

The Hyper-specialisation of Interventions — Just Being There For Us

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Introduction

I come to a conference focussing on individual and group restorative practices and ‘dreaming’ of how it can be better and my main messages are that strategies are getting too specialised, that there is insufficient attention given to the societal conditions that create and sustain problems we set out to deal with – and that the way forward is not through dreaming. Early intervention work, preventative interventions and restorative and corrective practices abound. Training in doing it, manuals to support practice, websites for on-going support point to an increasingly ‘professionalised’ strategy. North America has been prolific in developing and branding specialist, ‘manualised’ services. Along with this have gone powerful dissemination, merchandising and ‘product testing’. To prevent education failure and the development of anti-social behaviour we have Headstart, High/Scope Perry Pre-school, DISTAR and Cognitive Enrichment Advantage etc. For addressing delinquency there is an equally wide range of structured, restorative arrangements. In the UK at the present, we demand evidence-based practices and that doesn’t mean a bunch of committed practitioners and clients saying it works. We want randomised longitudinal controlled trials. These impress us most of all. The Perry High/Scope pre-school project reporting 20 years on that 1\$ invested saves 7\$ 6 cents is the star in that respect.

These approaches have a growing appeal in the UK but they confront professional cultures which are more holistic and less specialised. Inter-agency, multi-professional, joined up services are currently favoured yet some evidence suggests workers with a key link role and limited training can have as much success by ‘just being there for us’. Additionally there is considerable effort invested in ‘regenerating communities’; part of this is to train local activists to engage with the community in addressing its problems. Thus, befriending, mentoring, family visiting and volunteer family support are gaining ground as approaches that place LESS reliance on trained professionals to DELIVER services TO a passive, troubled individual, family or community. The first section considers briefly the nature of and motivation for hyper-specialisation. A range of cases is then considered

The discussion extends to a weighing of the expertise external professionals bring to a ‘problem’ individual or family and the strength of community belongingness and local knowledge. Additionally consideration is given to notions of professional despotism, self-righteousness, personal advancement and ‘client’ disempowerment. The ultimate message is that, Yes, there is a need for supportive and restorative interventions; all workers in this field are political agents and, because there are larger societal forces contributing to the creation of these problems, we all need to speak and act on this level too.

Hyperspecialisation

There are practical, moral, financial and sociological reasons for questioning the ever-greater specialisation and professionalisation of services to address disadvantage, delinquency and disengagement. The social inclusion agenda in the United Kingdom has a strong moral and rhetorical appeal despite, and even perhaps because of, its conceptual vagueness. This paper looks at the problems of delinquency and challenging behaviour amongst young people and the way it is conceptualised. It then examines the increasing specialisation of the services designed to ‘target’ children, families and schools, most often designed to ‘fix’ the child. It goes on to look at more generalised community-based and interpersonally simple ways of approaching the problem. It questions notions of targeting and dosage and whether one needs to examine the child, school and family within a community context which itself lies within broader political and historical forces.

Gans (1995) has described the perverse tendency for professionals and professional groups to benefit greatly from the disadvantage of others and applying their professional and therapeutic skills to addressing this disadvantage – though it is deeply embedded and their efforts are likely to yield little.

We specialise

- To provide a bounded, targeted rationale
- To prevent being drawn into diverse multiple problems
- Acquire, maintain and enhance status
- Greater specialisation in socially valued work leads to esotericism mystic
- To insulate from responsibility and community

The challenges: individual, family, institution, community, culture, law, history

One of the reasons many of us are involved with troubled youngsters is that we do not believe they wanted to grow up this way and lots of choices and decisions made by others led to these difficulties. With each of the four cases below two questions can be posed: What could/should be done to help the individual? What could have been done to prevent the problem developing or getting this bad. As professionals and political agents, to do the best we can in this field, we must confront both.

Case 1

Martin is a 14 year old boy described by his Year 2 tutor as “of average ability at least” who suggests his potential level of achievement could have been much better but his home life is “very difficult”. The home life has been referred to in fairly vague terms as comprising a mother with drink and possibly drug problems, intermittent employment a new partner with his mother who, in trying to contribute to Martin’s discipline, has provoked huge tensions and living in an area which is very run down and poorly maintained – supermarket shopping trolleys in overgrown front gardens and derelict cars on the streets. Martin has attended school erratically with a couple of long absences. Martin as bouts of heavy drinking, is known to take drugs, has stolen and often spends days away from home.

