

The University of East London Mulberry Bush Study

**‘Keeping the Children Close’:
Towards an Understanding of Therapeutic Provision
at The Mulberry Bush School**

Summary of Main Research Findings*



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*The full report (Price et al, 2017) is available from conions@mulberrybush.org.uk

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“It can be really, really challenging but most of the time the challenges that we think are really challenging don't end up being really challenging at all, we just make a big thing about it. There are a lot of really good adults that we can trust that we like here at the school. Lots of good friends.” (Child F, interview)

A recent independent research study by UCL's Institute of Education reported very good outcomes for the Mulberry Bush children on a range of educational, behavioural, social and emotional measures. In 2015, the school commissioned a new team of researchers from the University of East London to study how the Mulberry Bush achieves such good outcomes. The UEL study asked,

- *How does the therapeutic environment at the Mulberry Bush work?*
- *What is the model for engaging and assisting children who experience severe social, emotional and mental health difficulties?*

We have found that the Mulberry Bush School's therapeutic approach is distinctive because it trains and supports its staff to stay close to the children's feelings. Staff build trusting relationships and work hard to empathise with the children's present and past experiences. When the children feel understood, the staff are able to challenge them and nudge them towards a more thoughtful, curious approach to their difficulties. The intensive '24/7' nature of group living and group learning then provides many natural opportunities for the adults to work alongside the children to help them make their own positive choices.

“I used to just punch people in the head ... and also after that I wouldn't talk... Once I do it now I feel sorry and bad ... it's just like you need to talk better to actually help you not do it.” (Child A, interview)

There is increasing recognition that everyday relationships are central in supporting the emotional well-being and mental health of children in the care system. Yet some highly troubled children cannot manage ordinary family and school life. They find it hard to trust and their anti-social and disturbing behaviours make it difficult to get emotionally close to them or to be objective in making sense of their problems. They may need specialist therapeutic care at a school like the Mulberry Bush.

The UEL research team used a variety of ways to learn about what happens at the Mulberry Bush School. We:

- Visited regularly over 15 months and carried out over 30 observations
- Interviewed 7 of the children getting ready to leave
- Interviewed 13 front line staff and 8 senior staff about 'what works'
- Interviewed 7 individuals from agencies using the school's services

We also read research and policy documents about approaches to supporting traumatised children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. We looked at the school's own publications to see if the Mulberry Bush has clear principles that are consistently used to good effect in practice.

We found that the Mulberry Bush does have clear principles that translate into an effective whole-school practice approach. We concluded that privacy and emotional intensity in the family home have been experienced as potentially threatening for the children, so the open, public nature of group life at the school is a protection for all concerned. When relationships are shared and relating is very 'public', we found that paradoxically, closer one-to-one moments can be more safely found.

For a full report of our findings see Price et al, 2017 (contact conions@mulberrybush.org.uk)

INTRODUCTION

The Mulberry Bush School is a therapeutic residential special school in rural Oxfordshire offering three-year placements for girls and boys aged between five and eleven years. The primary task of the school is to provide therapeutic care, treatment and education for children who have experienced severe trauma in their early years, and the aim is to re-integrate them back into local school, family and community life at the point of secondary school transfer. Children at the Mulberry Bush have usually suffered severe and chronic neglect, severe emotional, physical and sexual abuse and complex family breakdown.

There is increasing recognition that everyday relationships are central in supporting the emotional well-being and mental health of children in the care system. Secure relationships should ideally be the place where children receive the therapeutic support they need to recover from past trauma. But some highly troubled children need more specialist, intensive help, beyond that which can be provided by even therapeutically trained foster carers or specialist local mental health and educational services. The children who come to the Mulberry Bush typically find it difficult to make relationships and harbour a deep distrust of adults. At the point of referral, they have usually been excluded from their local schools, even when these are specialist, and their family placements are at breaking point. Their behaviour has become unmanageable and they are often felt to pose a risk to themselves and others in their current settings.

The Mulberry Bush has high rates of success in re-integrating such children, and consistently achieves 'outstanding' Ofsted reports for its educational and residential care provision. A recent independent research study by UCL's Institute of Education reported very good outcomes for the children on a range of educational, behavioural,

social and emotional measures. In 2015, the Mulberry Bush commissioned a team of researchers from the University of East London to study *how* the Mulberry Bush School achieves its aims.

