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Essay Three

"Describe one specialist area of work with young people and evaluate the use of a variety of creative interventions in your working practice"

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"Compulsory education is one of the defining characteristics of modern childhood"
Wagg (1996)

Indeed, as a result of compulsory education, all children in the U.K. spend around half their waking hours in formal education for at least eleven years. Schools, teachers and ancillary staff have a vital role to play in the shaping of children's experiences." *The child's progress will come to be powerfully affected by his teacher's attitudes, values and beliefs".* (Pringle, 1975)

According to Lines, (2002), *"education in Britain has become highly competitive, as opposed to being collaborative and co-operative, with the wellbeing of pupils being replaced by an exclusive focus on academic achievement".* It is understandable then that schools come under much criticism for not meeting the social, emotional and psychological needs of the majority of children.

The UN Convention promotes three strands of rights for children; the right to provision, the right to protection and the right to participation. According to Donald Christie, University of Strathclyde (2004), all of these strands are proving challenging for schools in Scotland.

Firstly, the right to education without discrimination challenges policy and practice with regard to children with for instance special educational needs, many of whom are still schooled outside the mainstream, despite policies promoting integration and inclusion. Secondly, schools are challenged on a daily basis by children's right to protection from all forms of abuse including bullying.

"In the early 1990's the Scottish Office made a significant commitment to tackling bullying in schools by designating a national anti-bullying development officer and sponsoring the development of resources by the Scottish Council for Research in

Education" (Johnstone et al., 1991). However, the problem of bullying remains relatively intractable, and after nearly ten years of effort, imaginative solutions are still being sought. Thirdly, schools have still to respond to the rights of children to participate in decision making and to express their views in all matters that affect them. Pupil councils have been set up in some schools, however, evidence points to the fact that children themselves see pupil councils as tokenistic (Christie 2004).

The specialist area of work I would like to discuss is that of 'bullying' and in particular bullying at school. *"Schools as institutions create a climate in which bullying can thrive"* (Lines, 2000). I will discuss the main issues and concerns that bullying has for children and young people and how this affects the child in terms of developmental stage and cognitive ability. I will go on to discuss what interventions might be employed other than straightforward counselling and how beneficial these might be, bringing to light any contra-indications.

What is Bullying?

"Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can have serious consequences for the general school climate and for the right of children to learn in a safe environment without fear" (Banks, 2005). The problems associated with bullying have been raised and discussed wherever formal schooling environments exist. The harmful effects of bullying date back to the public debate following the publication of the book 'Tom Brown's Schooldays' in the 19th Century.

Bullying can be a series of direct behaviours such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting and stealing that are initiated by one or a group on an individual. Bullying can

also be indirect and insidious causing a child to be socially isolated through intentional exclusion.

 "Whether bullying is direct or indirect, the key factor is that there is repeated physical and psychological intimidation over a period of time resulting in a pattern of harassment and abuse". (Batsche and Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993).

The earliest research on bullying was carried out in Scandinavia by Olweus (1978,1991,1992,1993), and has gained in international awareness. The findings point to an almost universal picture with on average one in five pupils being bullied in school and one in ten admitting to have bullied others. The research also concluded that bullying can be reduced in schools by a range of interventions that keep 'bullying' high on the school agenda. (Lines 2000)

Last year, more than 31,000 children and young people called 'Childline' about bullying, making it the most common problem counsellors helped children with. Some children were so disturbed that they called 'Childline' after one single incident.

Characteristics of Bullies and Victims

Children who are bullies seem to have a need to feel powerful and in control. They appear to gain satisfaction from inflicting pain, injury and suffering on others, displaying no empathy towards their victims. Bullies often defend their actions by shifting the blame onto the victim by saying they were provoked in some way. Studies have shown that bullies tend to come from homes where physical punishment is used sort out problems and where parental care and affection are lacking. Bullies are generally defiant and oppositional towards adults and school rules. *"Contrary to public belief, they appear to have strong self-esteem and little anxiety"*. (Olweus, 1993)

Children who are victims of bullying are typically anxious, insecure, afraid and can suffer from low self-esteem. *"Their inability to cope proves for them that they are inferior, resulting in a gradual but pervasive erosion of self esteem"* Seligman and Peterson (1986)

