three-day training course, I have found it illuminating to draw the participants' attention to the ways in which the course replicates and illustrates the concepts that are being covered on the course. In this paper, I describe how I demonstrate lifespace in the training room and give a brief outline of how I try to incorporate the key concepts from lifespace working into teaching about this important model.

Milieu

The milieu is the environment and the setting within which lifespace work takes place. It is more than that, however, as it also encompasses the feel of the space which is created from the interactions within it, and what everyone brings with them into the space. Everything that happens in the unit has an effect on the

lifespace. The practitioner's skill lies in utilising this consciously to foster growth and development. Similarly, everything that is happening in the training room has an impact on the training. The training room becomes, in effect, a working model of the lifespace. Managing the space and drawing attention to ways in which small changes can affect the level of involvement and the learning of those in the group can help the participants to get a real sense of what the milieu is. As Burton (1993) commented, 'It's not so much the building as the way you use it' (Burton, 1993, p.90). So, for example, the hardness of the seats, the positioning of the table, difficulties or not with technological equipment, can all be used as part of the learning experience.

Boundary and structures: consistency versus flexibility

As Clough (2000) states:

Residential workers have an opportunity both to structure services and to be alongside people. It is in this combination of practical task and personal relationship that the opportunity lies for purposeful and valuable work (Clough, 2000, p.2).

Many workers struggle to understand 'consistency' and the balance between rules and boundaries, and the flexibility required to meet each individual's needs. Rules and boundaries protect workers from their anxieties and serve to 'hold' and 'contain' the young people in a psychodynamic sense. Flexibility, however, is also required to ensure that the structure can accommodate the developmental needs of each individual child. There is a danger that 'insistence on equality of treatment can be seen as a way of avoiding or denying the reality that different individuals have materially different needs, emotional as well as physical, and therefore require unequal treatment' (Miller & Gwynne, 1972, p.126).

In the training session, the participants' attention can be drawn to the structures and parameters of the day - such as the timetable or the aims and objectives - while indicating points at which this is amended to suit the learning needs of the group. For example, although there is an official finishing time for the day, this may be renegotiated if the participants have reached saturation point and further discussion would be counterproductive. Another example could be when a particular worker raises an important issue from their work, a particular session may be extended in order to help them to explore the issue more fully. In addition, emotional reactions to the activities and material during the course may mean that the group needs 'holding and containing.' If the trainer gives that person extra time at the end of the day, it may not be referred to directly but gives the group a message about being flexible in meeting individual needs.

Assessment and involvement in activities

Working in the lifespace involves ongoing assessment of the emotional, physical

and cognitive abilities of the young people in the selection of daily activities and the way they are undertaken. The worker should:

...weave the activities into the fabric of the milieu, taking into account the needs, interests and limitations of the worker and the resources available to them (Whittaker, 1969, p.255).

Similarly in the training sessions, the trainer needs to be constantly monitoring how small groups are responding to the tasks. At times the trainer will draw to the group's attention the fact that they seem to be struggling and may restructure the task. Healthy independence can only grow out of preceding experiences of dependency needs having been recognised and met. In a training situation, the expectations of a group would generally increase as the three days progress. When the trainer senses from the group that they are tired or overburdened with ideas, he or she can often move back from group-centred activities to presentation of material or trainer-led discussion, rather than continuing to expect the group to work on their own. In doing this openly, the process can be used to illustrate flexibility in assessment and involvement in particular tasks.

Use of self and relationships

A key area of working in the lifespace is the use of self in relationships with young people and managing the impact of this. The worker needs 'self management in the face of constant exposure to residents, often competing in each other's presence for a worker's time, attention and emotional investment' (Davis, 1982, p.43). Within a successful training session, participants similarly may all want to be heard and responded to as they share their experiences. Highlighting this as it happens, and outlining the difficulties in giving enough time to each person can illustrate this point. Helping the group to draw upon and support each another also demonstrates how similar support can develop between young people in residential care. Differences in viewpoint and frictions within the group can similarly be highlighted as learning points. It can be helpful to point out that young people are often expected to get along with each other and with staff, yet workers may, at times, struggle to do so.

