Removing the threat of exclusion in schools: creating inclusive educational environments

School exclusion is damaging for the whole community, reinforcing attitudes of intolerance and prejudice. There is no evidence supporting the notion that exclusion serves as an effective deterrent, neither is there evidence that the threat of exclusion promotes cooperative behaviour. In fact, exclusion further ostracises young people who are already struggling with a sense of belonging. However, exclusion is still widely used as a disciplinary action within our education system and recently available figures demonstrate that in the year 2017-2018 there were 7,905 permanent exclusions in England and it is estimated that there were thousands more informal exclusions happening either through managed moves, or pupils being "off-rolled" into home education. (Weale 2019).

This qualitative research study aimed to evaluate the interventions implemented by an educational organisation that works with Children and Young People with co-morbid Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs and/or Autistic Spectrum Conditions, who have experienced multiple exclusions in educational institutions. The social, education and careers prospects would typically be poor due to their complex learning and behavioural needs and often adverse childhood experiences. Yet, for the past two decades this organisation have demonstrated that 90% of their students' progress on to education, employment and training. This organisation makes no permanent exclusions and has minimal fixed term exclusions. The research project investigated what underpinned this inclusive approach.

Participants included three black and six white students; eight men and one woman; with a range of complex needs.They came from a variety of family circumstances and backgrounds. Participants were selected to represent a range from those having recently graduated, to those who had graduated five years ago.

We identified significant themes from the research; identity, attachment and loss, transformation and empowerment and group process. These themes were pivotal in supporting the participants in turning their lives around to become thriving individuals.

Identity; pride and purpose

Identity is an individual's frame of reference for making sense of lived experience in order to '*maintain a meaningful sense of self-sameness and self-continuity despite the random events and inevitable changes they encounter during their lives*' (Berzonsky et al: 2013: 893). This frame of reference underpins life decisions, the formation of goals and personal beliefs and values. Adolescence is a formative period in identity formation, towards identifying, evaluating and selecting values and roles in the adult world. (Crawford et al 2004, Hamman & Hendricks 2005, Erikson 1968).

The research participants identified strongly with a religion and or a profession, demonstrating a commitment to pursue further training. For example, Ricky told us how he was working towards his long-term goal of becoming a mechanic and

continued: '*Well, I guess to become a vehicle technician and then eventually … an engineer. But apart from that…. probably to travel the world.*'

These attitudes are remarkable given the low self-esteem and reckless behaviour that typically characterised their lives.

Exclusion, isolation and rejection

Participants described how, prior to attending this organisation, educational relationships had broken down and they had internalised a self-concept as 'bad'. For example, Ben said:

'*Before I went to the school I was a little troublemaker. I was just rude, naughty, didn't pay attention'.* He continued: '*I was kicking off a lot of the time and I kept getting myself arrested.*'

This difficult behaviour was a deeper communication of distress, leading to increasing isolation. Jake described his acting out: '*When I'm angry, I don't really have feelings; I don't care about no one when I'm angry, I'm just in my own little world. I don't really think about no one else but myself when I'm angry.*'

Conversely, Mathew described how he turned his anger in on himself: '*I had like this kind of buddy program. I was such a kind of introvert….a guy was paid to just like play tennis with me or like he would kind of go in my room, and I'll just tell him to go away, slam the door on his face. '*

Students have typically experienced between two and five exclusions prior to entering the organisation These experiences alienated them from an educational system unable to tolerate, manage or accommodate their behaviour without excluding. Participants described their reckless behaviour, as an effective defence against experiencing the painful feelings of rejection and the impact of discrimination and bullying, remaining acutely aware of how their complex needs were a low priority to under-resourced professionals. Participants were resentful of being judged by their past, but confident about the significant shifts that they had made once they felt seen, heard and understood. Before joining this organisation, these young people were unable to locate themselves within the master narrative of the education system. They adopted alternative narratives that counter social norms and expectations as a way of 'implementing their own sense of agency' (Hihara et al 2018: 330) and regaining control.

Loss and avoidance to attachment and connection

We, the researchers, wondered *how* the curriculum enabled this transformation. An overarching theme was the relational approach to teaching and learning. The young people described a safe facilitating environment (Winnicott 1968 & 1971) in which there is the potential to encourage and establish healthy attachments, in order that learning can take place within 'affectional bonds' (Bowlby 1999: 126).