They rarely retaliate or are able to defend themselves when confronted by a bully. Victims may have few friends, lack social skills and are often socially isolated. They may have overprotective parents who display similar personality traits, eg, anxiety; caution etc. *"The major defining physical characteristic of victims is that they tend to be physically weaker than their peers"*. (Olweus, 1993)

The Consequences of Bullying in Schools

"A child's involvement as a victim of bullying can be considered as a risk factor for poor emotional wellbeing. The risk will be greater if the bullying is prolonged and severe and there is a lack of adequate support". Rigby (2002)

The developmental stage a child is at will have a bearing on his/her understanding of the reasons why he/she is being bullied, however children of all ages will experience similar feelings of being hurt, rejected and made to feel inferior compounded by strong feelings of anger and hatred towards the bully.

"Although low self -esteem and a poor attitude towards school are not always the result of bullying they are the most commonly reported consequences", Murphy, (2004).

Children may lose faith in ever finding a solution to their bullying as adult intervention may be infrequent or ineffective, and can often lead to more bullying and ultimately total disillusionment at the lack of protection.

Being bullied is all too often an experience that leaves both the child/young person and his/her parents feeling powerless. It can cause a crisis of confidence as both parent and child recognise the inability of the parent to protect the child from bullying. " *It can also lead to feelings of guilt and inadequacy if one's own child is the bully"*. (Dorit Brown, 2004). "

"*More often than not, parents remain unaware of the extent of the problem"*. (Olweus, 1993).

There may be unforeseen and tragic consequences of bullying as the injustice of a bullying situation gathers momentum. Children have committed suicide as a result of being bullied at school. There are other children and young people who resort to seeking justice in their own way by a desire to retaliate with violence. Ultimately, things can spiral out of control with strong emotions overriding any sense of right and wrong. In America in the 1990's there was a series of mass school violence culminating in the attack on Columbine High School in Colorado. The video of this massacre, a film called 'Elephant' was difficult to watch as teenagers were brutally and systematically shot and killed. The fear, the panic and the bewilderment on the faces of those about to be killed was clearly captured. The motivation behind the killings was revenge. The two attackers were victims of bullying at the school.

Interventions to Reduce Bullying

Bullying is a problem that occurs in the social environment as a whole.

"*Bullies can and do get away with bullying because it is carried out in social contexts in which teachers and parents are unaware of the extent of the problem and other children are reluctant to get involved or simply do not know how to help*".(Charach, Pepler and Ziegler, 1995).

In raising the self-esteem of the victim, Lines (2002) believes the use of humour can be effective with for example quick witted responses practiced through role play and for one victim winking in a self-assured manner when called 'gay.'

For interventions to be effective, the whole school or community must be involved rather than dealing with the perpetrators and victims in isolation.

" Research has shown that schools which emphasise co-operation rather than competition, which neither stream nor use corporal punishment have a lower incidence of bullying, violence and delinquency, without lowering academic standards" Pringle (1975)

Smith and Sharp (1994) emphasise the need to develop whole school anti bullying policies which empower children and young people through conflict resolution, anger management, peer counselling and assertiveness training. Schools should adopt a 'no blame' approach to bullying by trying to talk to all children involved and by paying particular attention to the role of the 'bystander'. The bystander has a very significant role to play in stopping the bullying and schools have a duty to make it safe for them to report bullying. It is helpful when working with children in a group not to apportion blame but to empower them to think about ideas on what might work to reduce the bullying.

Young people in particular with serious mental health problems who are alienated, socially rejected and taunted by peers are a danger to themselves and others. These children are often known to peers, teachers and other staff and should be given access to professional support systems. "*Having mental health problems combined with being the target of bullying has proven to be a dangerous combination in the context of school violence*". (Murphy, 2004).

Interventions in Counselling

When looking at what interventions to use it must be decided if the counsellor is to work with bully, victim, both or friends of either. As a bully can be described as a troubled individual, access to counselling should not be denied. Different approaches will apply given the developmental stage and cognitive ability of those involved and the nature and severity of the bullying.