Working with defences

In working in the lifespace, the defences and emotions of the young people are part of the mix along with the defences and emotions of the workers. Workers have been attracted to a profession where they can only ever partially succeed. This is sometimes called 'the self-assigned impossible task' (Roberts, 1994, p.110). This leads to a need to manage the inherent anxiety in the complex tasks of the helping professional. 'Instead of reflecting on what is most appropriate, issues are polarised around right and wrong' (Roberts, 1994, p.115). This is not to say that there may not be genuine differences. It simply means that these differences are not examined or discussed as the position becomes polarised. For

example, polarised discussions of why a particular rule has to stay in place or not can become quite heated and it can be helpful to suggest to the group that this may be reflective of their own anxieties and defences. In exploring the demands of the work upon themselves, the trainer can help them to tease out the defence mechanisms they use to manage the work.

Self-awareness and supervision

When working with young people, one of the aims is to help them make sense of themselves and their lives. This developing self-awareness comes both from learning within the group, and through individual work with their key worker, taking place within a context of meaningful relationships. Within the training group there is the chance to look at painful, exciting, frightening, challenging and rewarding experiences within a 'safe enough' space and this can contribute to a developing self-awareness for the participants. This can be noted by the trainer and links drawn between the young people's experiences of being heard and the participants' experiences. It is also a good opportunity to underline the need for supervision which can mirror in its function key worker time. Lishman (2002) indicates that self-awareness hones the worker as a resource, but also stresses the developmental and protective functions of developing self-awareness and of supervision. Not only are self-awareness and supervision important for ensuring good practice but they also allow the worker to make sense of what is going on personally and professionally. This can allow them to process the negative feelings and difficulties they are having and help them to survive and thrive within residential settings. Workers

...need themselves to be contained in a system of meaningful attachments if they are to contain the children effectively. They need firmly bounded situations in which to work and they need the support of being able to talk things through in quieter circumstances away from the core of children's distress and problems (Whitewell, 2002, p.94).

Conclusion

The aim of this article is not to imply that training in any way involves the same depth and complexity as that of working within residential units but that, in many ways, it draws on the same skills in a different context. The fact that it does so means that learning experientially from events during training can make the knowledge and skills of lifespace working real to the participants.

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Young people's participation in the recruitment and selection process for secure care staff

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Who Cares? Scotland

Introduction

It's about young people having good staff that are dedicated in working with young people (Male, aged 17).

It's about making a difference for young people in the future (Female, aged 16).

The participation of children and young people in decision-making has been an important principle since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1992). In particular, Article Twelve of the UNCRC upholds the child's right to be heard. Children and young people can play a valuable role in the recruitment of staff and some agencies are involving them in a purposeful way. By involving children and young people in recruitment, a very clear message can be transmitted about their value and their centrality to the process. Important policy documents have called for greater involvement of children and young people in selection (e.g. Kent, 1997). Research also recognises the political, legal, social and moral reasons for promoting greater participation by young people in matters which affect their lives (Sinclair, 2004). As the main advocacy agency for children and young people in care in Scotland, Who Cares? Scotland has become increasingly involved in the preparation and support of young people in the important task of staff recruitment. This paper outlines the process used by one agency and discusses the difficulties and the benefits involved.

Background

It's about looking out for people in care and helping people get jobs (Male, aged 15).

Who Cares? Scotland is a national voluntary organisation offering an independent, rights-based advocacy service to children and young people who are, or have been, looked after and accommodated. We were asked by Cora Learning to identify, train and support young people to be involved in the organisation's recruitment and selection process for staff to work within two new secure units. The two secure units in question were St Philips in Airdrie and the Good Shepherd Centre in Bishopton. Cora Learning is a registered charity and a well-known provider of training and assessment services to the care sector in Scotland. It is the in-house learning and development provider for a number of residential establishments for young people in the west of Scotland, including secure accommodation. The organisation had been involved in an innovative