A body of research links the significance of attachment behaviour to the capacity for self-regulation and this is particularly important for those with intellectual disabilities (De Schipper & Schuengel, 2010). An experience of being valued by a significant

other supports an individual to establish purpose and meaning (Dewitte et al 2019: 2251). Matthew illustrated this holistic approach in action when he said:

'I suffer from anxiety, sleep problems and for the first month they allowed me any time during the first half of the day just to have a rest for a couple of hours and they'd always say that as long as you're here, you're making improvements, you're showing your determination to arrive and the willingness to learn. So over time, I naturally progressed .. not a lot of people would support you in that way, it's a very unorthodox approach …, quite unique'.

It was clear that relationships were pivotal in providing a sense of belonging and this inclusive approach has a deep and lasting influence. Participants noted how the continuity, persistence and predictability of the environment eventually became internalised contributing to their stability and security. As Ben noted:*' Yeah, they don't give up….You could tell them a thousand times to basically go away, and they will still stand there. You've got to be passionate and you need to care to be able to do that 100%.'*

Fostering empathy

An approach that models deep listening, contributes to an effective learning environment. Participants recognised the importance of empathy through reciprocal relationships and receiving an empathic attitude from staff, allowed them to offer empathy to others. For example, in talking about supporting other students, one participant said:

'I would try and Include them …to help them to join in…. For instance.. if we're in a group and the other kid didn't want to be, I will try and help them out by saying "It's okay, you can come in. Everyone's welcome." Try and include them so they'll feel welcome and loved…everyone deserves to feel loved.'

This feeling of being 'loved'; that is, valued and held in mind provided a platform for learning. Within a safe relationship, students were able to build resilience that includes tolerating failure, as part of the process of learning.

From disaffection to engagement

The development of a strong attachment supports an individual to manage and tolerate the ebb and flow of successes as well as failures. Explicit and implicit teaching and mentoring approaches underpin the process of transformation, as students lessen their defences and become more self-directed.
Participants recognised that relationship underpinned the process through which they could imagine themselves differently. Within a relationship, participants identified how they had also benefitted from specialist knowledge and practical strategies. For example, Jerome said: *'Understanding that I have autism and that there are times where I have difficulties … they were there and they were supportive. I'm more in control now than I was before.'*

The interviews revealed the importance of a secure attachment relationship to foster a sense of belonging as a valued member of a community.

Transformation and empowerment; a student centred approach

Participants described a person-centred curriculum that sought to identify each student's unique gifts, encouraging individualised learning and making learning relevant and accessible. The organisation remains open to different learning styles of individuals with co-morbid Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs and/or Autistic Spectrum Conditions. This mirrors the contingent response that underpins a healthy attachment relationship (Gerhardt 2014), that is, responding to the presenting need, rather than to an external agenda. The achievement of sitting and focusing on learning in the classroom was a revelation to many participants, for example Ben said:

'I would just come in and naturally …. sit down and do work That was a massive… achievement for me…people used to say you're never going to get through education, you're going to be a failure. Then, I did…I got through it.'

It was clear that these participants had managed to step up to the demands of studying and pursuing meaningful interests and career opportunities. Within this diversified curriculum, participants spoke of a strong emphasis on group process that supports the intra and inter-personal development of students within a community setting.

Isolation to belonging

Group process is central to the curriculum and provides opportunities for self-awareness, altruism, catharsis and individual learning (Yalom 1985).Woodger and Anastacio (2013) identify how group process gives opportunities 'to develop a conceptual understanding of earlier life and experiences and their meanings in terms of personal growth…developing stronger sense of ourselves, our place in the world and impact we have on it… supporting participants to take responsibility for their own learning'. (ibid: 58-59) All participants mentioned the centrality of group process and its significance. Ben reflected with hindsight:

'I mean, it was ..like everyone just sort of sitting in a circle and basically saying how the week's been or the day's been, what have you found difficult or what do feel like you've achieved during the day, that sort of thing. I mean, don't get me wrong, at the time it was a bit rubbish because I don't really want to sit there and speak about that, but to be fair now looking back at it, it was a good idea ….just to figure out how someone's been during the day.'

Participants valued the interactive approach to teaching and group discussions. This, coupled with being motivated by rewards for their efforts, meant classes were enjoyable. It was evident that these students had internalised a sense of group process and this was demonstrated by their capacity to engage in our immediate focus group with most of them encountering each other for the first time, yet able to be open and willing to share and reflect on their personal experiences and lives together. All members of a community need to have their voice heard in order to feel a sense of belonging.