Some counselling approaches which are effective are those which focus on the victim changing his/her behaviour with for instance self assertion techniques, and for the bully with aggressive tendencies, this can be managed with cognitive behavioural techniques, Lines (2002). Attention must be paid to the level of understanding and verbal reasoning of the children as straightforward counselling may be inappropriate and other ways of interacting must be sought. For instance, younger children unable to express their thoughts and emotions verbally may find play or art therapy more stimulating, more so than a 15 year old who may view play therapy as babyish. Anyone who has ever had an 8 year old in front of them will know that discussing heavy issues only makes them uncomfortable, likely to fidget and not engage in the process, however give the same child a set of figures, animals or a sand tray and they will immediately become animated. "*Make believe games allow the child to anticipate through the medium of fantasy impending and possibly frightening experiences*". Pringle, (1975)

 In my work I have used play therapy, art therapy, music, poetry, role play, drama and games to good effect; however here, I will concentrate on some key interventions I use in my work with regard to the issue of bullying.

<u>Play Therapy</u>

Richey, aged 10 and his family were well known to me. Recently, Richey's mum said he had just been diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome, and she was angry at this labelling when the diagnosis was not definitive and further tests were being carried out. Richey's mum was convinced her son was being bullied at school and his 'isms', 'facial tics', 'shoulder shrugging' and 'coughing' all started when the 'bully' moved next door, attended the same school and was put in the same class as Richey.

I decided to start with some play therapy as a way of allowing Richey to relax, knowing he would be nervous and have trouble concentrating. I introduced a wide range of toys, characters, figures, animals and cars and I asked him to select a figure to represent each member of his family. He appeared motivated and with much thought, slowly and carefully chose a panda for his sister, a mole for his grandpa, an elephant for his granny, a dalmatian dog for his mum, a brown dog for his dad and a mouse to represent himself. He placed them all in a line then when I asked did he want to leave them in a line he changed them to form a circle, placing the mouse between the mole and the Dalmatian, saying as he did so he wanted to be next to his mum and grandpa.

I know that Richey's dad left the family home when he was just two years of age and he has a partner and another two children, living some 80 miles away; and although Richey and his sister visit every other weekend there was no mention of them. I then asked "Is that all the members of your family?" At this Richey placed two figures, a teddy and a sea dragon next to the mouse saying "these are my sons", and named them as Max and Sam.

We discussed school and friends. Richey chose four figures for friends, a hedgehog, a white rabbit, a fox and a racing car, naming them. This time he chose a grey bird for

himself (interestingly, I saw that he fired the mouse which represented himself in the last exercise into the box), then he chose a dinosaur saying this was his imaginary friend called Rob. Richey mentioned the bully by name and the bully's friend saying I don't want them near me and he didn't represent them. At the end of the session Richey said he enjoyed playing with the figures, I noted he enjoyed being in control. *"Through imaginative play, children can create a world where they are king, as they are the ones to make and break the rules"*. Pringle, (1975).

I was surprised by how much information I received indirectly. I tried hard not to ask too many questions or lead Richey in any way and was reminded that; *"asking questions in therapy would be so helpful if anyone ever answered them accurately. But no one ever does"*. Axline, (1964).

Play therapy is undoubtedly enjoyable for children of all ages and the counsellor must decide if the play is to be open, 'non-directive play' or guided 'directive play'. Open play involves the child deciding and leading all aspects of the play session, whereas guided play involved the counsellor taking the lead and asking questions. I cannot see any contra indications of using play therapy; however as stated already some older children may view play therapy as immature and may not be motivated to engage fully. All children, but especially younger children should not be asked to make sense of their play as they may not understand it themselves and this may create confusion in having to verbalise their thoughts and actions.