THE UEL RESEARCH PROJECT – OUR QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The purpose of the UEL study was to understand better what it is that the Mulberry Bush does to make a difference to the pupils they look after. The school wanted an independent research team to document how the school achieves its aims.

The research team therefore asked:

- *How does the therapeutic environment at the Mulberry Bush work?*
- *What is the model for engaging and assisting children who experience severe social, emotional and mental health difficulties?*

The UEL study used a variety of ways to learn about what happens at the Mulberry Bush.

We read existing research and policy documents about approaches to supporting traumatised children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. We also read historical and recent publications about the school itself and its methods. Our aim in doing this was to understand the practice principles guiding therapeutic work at the Mulberry Bush and to look at how the principles had arisen. We wished to be in a position to see how these were informing therapeutic provision in the school, whether staff learned about them and drew on them consistently, and how the principles benefited the children.

We also visited the school over an extended period of fifteen months. Two researchers visited regularly and undertook at least thirty observations in both the classrooms and houses at different times of the day. The researchers got to know the staff and children and became involved in their daily activities. We then wrote detailed notes. One of the observers interviewed seven of the older pupils informally. Thirteen frontline staff and eight senior staff were also interviewed using questions based on the team's experience of being at the school. Finally, individuals from seven external agencies that either referred to Mulberry Bush or used its outreach services were interviewed about their experiences of working in partnership with the school. Once all the data had been collected it was analysed thematically.

All research project staff had recently completed enhanced DBS checks. Before we undertook any data collection, we obtained ethical approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee for all aspects of the project, including procedures for obtaining consent from participants. Throughout the research process we shared what we were finding out with staff, trustees and the children themselves. We met with the pupils in the School Council to talk through why we were doing the research, who was funding it, what it was for, how it would be disseminated and why it might be useful. Researchers asked the School Council for advice on how to 'fit in' and to learn most during visits.

SETTING THE SCENE

The Mulberry Bush School has its own purpose built site on the edge of an Oxfordshire village in extensive grounds. Children live at the school in term time and

usually stay for about 3 years. There are four family-style houses with gardens, and a school building, grouped around a large green with a play area.

Children are referred from local authorities and in December 2016 a total of 26 children (11 girls and 15 boys) aged between six and twelve years attended the school. The overwhelming majority were white British, with two black children, one dual heritage and one white European. One child had physical disabilities. They were supported by a head teacher, five teachers, fifteen teaching assistants, a head of group living, six house managers and forty residential care practitioners, as well as thirteen ancillary members of staff (administrators, kitchen staff and housekeepers) and three gap year students. Specialists included consultants, therapists and psychologists, and sports teachers. Senior staff have wider responsibilities, including the head of training, head of the therapies and networks team, the Director and the Chief Executive Officer. The gender balance in the staff group is 62% women to 38% men, and most staff are white British (91%).

When children arrive at the school they join an assessment house, and after a fortnight they are integrated into a foundation class. Here, they are supported to become part of a group and to re-engage with learning in a classroom. High levels of individual attention in both settings enable staff to gather details about their behaviour, capabilities and relationships. This information is used to inform a treatment plan for each child. The child's treatment team consists of a key worker, a teacher, a therapist, a family network practitioner and a house manager. After a three month assessment period, the children move to one of three parallel houses where they usually remain until they leave the school. When they are ready, children move from the foundation classes to a middle stage class, and some children later

move to a 'top' stage class. House and class sizes are small – usually a maximum of eight children.

The school provides group art and music therapies and some children receive individual and small group therapy. There are a range of outdoor and extra-curricular activities, including regular field trips for outdoor adventure activities and links to the local primary school.

The School's History

The Mulberry Bush was founded in 1948 by the psychoanalytic psychotherapist Barbara Dockar-Drysdale, who first encountered the effects of trauma in young children during the second world war, when she took care of young evacuees who were 'difficult to billet'. Dockar-Drysdale's careful observation of children led her to suggest that the violent and delinquent behaviour encountered in some of the children could mask an inner state of arrested development, arising from trauma. In particular, she argued that the children were unable to understand their feelings; instead, they could only act on them. Dockar-Drysdale believed that the children needed the chance of a safe 'primary experience', to help them develop the capacity to understand their emotional experiences and to reflect on events rather than simply responding.

