

A lost community

After more than 70 years, the Cotswold Community, one of the first therapeutic communities for troubled boys, has closed. **John Whitwell**, a former principal, laments its loss

The Cotswold Community has closed, ending more than 70 years of looking after, “training” and “treating”, troubled and troublesome boys on a 350 acre farm near Ashton Keynes. I lived and worked there with my family from 1972 until 1999, for the last 14 years I was the principal, succeeding Richard Balbernie, principal from 1967–85.

Balbernie was the founder of the community as a therapeutic programme, leading the transformation, perhaps more accurately described as a revolution, from its former incarnation as an approved school. The change was vividly described in *Spare the Child* by David Wills, published in 1971. This brought fame to the community as the book was widely available. It is still a good read. It convinced me that this was where I wanted to work to deepen my knowledge of therapeutic residential work.

Spare the Child is an account of how the staff of an orthodox approved school are trying, with vision and tenacity, to convert it into a therapeutic community. Their concern was to rid the school of its hierarchical and repressive culture, and to establish instead a community which could provide the care and understanding of which the boys had been deprived. What was encountered was violent hostility to such changes from some of the staff, and, even more alarmingly, the existence among the boys of an established and vicious subculture which

mirrored all too accurately the official system of rewards and punishments.

Change in this hostile climate was hard won requiring considerable bravery and tenacity and a clear vision. Having experienced the resistance to change I am unsurprised by the many failures to change institutions that I have witnessed in my lifetime. I think it took approximately five years to establish a therapeutic culture.

Balbernie brought in eminent consultants to help drive the process. Key was Barbara Dockar-Drysdale as consultant psychotherapist. She founded The Mulberry Bush School in 1948 and then trained as a psychotherapist which brought her into contact with Donald Winnicott whose work on how small children achieve emotional integration was the key concept underpinning the Community’s work. The boys referred were diagnosed as emotionally unintegrated. In today’s parlance they would be described as having attachment disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, oppositional defiant disorders. In other words they were chaotic, disruptive, prone to panic rages, had low self-esteem and very little concern for others.

The Community’s therapeutic work was to help emotionally unintegrated boys achieve emotional integration, a stage in development which would be normally achieved before the age of three. The fact

that this reparative work was taking place with boys in the age range 9–16, whose age appropriate needs also had to be addressed, meant that this was complex therapeutic work. Dockar-Drysdale’s consultancy was to the staff teams of the group-living households and the education area. The therapeutic model was that the residential workers would be trained and supported to provide therapeutic child care. This was a very different model to residential child care where the child might see a therapist once a week. Emotionally unintegrated children need therapeutic management 24-hours a day. Staff had to be trained to take full advantage of the moments in a day when a child might drop their defences and be receptive to being cared for. It was this daily process over many months that basic trust was achieved, the cornerstone for ongoing therapeutic work.

Another decision that Balbernie made, crucial to changing the culture of management, power and authority, was to bring in the expertise of the Tavistock Institute. Initially this was Ken Rice, followed by Isabel Menzies-Lyth and subsequently Dr Eric Miller. Their task was to oversee a change in the management structure that would support the therapeutic task. The previous regime had been top-down and hierarchical – the staff who were directly involved with the boys were the least effective people in the organisation. The pyramid had to be

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stood on its head, delegating authority to the staff looking after the boys to make decisions in their best interest. This meant the residential workers had the authority and confidence to draw the boys into the decision making process, a key attribute of a therapeutic community. These practices are taken for granted now but at the time it was unheard of for staff to have authority and budgetary responsibility. The idea was to enable the staff to role model effective adult behaviour to the boys which, in the absence of family life, was vital for the sake of their future wellbeing.

It is now accepted that the aim of therapeutic work with emotionally damaged children should be to break the cycle of deprivation, enabling them to develop a feeling of self-worth and the ability to sustain meaningful relationships in adult life. The boy who was read bedtime stories grows into the father who reads bedtime stories to his children.

Sad though it is that the Cotswold Community has closed, the work will live on through the many generations of people who experienced working and living in a therapeutic community with an explicit and coherent philosophy in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. ■

More information can be found on
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