Art Therapy

This involves painting, drawing, sculpting, collage work, origami, clay, pottery and moulding, all mediums through which children can be creative and express themselves. Children should have access to bold, bright, dark and pastel shades in

order to take advantage of the full spectrum of colours and the play will be more rewarding and less inhibiting if there are no restrictions on mess. In my experience, art therapy works well for children of all ages as it's something that doesn't require a level of competency, there is no competitive element to it and it promotes individuality. I have found that children who are unhappy or troubled tend to create dark, dull, lifeless drawings as opposed to other children whose drawings radiate warmth through bright, bold colours. An 8 year old girl I work with, called Anna has gender issues and is frequently mistaken for a boy. She said she gets bullied and has no friends but doesn't understand why. She'd rather befriend boys than girls as she enjoys boys' activities but the boys call her names and this hurts her. She drew a self portrait which shocked me as the face was scary with staring eyes, a frown, big teeth and jagged hair, not at all like Anna. There was no colour, only black. A few sessions later she drew another picture of herself and this time she made the eyes red, but very similar to the last drawing. Through art therapy, Anna appears to be connecting with her feelings and emotions and her self portrait would suggest this is how others view her. Art therapy can also be useful as an "assessment tool" when working with children over a period of time, as it can show how their emotional state is progressing and give an idea of what other interventions may be required. In working with Anna, I am reminded that children can be cruel to other children if they are in any way different, "*such is the power of the peer group*" Lines, (2000).

Music and Poetry

A 15 year old girl, called Jane came to live in my house as a foster placement. She was well known as the school bully, her teachers describing her and her entourage as "the teenage mafia". She was a very angry individual who would frequently scream,

shout, swear, kick her bedroom door, and lash out at anyone who looked at her the wrong way. Her way of dealing with everything was with violence and she learned this from her parents. She had been a victim of bullying when she was younger and became so self-assertive, she became a bully herself. In the end she found her own way of dealing with her anger and aggression and this was by having her music up loud and screaming out the lyrics.

An intelligent girl, she wrote poetry with disturbing narrative and much swearing. She allowed me to read some of her poems and I encouraged her to continue to write as this was providing a safe way for her to express herself. Like many adolescents, young people can find solace in listening to music with powerful lyrics that they can directly relate to.

In my work with young carers I encourage them to bring their favourite music along to an individual or group session if the music has meaning in their lives and they want to share it. Two of the best used pieces of equipment I have are a karaoke machine and a piano keyboard that I use to encourage free play or the singing of new, made up lyrics to popular tunes.

Using music as a creative intervention works with children of any age because through music children can express themselves and younger children may even want to sing and dance to the music. I have found that older children gain a lot more when they have an understanding of the lyrics to a song as well, or when they are encouraged to be creative and write and perform their own songs.

Creative Visualisations

I used some creative visualisations with Richey as a way to get him to relax so that he would feel less on edge and think about being bullied less. Richey visualised a garden

as his safe place. He found it difficult to stay still and I noted that some of his movements and coughing were involuntary. Richey said he enjoyed being in his safe place and would go there whenever he felt he needed to. I wasn't convinced that Richey engaged totally in the visualisation and I wouldn't use this with children under 10 years because it does require a high level of concentration. Children easily distracted who perhaps have a lot on their mind may benefit from creative visualisations because the 'grounding' aspect makes them more aware of the five senses and encourages them to take note of everything around them, which in turn helps them to concentrate, relax and engage in the process, freeing their mind of current worries and even externalising the worries.

Conclusion

"No school can afford to be relaxed or dismissive about the prevalence of bullying among the most vulnerable", Lines, (2002).

There are a range of strategies available to the counsellor when confronted with bullying issues at school, most of which focus on raising the self esteem and confidence of the victim and a 'no blame' approach when dealing with the bully or the bystanders, all of whom need to be worked with if anti-bullying policies are to be effective.

Lines,(2002) in advocating the use of humour as a tool to challenge the sometimes non malicious element of teasing and name calling believes that *"the more name calling is effectively challenged, the less will be the incidence of severe bullying"*. Other interventions to tackle bullying besides direct counselling involve a range of creative therapies including play, art, music, poetry, role play, creative visualisations and games, to name but a few. The age and developmental stage of the child will

determine how well these are likely to be accepted, as some interventions may be viewed as immature and childish. In evaluating any contra indications to the use of these therapies I couldn't see any that would 'harm' the child but I was aware that attention must be paid to the individual nature, resilience and characteristics of the child as sometimes age is not a measure of cognitive or developmental ability. The provision of a range of creative interventions all have one thing in common and that is a non verbal way to "*assist the child in coming to terms with the frustrations and conflicts which are inseparable from growing up in a complex and fast changing society*" Pringle (1975).

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