

Intuition is not Enough

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*Matching Learning with Practice
in Therapeutic Child Care*

Edited by Adrian Ward and Linnet McMahon

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Designed as a guide for trainers and academic staff as well as for practitioners working with the most disturbed children and young people, *Intuition is not Enough* explores the connections between the challenges of practice and of learning. The book introduces the ‘matching principle’ – the principle that, in order to be successful, training for any field of practice should ‘match’ or reflect key aspects of that practice in terms of personal experience as well as academic content.

Based on the work of a unique course at the University of Reading, the book includes accounts by staff and students of this special way of working – its rationale, content and process. The authors demonstrate how the developmental principles underlying therapeutic work with young people can influence the design and practice of training, how those who have experienced this form of training have been able to apply their learning in their own professional practice and the struggles they have encountered in doing so.

The book’s clear and accessible style will appeal to practitioners and trainers at all levels and in a wide range of professions and it will be especially helpful for those responsible for designing and running courses in the fields of social work, social care, counselling and psychotherapy.

Adrian Ward is a senior lecturer in the Department of Community Studies at the University of Reading. **Linnet McMahon** lectures in Therapeutic Child Care at the University of Reading and is also a play therapist, supervisor and trainer.

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and Linnet McMahon

First published 1998 by Routledge
27 Church Road Hove East Sussex BN3 2FA

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Transferred to Digital Printing 2008

© 1998 for the collection as a whole, Linnet McMahon and Adrian Ward; individual chapters, the authors

Typeset in Times by Routledge

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Intuition is not enough: matching learning with practice in therapeutic child care / edited by Linnet McMahon and Adrian Ward.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Psychiatric day treatment for children – study and teaching.
 2. Child psychotherapy – residential treatment – study and teaching.
 3. Social work with children – study and teaching. 4. Problem children – counselling of. I. McMahon, Linnet. II. Ward, Adrian, 1953–
- RJ504.53.I57 1998
618.92'8914–dc21

97-34706

CIP

ISBN 978-0-415-15662-2 (pbk)

To my mother and father, with love (A.W.)

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Preface

This is a book about learning: personal, professional and academic learning, and how these different types of learning are connected with each other. It has emerged from our own learning as we worked on running one training course in particular, the MA in Therapeutic Child Care at the University of Reading. Since 1990 this innovatory programme has been providing post-qualifying training for child care workers, social workers, teachers and others. It originated from a collaboration between the University and the Charterhouse Group of Therapeutic Communities, which is an association of schools and other facilities providing psychodynamic and educational support to emotionally disturbed children and young people. The MA has become established as a leading course for those working therapeutically with children and their families, especially those in residential, day care and groupwork settings. Our work on this course has led to the writing of this book through two routes: first, a need to produce theoretical material for the study of therapeutic child care; and second, from our developing interest in the processes of teaching and learning and in how these processes can be made to 'match' with practice.

A single MA course such as this can only hope to reach a small number of people directly, whereas the need for training and staff development in this field is very great. We found that we were frequently being asked for course materials both by those in child care practice who could not attend the course, and by those running other training and staff development programmes elsewhere. At first, we could only send out copies of our course handbooks and reading lists, plus a few reprinted articles, as there was little recent material in print. When originally preparing the course we had faced a considerable problem in assembling the content; in a sense

we had had to draw on learning in several disciplines and in none. The extant disciplines included social work, psychology, psychotherapy and special education, although each of these only dealt indirectly with the residential and day care settings which were our own focus. Meanwhile the specific disciplines of residential and group care for children appeared to be less well represented in the literature: not very much had been published, and much of what there was had appeared either in books which were now out of print or in journals normally found only in university libraries. The literature was thus somewhat scattered, hard to find and full of gaps. In order to begin filling some of these gaps, we started to write and publish papers about our work, and encouraged our students to do likewise. When we first envisaged writing this book, our aim was simply to collect these papers on therapeutic child care and write with a primary focus on child care practice. However, as our work developed, so too did the focus of this book.

We found that, through our work on this programme, we ourselves were learning. We were discovering more about how the processes of learning and teaching operate, and about how staff and students can work together at enhancing these processes and at acknowledging and trying to overcome the problems which inevitably arise. It was difficult work, and we had much to learn. We met every week as a staff team to reflect on what was happening, on what sense we could make of it, and on what we might need to do in order to maximise the learning for all. Some of us kept journals of our own work, just as we encouraged our students to do, and we were able to draw upon these when the time came to write up our work. We realised that, through some of the methods which we were using, such as Opening and Closing Meetings, and an 'Experiential Group', we were hearing more than trainers usually do about the actual experience of those attending the programme: about their hopes, fears, excitements and anxieties, and about how these affected both their professional work and the quality of their learning about it. Indeed, we sometimes wondered whether these particular students had a more intense experience of these feelings than other students on professional training courses, but we do not believe this to be so. It was just that we had more direct access to such experiences than is sometimes the case.

Throughout this learning we became increasingly aware that what was distinctive about the course was that it built so firmly upon what we called the 'matching principle': the principle that the

process of learning should match with the process of practice. While our main motive for running the course had always been to improve the quality of services to children in the child care system, our motives for writing the book now included a wish to propose and explore the matching principle, and indeed this has eventually become the primary focus of the book. As we talked with colleagues from other disciplines, we realised that similar questions arise in other forms of professional training, and indeed that people such as Donald Schön have theorized about, for example, the subject of how people learn about 'reflective practice'. However, it turned out that our experience was taking us beyond what we had read about elsewhere, and that, for example, what we meant by reflective practice was rather different from what Schön meant, so there was further conceptual work to be done – which is what we have attempted in this book.