By 1955, Dockar-Drysdale was meeting regularly with Donald Winnicott, who was carrying out group work with children at Paddington Green Hospital. Winnicott came to believe that a traditional one-to-one therapeutic approach did not work with traumatised children with behavioural difficulties, and that the answer lay in creating

a more immersive, continuous group therapeutic environment, where the children could live together, learning from each other and the adults living alongside them.

Practice Principles

The Mulberry Bush retains links with its past psychoanalytic heritage, but also uses insights from contemporary attachment theory and neurodevelopmental research into the effects of early trauma on brain development.

It has three key principles that it believes should inform its therapeutic practice:

- to provide staff with a good psychodynamic understanding to inform their therapeutic work;
- to develop a reflective culture at all levels and in all disciplines;
- to work collaboratively in order to create a high quality treatment environment.

It also has four key concepts:

- all children use behaviour as a form of communication, especially when what they are communicating is an expression of an unconscious, unmet need, and when they do not have the comprehension or words to say what they want to say;
- children communicate the same thing in different ways to different people, and also different things to different people;
- there is an emotional impact on those experiencing these behaviours and those trying to understand them;
- when people who are trying to understand or who have experienced the impact of these communications come together to openly share and process

their feelings about this, there is a better chance of a fuller understanding being reached, or developing effective responses, and of supporting individuals and teams with their particular struggles in working with these communications.

THE CHILDREN'S THERAPEUTIC PROVISION – OUR FINDINGS

We found that the 'group living and group learning' environment in which the children live is a very dynamic, demanding one emotionally for both the children and the staff. The researchers noted many examples of staff attempting to hold a moment-by-moment balance between maintaining the setting as a safe and secure base for the children, whilst also working to understand and empathise with the children's very disturbed and angry feelings. This creates edginess and tension. We saw the willingness to work with potentially dangerous and explosive feelings as being linked to the staff's training in reading the children's behaviour as a form of communication of inner, unconscious or hard-to-process emotional states.

The research team felt that the MBS understanding goes beyond an informed awareness of the explanations for why traumatised children 'act out'. Staff show a willingness to allow children's feelings to surface and stir up other people's feelings, including their own. There is then the challenge for staff of how to 'pace' this emergence, and how to relate to the emerging feelings - in the child, in the group and in themselves.

'Keeping the pot bubbling'

A senior member of staff observed:

"...you need the pot to be bubbling not flat, you need things to happen...If everything just stays the same, we keep a lid on it, we don't take risks with the kids, nothing changes, we're just - this is sort of behaviour modification isn't it? It's just sort of - we're just controlling rather than actually working through some of the - so that's what we say to staff. Yes, it may go wrong tonight but if it goes wrong tonight then what can we learn from it, what can we move on in relationships?" (Head of Group Living, interview)

The research team has concluded that within the therapeutic environment the school provides for the children, there is both a 'safe' and an 'edgy' dimension.

A Safe Place

We firstly observed that the Mulberry Bush sets a clear 'therapeutic frame' so that those living in the setting understand what they can expect. In reflecting on this, we noted the importance of themes relating to space, boundaries, basic rules and time. Then we recorded the importance given to 'building trusting relationships', underpinned by themes relating to playfulness, warmth, humour and normality in the setting.

The therapeutic frame

The MBS has a high quality, homely, deliberately designed physical environment. When the children's setting has been thought about with such care and attention, it

has the potential to invite the children in, and to convey the message that they are valued and their needs respected. The environment is also very public. Children are continuously witnessing and observing each other's struggles and difficult episodes. Whilst this could potentially be shaming, it also provides an opportunity to discover that you are not the only one with problems, to see that staff and children survive, to observe how others work through difficulties, and to get a sense of one's progress over time in the eyes of others. One child noted,

“When I’m older I’m going to have a lot more experience, things I’ve grown up with, a lot more. Being here, you get lots more life experience and you can watch other people and learn from that and what they do and how staff deal with it.” (Child G, interview)

Time is also something that punctuates the children's lives at the Mulberry Bush. There are the rhythms of the term, punctuated by several weekend visits home; and the rhythms of the day, moving from houses to classes and back again. These punctuations can very easily feel like disruptions or breaks, arousing a fear of change and acting as reminders of past losses. We observed that transitions to new settings and tasks, or changes in the setting or timetable, are managed very sensitively. Children observe each other managing these transitions, including the biggest one, leaving. They are also given many opportunities to go over their day's experience in a measured, sequential, evaluative way. The intention is to help them to order events, to place themselves in time and space appropriately, and to understand cause-and-effect processes more calmly and realistically.

