

Changing culture: Learning into practice

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Introduction

The impact of unit culture on the life experiences of children in residential care is extremely important. This was recently recognised during the work of the National Residential Child Care Initiative (NRCCI) in Scotland:

The NRCCI is calling for a change in culture whereby properly resourced residential child care would be recognised as an important, valued and integral part of children's servicesThe NRCCI fully recognises that the workforce is the most important resource in residential child care and the status, skills and training of the workforce, as well as the support they are offered, has to be commensurate with the increasingly demanding and challenging task expected of them (SIRCC, 2009, p.14).

The importance of unit culture has also been acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Clough et al., 2006; Hicks et al., 2007). In general, culture can be described as:

The creation of meaning through which human beings interpret their experiences and guide their actions (Geertz, 1973, p.4).

There can be no doubt that cultures in residential child care can be positive or negative. There is, however, a lack of research on cultural indicators such as staff morale, job satisfaction and retention in the residential child care setting. Savicki (2002) demonstrated that cultural factors were related to burnout in child and youth care workers, and identified teamwork training and support, supervision, and coping strategy training as important contributors to a positive culture. Other studies have highlighted the importance of training as a contributory factor in levels of job satisfaction and staff morale (Ploeg & Scholte, 1998; Sinclair & Gibbs, 1998).

Over the past ten years, Linn Moor has grappled with the issue of how to create a self-sustaining positive culture and have used training as a key feature in this. A recent evaluation (Stevens and Lawrie, 2008) demonstrated the success of these training strategies in reducing physical interventions and creating a positive culture for both staff and young people (or students, as we refer to them). Since 2002, Linn Moor has had a

policy of seconding staff away from their normal duties to work as trainers or to provide additional support to new staff or staff experiencing difficulties in managing the challenging behaviour of students. We call this group of staff our 'Culture Carriers'. For us, 'Culture Carriers' are the experienced staff who have synthesised their training, knowledge and experience in such a way that they embody the vision and mission of Linn Moor in thought, word and action. This paper argues that residential child care services may benefit from having a more formal system of developing their experienced support staff to act as their 'Culture Carriers'.

Training in Linn Moor

As stated previously, we believe that training and support are the key elements in developing a positive culture. Over the years, Linn Moor has ensured that all staff have been trained to manage the many challenges presented by our students. Most new staff receive a two-week induction which is designed to meet the Scottish Social Services Council's (SSSC) Induction Framework (SSSC, 2005), as well as to equip staff to work with our students, all of whom have moderate to severe challenging behaviour and complex needs. This is followed by ongoing training opportunities. Once in post for six to nine months, staff are enrolled on our in-house HNC social care programme or are enrolled as SVQ health and social care candidates. We have dedicated staff on-site to ensure this happens. All training is integral, not marginal to the work, and no-one is permitted to work until they have had their initial induction, even if we run short of staff for three weeks until the next VSA Induction Cycle.

Linn Moor also uses three main approaches to working with our particular client group. These approaches are TEACCH (Training and Education of Autistic and Communication-handicapped Children), Applied Behavioural Analysis (IABA) and Behaviour Support Strategies (BSS). These approaches have been adopted and integrated into the daily lives of the students as well as the day-to-day working routines of staff. By developing 'Culture Carriers' across the three approaches, we have created a large number of staff with different yet complementary expertise. The following is a short description of how we are developing our experienced support staff as 'Culture Carriers'.

Behavioural Support Strategies

All staff are trained in a two-day course on the management on Behaviour Support Strategies (BSS) as soon as they start their employment. BSS is a behavioural approach to the management of challenging behaviour that is linked to a series of physical interventions. However, while physical interventions are taught, the main emphasis is on the use of 'proactive strategies'. The reality is that many of the students come to the school because of their severe challenging behaviour, both to self or others. While it is recognised that we may need to use physical interventions, staff soon learn and accept that good communication, coupled with calming techniques, distraction and withdrawal are always a preferred option. The trainers at Linn Moor are all experienced support staff who are trained and supported to deliver the training and to then support the staff on an ongoing basis.