Police, social work and educational welfare officers have been in touch with the family. Counselling has been suggested for Martin (adapted from Hustler et al, 1998).

Case 2

Lester is 9, but was excluded from his primary school as a 5 year old because he was ‘unmanageable’ – fighting, hurting children, running away. He lives with his mother and younger sister and his mother finds it very difficult to manage Lester’s moods, aggression and even getting him to bed at night.

When he was excluded from school his mother hoped to find him another placement fairly quickly but the other schools were full and his history was such that other schools did not feel able to take him without a Special Educational Needs Statement. He had a home tutor for three hours a week. He was then assigned to a local school which his home tutor took him into on two mornings a week. This period was extended to three and eventually four mornings in a special class designed for disruptive children. Lester began to enjoy this school experience and developed an attachment to his teacher who was a specialist in behaviour management. At the end of the summer term she left to go to a new school and Lester failed to form any comparable attachment with other members of staff. He eventually went to a special school and, because of continuing problems in the evening and at bed times, he became a weekly boarder. The special school speaks very positively of Lester (adapted from Parsons, 1999).

Case 3

Two ten year old boys killed two and a half year old James Bulger on 2nd February 1993 in Liverpool. The killing provided the content for the press to galvanise moral outrage and opportunities for Archbishops and moralists to contribute judgements and interpretations of the 'meanings' which the murder held for society.

After the court's judgement was delivered in November, 1993, the boys' status as criminals and as evil was confirmed. The English judicial process had run its course and the event was clearly established as a 'moral' and 'legal' matter, not a medical, (im)maturity or social disadvantage one.

King describes the outbreak of 'the demonisation of the two boys' (King 1995: 172). The Sun newspaper wrote, 'The devil himself could not have made a better job of raising two fiends'. The Times newspaper too shared in this with a leader article on 25th November headed 'The Three Evils'. BBC radio's *The Moral Maze* dealt with it, also using 'evil', and the Archbishop of York sermonised in similar terms. The act was judged 'beyond comprehension' legitimating language and response which combined harsh punitive law, witchcraft and wickedness. The judge was similarly shocked and referred to 'wicked and cunning boys' who had committed 'acts of unparalleled evil and barbarity'. The trial and treatment enterprise was one of allocating blame. If the boys had been dealt with according to psychiatric coding, as mentally ill or disturbed children, this would have been inconsistent with the media presentation of them as the personification of corrupted innocence and there would have been 'a regime of therapy' (King, 1997: 118).

The case could have been dealt with outside the criminal law if the Labour Government's legislation, passed by parliament in 1969, raising the age of criminal responsibility to fourteen had been implemented. A change of government and 'divisions within the Labour party throughout on the issue of juvenile offending made it possible for two ten year old boys to be found guilty of murder' (King, 1997: 113).

The age of criminal responsibility ranges from eighteen in Belgium, Romania and Lithuania to seven in Switzerland and Ireland. In Scandinavian countries it is fifteen. (King, 1995: 174). The possibilities for the attribution of blame and for dealing with illegal acts of young people are dependent on the national context.

The boys were sentenced a minimum eight year sentence. The Lord Chief Justice raised this to ten years. The Home Secretary, six months later, made the sentence fifteen years, citing public concern such as that represented in the Bulger parents' 300,000 signature petition sponsored by the Sun newspaper.

The significance of the public and official reactions to the Bulger killers is that a punitive legal framework, the individualises blame and responsibility, justice wins out over welfare, and political voices speak sternly of toughness rather than care. The complexity and paradox is also ever-present in the expression of horror at the deed, sympathy for the victim's family and pity for the perpetrator, and in the tension between retributive and restorative goals of the criminal justice system.

Case 4

Under the headline ‘Boy, 12 involved in vigilante killing given year’s detention’, Paul Kelso reports the case of a 12 year old convicted of taking part in the vigilante execution of a man he claimed had sexually assaulted him was sentenced at the high court yesterday to a one year detention and training order for assault.