Building Trusting Relationships

“There are a lot of really good adults that we can trust that we like here at the school... we have to build up trust...First we needed to do things that made them get used to us and get involved with us. Then once we trust them and we got to know each other, it’s kind of how it works.” (Child F, interview)

For children who have come from environments which have been at best uninterested and undermining and at worst deliberately abusive, there is a conscious effort to offer a positive experience of other human beings, to show that the world and people can be not just benign but safe, nurturing and affectionate. One member of staff commented:

“[I] try and get out in the open their feelings of why they’re displaying certain behaviours. To keep a sort of - a really open atmosphere between yourselves so that they feel like there is a space that they can talk or express themselves.” (Therapeutic care practitioner 2, interview)

Staff were observed frequently distinguishing between the child and their bad behaviour, and signalling their liking, valuing and caring for the child, despite the child’s destructive actions. The children at the school have missed out on a lot of ordinary developmental experiences of affectionate play and conversation, particularly one-to-one, with attentive and caring adults. The researchers observed staff consistently making themselves available to play with the children. We also saw how the therapeutic milieu places a lot of importance on shared fun activities, with an emphasis on outdoor activities in nature. As part of the more upbeat and lively aspects of the setting, we also observed many genuine attempts to be humorous. Humour seems to be used by staff to diffuse the emotional impact of situations both for themselves and for the children, to lessen upset and to prevent escalation.

Despite this often being a difficult setting, there was lots of joking and laughter from children and staff.

The school therefore stresses the importance of ordinariness in the therapeutic environment, and of interludes that are not about 'therapy' or 'treatment', but simply times in the day when children can just begin to live their lives. In the daily routines there was often a feeling of normal life just going on in a 'familial' way. There was also some evidence of a more supportive peer culture at times with quite long interludes of friendly co-operation and engagement between children.

An Edgy Place

The Mulberry Bush works with children who struggle to express their states of mind verbally. The school staff believe that in order for change to occur, it is necessary to engage all the time with 'real' and strong feelings in the children, as expressed through their behaviour. The argument is that simply calming or suppressing behaviours is unlikely to lead to progress or change. This moment-by-moment attention, which is empathic but clear, provides a particular way of regulating and addressing the children's feelings and behaviours, which do continuously threaten to get out of hand. One teacher described her work with one boy whose violence was understood to have been triggered by his anxieties about his place in the minds of staff being usurped by another, younger, child. Despite very disruptive behaviour in the classroom, it was felt important to keep him in the room so that he did not feel excluded. The teacher describes how she came to understand his feelings:

"There was one day that I had scooped him aside and was saying, 'No, I'm thinking about you and I can see you're finding things difficult. You've got a

face that's looking very cross. I think you're feeling angry or sad or worried.'
We went and started there and he turned his back to me and said 'I can't say this while I look at you - while I'm looking at you' or something, 'But I'm worried about James moving in. I'm worried you're going to forget me.' So, *that was quite remarkable he was able to say that.*" (Class Teacher, discussion)

The child could not experience being looked at whilst he spoke about his feelings, but he was able to expose them nevertheless, having an experience of trusting someone enough to share them. For the staff, working successfully 'at the edge' depends on timing, knowledge of the child, context and the staff member's individual trusting relationships with the children.

The expression and regulation of feelings and behaviour

The children's behaviours can be extremely intimidating and upsetting, partly because of the degree of inner disturbance they reveal in the child. The following description is adapted from a researcher's observation notes made during a visit to a classroom one Monday morning:

"One Monday morning just after 9 am Emma rushes into the classroom and responds to a comment from another child by throwing her shoes and when asked to 'calm down' by the teacher responds by telling him to 'fuck off'. She hits him on the arm, swears and spits onto the floor. The teacher asks her to sit down. She ignores him and runs around crashing into chairs. She picks one up and holds it over her head and looks at the teacher in a challenging way. He takes the chair from her and she hits him again. A carer takes over

from the teacher and Emma spits again. The teacher then takes Emma firmly by the arm and leads her down the back corridor. She struggles and is screaming and swearing at him. After a while the teacher returns to the classroom with Emma. Assessing Emma's demeanour, Bert, a carer, suggests that Emma might like to have a blanket to cuddle up in. He puts an arm round her shoulders and leads her away. Later the researcher observes Emma curled up on the comfy chair with a patchwork quilt wrapped tightly right round her. There are several soft cuddly toys tucked up beside her."

