

Does the therapeutic model implemented by the Mulberry Bush School benefit the emotionally traumatised children in its care and, if so, in what ways?

Provisional Findings:
Informing change

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The Mulberry Bush School has been a therapeutic environment since 1948. As part of the developing work with families it is looking at developing more of a shared understanding of its therapeutic approach to the work. This research used a case study approach to gather the views of children, their families and staff within the school to look at whether the model is felt to be beneficial; how the schools emphasis on group-work impacts the children and how any changes to children's behaviour are recognised.

The researcher:
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Key points:

- Many of the families feel at breaking point when their child is placed at the Mulberry Bush, feeling they have exhausted all local resources and support available and often feeling they are looking at a bleak future for their child. As a result they feel often feel relieved, yet guilty, when their child starts at the school.
- Although parents and carers feel that the work of the school was described to them before the placement started, they are often unclear about the therapeutic nature of the school, feeling that an ongoing emphasis during the placement about what work is taking place would help them understand and implement similar strategies at home.
- Parents and carers all believe that the behaviour of their child has improved whilst at the school and that their child has benefited from attending the school. However, they are unclear how this progress will be enabled to continue in subsequent placements.
- Children also recognise improvements in behaviour but are unclear which, if any, specific aspects of the schools work have supported these changes.
- The model of group-work is confusing to children, staff and parents despite sitting at the heart of the schools work.

Background:

The children placed at the Mulberry Bush School have experienced multiple placement breakdowns as a result of their emotional trauma, exhibiting complex and challenging behaviours. All have been identified as requiring long-term additional therapeutic interventions which their Local Authorities have been unable to provide for them.

Common factors affecting each of the children involved in the study included:

- Family relationships had reached breaking point with children's physical aggression a common theme
- Educational placements had reached breaking point with children failing to reach their potential, often being excluded for behavioural difficulties
- Children were educationally and socially excluded from group situations, struggling to make and maintain relationships

Research aim:

The aim of this case study research was to determine whether the therapeutic model of the Mulberry Bush School benefits the children placed in its care and how the schools group-work model impacts children's ability to develop relationships.

Initial:

Four children were identified to be part of the study, with all children being in their first six months of placement at the school. From interviews, focus groups, observations and analysis of the documentation the following initial themes were identified:

- Parents and carers felt a huge sense of relief that their child had been placed "*somewhere that understands*" having previously felt at breaking point.
- All participants felt that the placement was primarily due to the child having behavioural difficulties, rather than a focus on their emotional trauma.
- Parents, carers, children and some staff were unclear of the nature of the therapeutic milieu and had expected individual therapy to be provided for all children.
- Parents, carers and children were unsure what the group-work model meant or if/how this was helpful.
- Parents held an anxiety about their child being in a setting with such high levels of behavioural difficulties.
- Children were unsure how long they would stay at the school or how its model differed from previous schools.

Follow up:

Follow up interviews and focus groups were held six months and twelve months after initial interviews. These highlighted:

- Children's behaviour had improved significantly enabling them to participate in education, family and social settings far more.
- Parents and carers felt their child was more aware of their own feelings and more able to manage difficult feelings.
- Parents and carers were generally very pleased with their child's progress, however were anxious about where their child would be placed after the Mulberry Bush and whether the level of progress could be maintained.
- Communication between the school, child and parents/carers was felt to be OK but families wanted more contact with their children and to know more. They often felt out of the loop and de-skilled as parents/carers
- The model of therapeutic work was still unclear to families and children.
- Parents/carers were still unclear what the group-work model meant for their child

Implications

The research concludes with the following recommendations for the Mulberry Bush School.

- Additional work is required to support children, families and professional networks to understand the nature of the therapeutic task.
- Work is required to develop the understanding of the 'group-work' model and how this sits within the model of practice.
- Expectations of children and families are high which can lead to frustration requiring additional support for families, particularly pre/post start of placement.

About the project

This qualitative case study draws on several forms of data, notably interviews with parents/carers; staff focus groups; interviews with children; informal observations and analysis of documentation. The researcher undertook twenty-eight semi-structured interviews over a period of thirteen months. Initial interviews focussed on the events and behaviours which led to the child being placed at the Mulberry Bush and their subsequent start of placement, whilst the later interviews focussed on the child's, and families, experiences once settled into their placement. Fieldwork ran from December 2015 to January 2017.

For further information:

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The full research is intended to be published in 2019