Phillip Barrowcliff was 11 when Jason Mantoyal, 44 was killed at his home in Thetford, Norfolk, in December 2001. Barrowcliff, his brother Gavin Clark, 16, and Neil Howard, 28, went to Mr Mantoyal’s home after Barrowcliff claimed he had indecently assaulted him. Barrowcliff (he is referred to by his family name in all court proceedings) hit Mr Mantoyal in the testicles twice before Howard stabbed him to death. Note the publicising of full names of minors and the reference henceforth to the 12 year-old only by his family name.

Barrowcliff, who has a history of abuse and neglect at the hands of his parents, sucked his thumb and occasionally wept as he listened to his counsel, John Ryder QC, argue that a custodial order would be counter-productive and that, although the boy was party to an incident which led to a death, “he did not intend, expect or foresee any such occurrence and he made no causative contribution to it himself. What we see is a young person who has lacked stability from an early age and has been left to make his own way in the world.

‘The things he has seen and endured are extreme. He is the victim of long-standing neglect and harsh physical abuse at home. There is an explicit history of harsh physical violence at home. He has been hit until he wets himself, and appeared hungry, dirty and unkempt at school... He has been consigned to chaos through no fault of his own and now bears the consequences. He has lacked guidance and discipline, though that is not to say the rod has been spared. In fact, it has been used too much, and he has been brutalised by it... We know now how he will behave in a secure unit with other disturbed children. He will do what he has been doing since he was six, which is to seek to stand up for himself and make a place for himself at the top of the pecking order. It’s what he always does to survive’.

Addressing Barrowcliff, Mr Justice Curtis warned that unless he changed his ways he faced a life in prison. “In my view your offence cannot be met with something other than a period of detention” (Guardian, 27/07/02, p6).

Hyper-specialised responses and ‘just being there for us’

Brief therapy, Webster Stratton, parenting courses, etc are highly structured inputs which have been widely tested and greatly refined in order to appeal to the client group. They also serve as great ‘protectors’ for the professionals who ‘deliver’ the package. They are seldom authentic interactions. They are abstracted from the interaction networks and communities from which people come and they are not sustained.

Lloyd et al (2001) report from the clients’ side. Investigating inter-agency working in preventing school exclusion they visited many families and interviewed in order to determine what made a difference in maintaining young people in school. Whilst single disciplinary teams may have some limitations the multi-disciplinary team is much recommended to address the multiple problems that many children and families manifest. There is the suggestion that ‘there is very little evidence regarding the efficacy of multi-disciplinary team working in educational setting’ (Wilson and Pirrie, 2000 : 4).

Lloyd and her colleagues question whether the nature of the professional role matters, particularly as the nature of their expertise and the organisation they belong to is often unknown by the client. Asked if the

professional who had visited had come from Youth Justice, social work, the health authority a local community group or somewhere else, they often did not know. The answer was not uncommonly “well there was this woman” (Lloyd et al, 2000: 181).

Interviewees talk also about good personal relationships with some ‘helpers’. These individuals did not see the helper in a professional role but rather as someone who “my dad used to talk to him all the time at the football”. Or “my mum and my social workers are good friends.....” (Lloyd et al, 2000: 182).

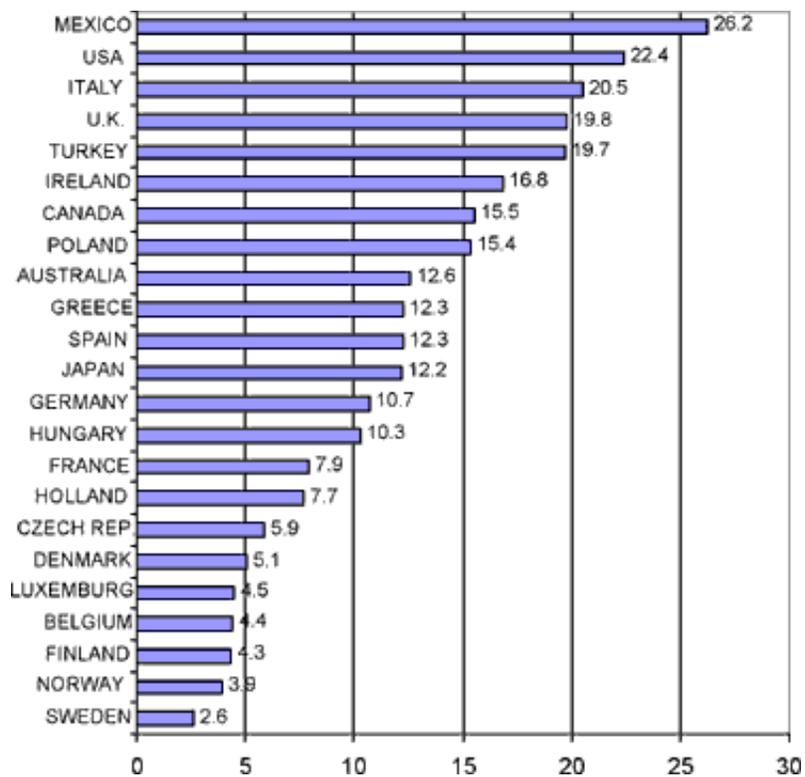
Arguably it is not the professional role nor the particular skills acquired in training but a manner, relationship, authenticity and trust. Hustler et al (1998) report on their evaluation of the ‘Choices for Life’ project in Manchester, UK. Rathbone C.I. is a charity which focuses on the most vulnerable and marginalized individuals and groups, sometimes referred to as ‘the disappointed, disadvantaged, disaffected, disappeared’ and in relation to these Merton (1996) pointed to the temptation to give ‘great concentration on measures to be taken by providers – the supply side – with insufficient account taken of experiences, needs and hopes of the young people themselves.