(Classroom observation, January)

In these situations staff remain calm rather than reacting aggressively. As researchers in the setting, we identified staff de-escalating violent behaviour and containing other behaviours in an accepting manner, by staying calm, and modelling calm. As observers, we saw that this frequently involved the adult also giving calm attention to their own feelings, sometimes voicing this, often with help from another team member. This helped the adult not to become overwhelmed by the children's heightened emotional states. Where children had been at the school longer, more emphasis was placed on the children being able to manage their own emotional states, with adult support where needed. We also noted many occasions where staff were not retaliating or punishing, but modelling a restorative approach:

One Sunday afternoon a violent outburst by Ben resulted in three members of staff being hurt. His sanction was to spend 30 minutes alone in his bedroom. Afterwards Louise, a member of staff, asked Ben how he would make things right with George (a member of staff Ben had hit) and Ben suggested writing a card. Ben agreed to do the same for the two other members of staff whom he had hit. When discussing the wording on the card Ben suggested he would

write he was sorry for hitting George and that he would try not to do it again. Louise discussed this wording with him and said that it was better that Ben said he was sorry for hurting him (the word hurting has more emotional content and conveys harm compared to the more neutral word hitting). Louise also suggested that Ben say on the card that he would try and ask for help in the future and Ben agreed (this action reinforces the practice of encouraging children to ask staff for support when they feel that they are becoming anxious). Louise helped Ben decorate the card with cheerful pictures of a sun and flowers. (House observation, May)

Quite frequently, we also observed staff restraining children. The Mulberry Bush uses the 'team teach' method. When children are held, it is within the narrative of 'keeping them and others safe'. We observed holding and touch ranging from comforting and nurturing the children, expressed in sitting on someone's lap or greeting them with a hug, through into the area of regulation, which could encompass hand holding, an arm around the shoulder, sitting on laps and full, hug-like holding. These could then slide into restraint, or in some outbursts, move directly into a child being held by one or two members of staff. The Head of Training commented:

"I think for some children, it's about, 'I'm emotionally out of control, if I'm physically out of control, will you step in and rescue me? My language is aggression and then I know that you will physically hug me, stop me, hold me'" (Head of Training)

Building the Capacity for Reflection

As noted above, one of the core aspects of the school's milieu is seeing behaviour as a communication. The researchers observed that it is common for children to re-enact past events in outdoor and imaginative play, with the facilitation of staff. The staff will play and be part of the situation and although being mindful of meaning, will not interpret. Instead they 'hold' the behaviour in mind, and think about what has been communicated, to make better sense of the child.

Within a setting that could seem chaotic or even dangerous at times, much is also done to provide boundaries and help keep children on track, using 'light touch' day-to-day reminders and suggestions, or even very clear direction and sanctions. The staff at the school express the view that reward-punishment systems can be easily manipulated by the children, and punishment can reinforce a cycle of shame, leading to more acting out and more punishment. Therefore, most boundaries are set and reinforced through the use of real relationships and the wish to keep everyone safe.

We observed staff demonstrating great sensitivity in managing feelings of shame. In spite of very difficult behaviour, children are not abandoned or made to feel bad about what they do. The feeling is



that they already demonstrate very clearly how badly they feel about themselves and this does not need to be reinforced. Instead, we observed staff continually seeking the meaning behind what was being communicated by the children and attempting to feed this understanding back to them, either through their own behaviour or by talking to a child about what they believe is going on. We also observed staff

discussing the child's preoccupations or dilemmas in their presence and for their benefit, but not directly with them. This allows the child to listen and think without feeling pressured to respond or to feel embarrassed at being the direct focus of concern.

THERAPEUTIC PROVISION FOR THE STAFF – OUR FINDINGS

“The Mulberry Bush provides the support emotionally and practically, the practical training. I mean that sounds really simple but there is something really unique about the support that the Mulberry Bush provides. There is something about the organisation having a real grasp of the understanding that we are here to support staff but we are not here to parent staff.”