Discussion

It was clear as we conducted the interviews, that these young people had made significant shifts in terms of their capacity to self-regulate, their perceptions of their own self-worth, their inter-personal skills and in their capacity to engage in education. These shifts are remarkable, particularly given their historical educational and personal profiles, whereby patterns of broken educational relationships had been internalised. A powerful capacity to sabotage relationships might have provided a sense of control, either internally or externally, as well as being a cry for help. This pattern is then repeatedly enacted at a less conscious level, recreating a cyclic pattern of relationship breakdown. The emotional damage of exclusion compounds existing complexities of disabilities and life experience, as well as disadvantaging these young people in terms of missed classroom time (Gill et al 2017).

A 'no permanent exclusion policy', offers commitment, security and reassurance. However, students are bound to challenge these boundaries, and our research participants articulated how it took time to trust that they would be supported. Winnicott (2011) suggests that deviant behaviour is a 'moment of hope' (Winnicott 2011:106) through which young people are communicating their sense of deprivation and asking for help at a less conscious level. An organisation that is able to meet these 'moments of hope' with tolerance and understanding, can a reparative experience. The research participants all stated that they discovered, for the first time, that professionals were investing in them as learners and the impact of this commitment was transformative, with the function of a primary relationship providing a secure base for students to develop an identity. Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development tracks stages of personality development and the successful resolution of identity crisis provides young people 'with a clear sense of themselves'' (Crawford et al 2004: 374). All participants had made profound transformations in terms of their sense of identity.

The participants presented as thoughtful, self-reflective individuals with good inter-personal skills, each expressing an interest in meaningful activities, including career-path commitments. An emphasis on attachment, along with a differentiated curriculum, with group process at its core, allowed these young people to feel understood and welcomed and to learn the social and academic skills to engage with all aspects of life more productively. The process of attachment encourages an emotional connectivity that provides a secure base, enabling an individual to tolerate and manage life's successes and failures. (Bowlby 1999). Simply put by one participant '*everyone deserves to feel loved'*. A person who feels loved (ie. experiences a secure attachment) is better able to navigate the vicissitudes of life. It is widely acknowledged that developing meaningful relationships is a key process in effective interventions with young people (eg: Cahill et al 2011, Edwards 2018).

Group process is an important component of the curriculum. In the words of one participant '*it (group process) gives everyone a voice'*. The flexibility of the guiding boundaries operated in the best interests of the pupils, rather than as inflexible power positioning (for example, the implementation of one strike and you're out and zero tolerance policies).

The emergent themes locate the delivery of the curriculum and the students' learning experiences as a departure from standard practice within an educational landscape in the UK. Participants identified the importance of adult-student relationships as vital in their capacity to access the learning opportunities, and the prevalence of this real relationship elevates TCES as a genuinely therapeutic learning environment, providing the reparative experience that these young people deserve in order to thrive.

This emphasis on attachment and diversified curriculum provides a safe and inclusive environment that welcome pupils from a wide range of backgrounds. Staff and management provide role models and sources of inspiration for the pupils, encouraging pupils to settle more easily.

Conclusion

These young people have typically experienced multiple exclusions and gaps in their education, in addition to living with complex learning needs which had caused them to feel isolated, alienated and rejected. All the participants in the study were successful, optimistic and resilient. An emphasis on staff/pupil relationships that fosters constructive identity formation that is imbued with respect for self and other created impressive self-awareness.

The centrality of the Group Process model contributed to an exceptional person-centred and relational based curriculum. This is underpinned by values of 'very high expectations' and 'never giving up'. This approach is reinforced by a 'no permanent exclusion' policy. This inclusive philosophy creates a facilitating environment in which both staff and pupils collaborate democratically to identify ways forward. The participants in this study described vividly how healthy attachments and relationships with staff were the key to unlocking their potential, providing a 'secure base' that enabled them to learn. The organisation succeeded in the delivery of a person-centred and relational-based curriculum which had the flexibility, differentiation and diversification to optimise and respond sensitively to the unique qualities of each pupil.

The themes that arose all indicated that this integral approach had supported these young people to make remarkable transformational shifts in terms of their sense of self and their agency as learners, as citizens and as potential leaders. Central to all these themes is the theme of relational connection.

Given the consistent rise in exclusions and referrals to Pupil Referral Units (PRU's), learning from a relational based curriculum embodying values of 'never giving up' and 'high expectations' and appreciating that behaviour is a form of communication have never been more important. These qualities, understanding and approaches are transferable to all school contexts, and significant to **all** students' growth, learning and discovery of their own purpose in life. The development of meaningful and connected relationships between teaching staff and students underpins the ability to make the difference in creating inclusive school environments. The reassurance for students that they will not be excluded gives them the opportunity to emotionally invest in relationships knowing they will not be disrupted.

Caroline Frizell and David Woodger
Goldsmiths, University of London

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