Hustler documents the huge frustrations that can arise working with a client group that finds it so difficult to turn up, keep appointments, carry through any decisions made; yet the charity and its work through Choices clearly makes an impact on the lives of these young people because it sustains its interest and commitment to the young people who are on its list.

The state of youth

We do not treat our young people well. Some countries appear to be better at cherishing their young than others. The Innocenti Report Card begins by saying, 'The persistence of child poverty in rich countries undermines both equality of opportunity and commonality of values. It therefore confronts the industrialised world with a test of its ideals and of its capacity to resolve many of its most intractable social problems' (UNICEF, 2000). Figure.1 sets out the facts about how poorly we support young children and the gross variation in the proportion that are below the ‘relative’ poverty line. The ‘five per cent club’ consists of Nordic countries, Luxembourg and Belgium. It could be that only these are approaching meeting Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child providing ‘a standard of living adequate for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development’.

Figure 1 Percentage of children living in 'relative' poverty defined as households with income below 50% of the national median.



A generation ago, ‘a prediction that poverty would still afflict significant numbers of their children in the 21st century would not have been believed’ (UNICEF 2000: 3). Hobsbawn, surveying the late modern world moving towards the millennium, points to the absurdity of arguing,

‘that the citizens of the European Community, whose per capita share of the joint national income had increased by 80% from 1970 to 1990, could not “afford” the standards level of income and welfare in 1990 that had been taken for granted in 1970s’ (Hobsbawn, 1995: 577).

Similar charges have been levelled at North American administrations. Globally, Wilkinson (1999) brings together convincing research pointing to linkages between inequality and ill health, psychosocial welfare and even homicides. Summed up by Benzeval et al, the health picture is that,

‘People who live in disadvantaged circumstances have more illness, greater distress, more disability and shorter lives than those who are more affluent’ (1995: xvii).

The inequalities which lie behind the unequal distribution of health hazards are much the same as those implicated in the poor participation and attainment in education. We cannot solve the education problems within that sphere alone.

In terms of criminal justice systems countries also vary widely and political decisions have defined the nature of the discourses about whether actions of young people are to be seen as punishable or remediable. In England and Wales 5,300 under 18 year olds are detained in prison, as against 16 in Denmark, 134 in Finland, 850 in Spain, 25 in Portugal and 8 in Sweden (Presdee, 2000: 110/111). The USA and Canada boast numbers and rates of juvenile incarceration that should be an embarrassment.

Nicaise (2000) has reported different proportions of pupils in special schools: Flanders has 3.6% of its pupils in special schools, The Netherlands 4.4%, Scotland 1.2%, Ireland 1%, Spain 0.5%.

The differences in allocation, treatment, status and life chances are conditioned by the socio-cultural

environment and specific decisions made. The striking finding from looking back over different countries over a fairly extended period of time is that prosperity as much as morality leads us to care for the young and the vulnerable. This suggests a fairly shaky moral foundation.