(House Manager, interview)

We were interested to see whether the approach taken to empathising with, supporting and developing the children would also be matched in the organisation by sufficient attention to the support and training needs of staff. When we came to categorise findings relating to the working environment for staff, we found many parallels between the environment provided for the children, and the environment provided for the staff. The research team decided that the staff environment also needed to hold a balance between ‘safe’ and edgy’ dimensions of the work.

As suggested by the quotation above, however, the school works hard at striking another balance in relation to its staff – offering empathic support but not tipping over into ‘therapy’, which is not something the school provides for its employees.

A Safe Place to Develop One’s Work

The therapeutic frame

In interviews, the staff did seem to feel that management and training structures were in place at the school, providing a ‘holding’ therapeutic frame for individual staff, and groups of staff, so that they could grow and develop in role and best

support the children. The school has a careful selection process in place, including day visits and involving the children in the interview process. Members of the senior management team spoke about the need to employ individuals who were open to working on themselves, but also, resilient. They stressed that on application, candidates needed to be appropriately cautious about what they would be facing, and open to trying to understand the children's behaviour. We found that in the research interviews, when individuals spoke about their specific professional identity as a therapeutic care practitioner, or educator, or manager, they also spoke seamlessly about the therapeutic dimensions of their role. Wherever they were placed, therefore, individuals were making a shared contribution to the therapeutic environment.

Maintaining a reflective culture is one of the three key principles at the Mulberry Bush. On top of a range of daily and weekly meetings, there are many regular opportunities for formal reflection. These include individual and group supervision, 'reflective spaces' and appraisal, all seen as crucial for developing staff in role, and ensuring they stay safe around the children. It helps sustain them under the intensity and strain of the work:

If those sort of spaces aren't available to staff, my experience is that some staff just get burnt out. You just get full up of all the negative projections and stuff...So even our maintenance team, but I think they're once every four weeks or something. So it's recognising, actually the children have an impact on every part of the organisation. So whether it's because you put them to bed and you went home feeling exhausted and rubbish and terrible or you're feeling frustrated because you just cooked lunch and they threw it on the floor,

or whatever. But actually there's an impact on every member of the community. (Teaching School Lead, interview)

In addition to supervisory and reflective spaces, staff attended meetings in their various roles, both within their professional area and in cross-disciplinary teams. There is a great deal of face-to-face communication aimed at sharing information about the children, to avoid misunderstandings, misinformation or insufficient information. Priority is given to staff building and maintaining direct relationships. Consultation, collaboration and reflection are observed to be integral to the staff's way of working.

The organisation also provides a foundation degree training, a psycho-dynamically oriented award delivered part-time on site by senior members of staff, which is mandatory and free for all staff working directly with the children. The FDA, and the support group that is attached to it, were described by staff as important for giving them a concrete measure of how the institution valued them, for providing ideas that made sense of a child's behaviour, for increasing self-awareness and for providing a supportive group.

The management structure and hierarchy was also reported to be an open one where staff felt they had access to the senior team and the organisation could tolerate and even welcome challenge and change. More than one staff member noted the organisation's capacity to use criticism constructively:

"... being able to take criticism and being able to give criticism to superiors without feeling that the sky's going to fall on your head for it. I think that would be quite distinctive about this place." (Class teacher, Interview)

Building Trusting Relationships

In interviews, staff members placed importance on being able to trust fellow staff members. It was partly because the work was so public, so potentially exposing, that people needed to feel a sense of trust, and did report experiencing this. Staff members also reported feeling closer to each other because they had witnessed each other in very vulnerable positions and people had also experienced very difficult situations together. Staff modelled surviving for each other, and turning up again after a difficult day was important and affirming. Given how hard the work is, staff showed awareness of each other's vulnerabilities and supported each other, which created a culture where people did not want to let each other down.

Many staff went beyond describing their colleagues as supportive, to suggest that there was something special about their colleagues and this was a reason why it was hard to leave. They attributed this 'bond' to the kind of people drawn to the work, and also, the nature of the connection created as a result of having all been on the receiving end of behaviour and communications that were so challenging.

The importance of humour and joking was noted again, to diffuse tension and create liking and friendliness between staff.