Autism Specific Training

All staff are trained on Autism Awareness within the first week and will go on to attend an awareness training on TEACCH. TEACCH offers a holistic approach which develops ways to help individuals with autism and its associated spectrum disorders to function in the culture that surrounds them, taking into account the characteristic cognitive and behavioural patterns of autism. Throughout their first year or so of employment staff are immersed in training as well as discussions on our work with students, the vast majority of whom are challenged by autism. On an annual basis, Linn Moor invites the Division TEACCH specialists from the University of North Carolina to run a five-day TEACCH programme. The vast majority of staff will attend this training within two years service. Division TEACCH also encourage up to five Linn Moor staff per year to work with them during the five-day programme, as 'Shadow Trainers.' Over the years of our involvement, 20 staff have acted as 'Shadow Trainers' and two have become fully independent TEACCH trainers in their own right. The 'Shadow Trainers' are encouraged to take their TEACCH training to a higher level and assist in integrating the approach into the school throughout the year. In addition to TEACCH, our in-house HNC includes the unit 'Working with Autism' which all Linn Moor staff are required to undertake. For those already qualified, we offer an additional Certificate in Supporting Individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, which is accredited by the SQA. Both qualifications are designed to afford opportunities for staff to integrate their work with students into their learning as well as their assignments.

Applied Behaviour Analysis

In 2001, the school adopted the Institute of Applied Behaviour Analysis (IABA) approach. The IABA approach involves looking at the message behind behaviour and involves very accurate recording of any 'target behaviours' that should be altered or changed. We have sent eight staff to the IABA Summer Institute in Los Angeles since 2001. All students at Linn Moor are assessed using the IABA model prior to admission and Support Plans are developed for many students within the school. In April 2009, 12 staff volunteers began a fortnightly training programme which ran for nine months, based on the IABA approach. This group were trained to assess / reassess six students between April and June. One of the 12 was selected on the basis of their assessment as well as their presentation of their findings to go over to the IABA Summer School in Los Angeles. This autumn the same group are continuing their training and will go on to develop and implement 'multi-element support plans' for their six students. Over the summer months, 10 of the IABA volunteers undertook some additional training along with other support workers to develop 'mini' support plans. Five new students have been selected for this pilot work and these 'mini' plans were implemented in October 2009. This opportunity widened the numbers of staff involved in quality assurance and monitoring.

Discussion

Establishing a wide and relevant training and support strategy which is congruent with the mission statement and which has verifiable outcomes for users, is a pragmatic way of creating a positive culture. However, the process is neither easy nor cheap. Linn Moor is situated in the north of Scotland. The reality here is that there are many employment

opportunities available and staff turnover is high, particularly where people are able to be selective over whom they wish to work for. All employers in the social care sector have to cope with this reality. The consequences of this for the operation of the school are a constant worry, as new staff take time to settle down. We are aware that too much stress or too many challenges can lead to staff leaving the school. We believe that by instituting 'Culture Carriers', we will be better able to attract and keep good quality staff. Equally, new staff can bring fresh insight, new ideas. Being receptive and supportive to new staff in order for them quickly to become part of the positive culture within the school is vital. Good support systems are in place to ensure new staff want to stay and develop a positive culture across the school that allows staff to feel empowered and supported to develop their skills and talents as well as learn new ones. This is a group that we encourage the 'Culture Carriers' to spend time with, as they all recognise that it is in the interests of the students and the staff to have a consistent approach. It is clear to us that high staff turnover can limit the development of a positive culture.

Good clear communication is also key to establishing and maintaining a positive culture. At Linn Moor, communication is generally very good but new staff can and do take time to become familiar with the challenges presented by individual students as well as becoming familiar with the school systems and procedures. It is all very well to have a mission or vision statement. However, it takes more than words to create a positive culture. Early indications are that the work of the various 'Culture Carriers' motivates staff and encourages co-operation as well as a healthy atmosphere of debate about what works best. It has taken Linn Moor more than ten- years to develop the type of culture which is best for its students. However, we are now seeing the fruits of this work. Apart from the fall in the use of physical interventions, staff attitudes to recording represents a major cultural shift in thinking and approach. The evaluation carried out in 2008 showed that staff see that recording is a tool and not a chore (Stevens & Lawrie, 2008).

Good feedback about the effectiveness of the models used is important in establishing and maintaining a positive culture. One consistent policy we have developed is to use staff as trainers, often releasing them from their normal work duties for part of their working week to train and support others. For some staff this time out has lasted for a few years but for most it has been part-time. In this way, as many staff as possible get the opportunity to become 'Culture Carriers' for the school. We demonstrate to staff how things are improving, and the 'Culture Carriers' will work alongside staff, willingly supporting them even if it means extra evening and weekend work.

In conclusion, it may seem that unit culture is one of the great indefinable aspects of residential child care. If culture is indeed, 'the creation of meaning through which human beings interpret their experiences and guide their actions' then ways must be sought to create that meaning. From my point of view, training and support are two of those ways. Too often, training and support slip down the agenda, especially in times of financial constraint or extreme challenges presented in work situations. By understanding and facing the challenges, and by investing in staff to prepare them to work with the challenges, positive cultures will develop. Any way that is found to ensure that staff and young people gain benefit and satisfaction from their experience should be encouraged.

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