Utopias, Third Ways and Dreams

Social exclusion cannot be combated adequately by the two 'modern classical' ideological options of authoritarianism or *laissez faire*. It remains to be seen whether or not The Third Way of Giddens and others, is a different way or whether there might be several alternative ways. What follows is some exploration of this question. There are no easy solutions, and there is no 'magic bullet' to combat social exclusion, through education or otherwise.

Youth's continued marginalisation and the compromised and partial entry to citizenship status are sources of concern. It is the social exclusion, with associated possibilities of crime, lack of participation, unemployment or unemployability, and long term dependency which the state apparatuses need to address. There continue to be groups which are predictably marginalised in contexts of competition and uncertainty.

The disadvantaged, suffering social poverty are exposed to alienation at multiple levels: being unproductive (unemployed or unemployable) members of a society with a strong work ethic (economic exclusion); being incapable of satisfying wants in a growing hedonistic ethos, being on social security or the dole in a materialist consumerist society (social exclusion); and finally being clients of an institution, persons incapable of handling their own problems (political exclusion). The cumulative effect of all these is a sense of loss of dignity. The institutionalisation of strategies to mitigate social poverty coupled with the breakdown of community solidarity, therefore develops a more acute form in the loss of 'social, economic, psychological and emotional well-being' which is reflected in various forms like the lack of coping or problem solving mechanisms, lack of meaningful activity, extinction of structures of intra-group and inter-group solidarity, loss of dignity, low self-image, and in the worst scenario, the loss of hope. Deprivation, and disadvantage thereby result in personal isolation leading to social alienation (Prabhu, et al, 2000).

Solutions?

In a study of what makes a difference in helping difficult young people stay in education, a medium term follow-up report by Parsons et al (2001) found that, in the examination of a whole range of factors associated with interventions and prevention, no particular strategy or professional skill stood out as making a distinctive difference. In looking at successful cases of children who had been excluded at primary school level but were succeeding later at secondary school level, the things which made a difference were not unlike earlier mentions of some woman came round:

1. Presence of a concerned adult in professional contact – these could be tutors or school year heads, staff in a Pupil Referral Unit, key workers in a children's home or special support staff from projects of various descriptions. In other words somebody took the responsibility and really concerned themselves with the individual's welfare.
2. Flexibility of approach and provision. There is not one approach and you know it will work. Layers of provision are necessary. There must always be another option.
3. Recognition of individual strength and abilities. Empowerment means allowing young people to make choices and build on their strengths. Professionals must acknowledge, value and provide opportunities for young people to build on their strengths.
4. The individuals themselves – in some cases people in contact with the young people wanted to emphasise the way they felt the individual should take credit for their own achievements, despite the fact that in such cases they had a great deal of support from particular individuals and/or agencies. In

these cases, personal ambition, maturation and taking responsibility for ones own life, as well as not blaming others, was a key thing.

5. Change of school or education provision.
(Parsons et al 2001, p. 52).

The history of the last 40 years has shown how ineffective our experiments and projects are to counter deep-seated and long-lived disaffection and social exclusion. We fill our prisons, foster teenagers, worry about street crime etc

There is the remarkably modest, but under-rated, principle of ‘do no harm’ or the goals of ‘preventing things getting worse’ or ‘delaying and reducing the negative outcomes’. The answer does not lie in more projects or greater specialisation.

It may lie at the structural level with PEACE.

Politics
Equality
Attitude
Culture
Economics

The barriers to PEACE are huge and historical. Those of us doing well in our privileged position, often through employment in the helping professions, will not vote for diminished income

At the level of action the answer may lie in RATS.

Relationships
Authentic
Trust
Sustained

The barriers to the application of RATS include

- professional hierarchies and associated pay scales,
- the long-term nature of support needed for children, families and communities,
- the slowness of change in communities so that they do not give rise continuously to the same sorts of problem
- money to raise many from below the poverty level.

So a broad front holistic approach could involve the PEACE-RATS. Think about it!

Postscript

Some years ago, when researching and lecturing on the causes of school exclusions, the role of state policy and the potential of specialist interventions a Civil Servant said to me “this will run and run”. My response was “long may it”. To this day I am unsure whether I meant I wanted it to carry on as a ‘hot issue’ until the goal of zero exclusions and appropriate provision for challenging young people was provided or whether I wanted the debate and interest, and the funding which it brought with it to continue because it provided me with a good professional life.

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