Working at the Edge

As with the children, there were elements of the environment that staff experienced as personally putting them 'on the edge'. Their workplace is one where things threaten to get out of hand, and a place where states of mind, feelings and behaviour are kept 'bubbling'. The experiences the children bring and how they behave stir up hugely powerful feelings in the staff. The staff have to consistently turn up to work in

a frame of mind ready to encounter and manage these feelings. There is a particular 'observing' frame of mind, and empathic attitude, that staff are encouraged to develop in order to be able to support the children in expressing their feelings, regulating them and making sense of them.

The Expression and Regulation of Feelings and Behaviour

A significant set of feelings staff have to process at the school are their reactions to what they learn of the children's histories, past and more recent. We learnt that senior staff are careful of how much of the history of the children is given to staff immediately, 'all in one go' and staff are careful not to make presumptions based on past history. Senior staff also think about the impact of the children's past abuse and how this might be acted out in relationships with staff and other pupils.

Staff demonstrate a knowledge of and belief in the three principles; a psychodynamic way of working; reflective practice and collaborative working. In interview, frontline staff talked about the psychodynamic principle of 'behaviour as communication', particularly important in helping them not take things personally, enabling them to use their own feelings to understand what might be going on for a particular child:

"It's important to remember that behaviour's communication...Ethan, his father horribly physically abused him...I am an authority male figure. The children know who's in charge of a classroom and then he wants to please me, but at the same time, that becomes very, very difficult. He will then feed into me those feelings... without knowing about or thinking about the communication, you would just have a child who would be as sweet as pie one minute and

then be trying to break your nose...without any apparent reason for it.”

(Class Teacher, Interview)

Staff were clear that children with a history of significant trauma with related behavioural issues were well suited to the Mulberry Bush. However, some children caused so much anxiety or were so challenging that very occasionally placements could not be sustained. There was some discussion as to how much risk and trauma the staff group could manage and the professional network tolerate.

Building the capacity for reflection

Staff spoke about the importance of acknowledging the hatred sometimes evoked in them by the children. They discussed the importance of understanding the reasons for a child's behaviour, but also used other ways of dissolving the intensity of the negative feelings somehow, through humour, or through finding something to like in a child. Nearly everyone commented that there was no easy answer as to how to cope with this darkest side of life at the school but people also felt that it was important to have permission to own and acknowledge negative feelings.

The converse of hatred for the children, love and affection, was quite a difficult topic for staff to discuss at interview. This might partly have been due to worries about child protection. Staff suggested that 'love' could be potentially as difficult an emotion as hate, because of the tendency to be drawn into fantasies of rescue or dynamics of over-involvement with the children.

Lastly, there were remarkably consistent responses about hope. Staff expressed the belief that children could develop the capacity to reflect on their feelings rather than simply acting on them. Staff believed the children could then begin to engage in

education and build healthier relationships with others. There was also hope that the children could go on to be good enough adults and parents and prevent another generation from experiencing abuse and neglect.

OUR CONCLUSIONS

Conclusion 1:

- The Mulberry Bush School's therapeutic approach is distinctive because it trains its staff to stay close to the children's feeling states, and to use reflection on feelings (their own and the children's) as a touchstone to help them make sense of the children's inner lives and their behaviour.

Conclusion 2:

- The Mulberry Bush School is distinctive in recognising that staff need a 'therapeutic milieu' of their own that provides a safe place for the expression of their feelings and equips them with a robust training in self-reflection and reflection on the work.

Conclusion 3:

- The therapeutic model at the Mulberry Bush School works similarly to Mentalization-Based Therapy. Staff attempt to provide mirroring and empathy, then more gently challenging responses, subsequently working towards more explicit reflective thought about what has happened, and finally, attempting to make sense of the experience with the child. This is a model the children can gradually take in and use.

Conclusion 4:

- The UEL Research Project has identified 'shame' and its management as an important dynamic in the setting that should prompt further reflection.

Conclusion 5:

- MBS has devised a model of group living where there is a diffusion of the intensity and privacy of the intimate attachment bonds formed in an ordinary nuclear family. As privacy and emotional intensity in the family home are experienced as potentially threatening for the children, the open, public group nature of life at the school is a protection for all concerned. When relationships are shared and relating is very 'public', paradoxically, closer one-to-one moments can be more safely found.