Eventually we began to collect together the material on child care practice with the other material on the processes of professional learning, so that we could explore the connections between them more carefully, and so that we could make the results more widely available. The book still contains a large amount of material on child care practice and its theoretical base, but this is all set within the framework of the discussion of the matching principle. It is therefore addressed both to those whose primary interest is in the practice of therapeutic child care and to those whose interest is in the processes of adult education and professional training. This may be viewed as ambitious, but we have preferred to aim higher rather than lower, and we hope that, as one of our readers, you will find that this approach is of some value, whatever your professional background and special interest.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge our debt to the members of the Therapeutic Child Care course who in their different ways have brought themselves and their work to the course and from whom we have learned so much.

Particular thanks to Michele Alfred, Mark Adams, Steve Bromage, Viv Dacre, Dave Fernyhough, Nyasha Gwatidzo, Margarete Lucas, Rebecca Nwaozuzu, Simon Peacock, Matt Vince, John Turberville and Janet Vale, who have allowed us to quote from their work.

During the original planning of the course we greatly appreciated the support of many colleagues in practice, especially John Whitwell, Michael Jinks, Richard Rollinson, Melvyn Rose, Christine Bradley, Caroline Whitehead, John Cross and Brian Bishop. This support was all the more valuable in coming from people who have each worked so hard to provide better care and treatment for troubled children. We are equally grateful for the encouragement and financial support provided by the Peper Harow Foundation, The Charterhouse Group, The Caldecott Community and the Tudor Trust.

We have also appreciated the continuing support of our colleagues in the social work team at the University of Reading, in particular the team leader, Doug Badger, who encouraged us in developing the course at a time when there were other great demands on the team.

Introduction

How can training really connect with practice? Surely training – and ‘theory’ – will always be distant and removed from the sheer grind and turmoil of everyday professional practice, whether this is in social work, teaching or any other setting? There has always been a dilemma about how to bring closer together the apparently different worlds of college and workplace and recent trends towards modularisation, distance-learning and workplace-based training seem to offer one way of resolving this dilemma. They do so by breaking down training programmes into small components, delivering them (literally) through the post or other media and in some cases expecting people to complete their studies without ever leaving the workplace and without entering a separate ‘place of learning’. On the other hand, it is questionable as to whether all forms of professional practice are best studied in this way. Especially at the level of post-qualifying training for therapeutic work, which will be our focus in this book, there is a risk that the ‘medium’ of distance may conflict with the ‘message’ of involvement. Indeed, we will be proposing that in such intimate and intricate work as therapeutic child care, there are more appropriate ways of tackling the dilemma of the distance between training, theory and practice than by increasing the distance.

Our argument will be based upon what we are calling the ‘matching principle’: that in all professional training the mode of training should reflect or ‘match’ the mode of practice in terms of process as well as content. ‘Let the training match the practice’ might indeed be a motto for the design of all training courses, but what do we mean by ‘matching’ in this context? This book attempts to answer that question by means of a case-study approach, concentrating upon an analysis of one particular mode of practice: that of

therapeutic practice with children. By closely modelling some aspects of training upon key features of the relevant practice settings, we aim to show how we have been able to provide learning opportunities which do seem to have enabled practitioners to achieve genuine improvement in the service they offer.

We are especially interested in the field of ‘therapeutic child care’, by which we mean that broad range of therapeutic work undertaken with children and young people in non-clinical settings, such as children’s homes and other residential facilities, family centres and educational ‘withdrawal units’, as well as in foster homes. These settings are of particular interest because the need for training and for a new approach to training in such places is so great. Although they provide help and support for many of the most deeply damaged and troublesome children in the UK, very often this help is provided by staff who have had little access to the specialised training they require and who receive very limited support and advice in their work. We have been involved for some years in providing post-qualifying training for these staff, but we are very aware of the lack of opportunities nationally for such training. We are therefore keen to add to the possibilities of improved training for them, partly by stimulating some debate about how such training might be planned and delivered and partly by offering our ideas on the complex relationship between practice, training and theory. In the process we are also aiming to provide a means of learning about child care to benefit such training.

Beyond this particular context, however, we also want to propose that *all* professional training should involve some degree of ‘matching’. We argue that, in order to maximise the potential for learning, the student’s experience of the training process should have a ‘felt’ connection with their experience of practice. It will be seen in [Chapter 6](#) that our emphasis is upon matching for *process* as much as for content and by this we mean unconscious as much as conscious process. Our assumption is that any matching must therefore begin with an analysis of process and content in the relevant field of practice, so in the early chapters we shall be asking not just: ‘*what* do people do within this field of practice?’ (which might be as far as we would get using a ‘competency’ approach) but also ‘*why* do they do it, what sorts of thinking and emotion are involved and what else is happening around them as they work?’.

The book offers an extended case study in the application of the matching principle, which we explore in more detail in [Chapter 6](#);

and we return to the question about the broader application of this principle in the closing chapter. We are proposing this approach because, while the design of many training programmes does suggest some element of matching, many others suggest an absence of such connections and indeed some seem to offer a model which is quite at variance with the relevant mode of practice. In the world of professional education this aspect of the design of training programmes often seems to have been left to implicit or intuitive reasoning, or even purely to chance, rather than being decided upon for explicit and well-argued reasons. Our aim in offering this principle is to show that these decisions can be reached in a more rational and explicit way, although we do not so much claim to have 'invented' this principle, but simply to have uncovered and articulated it.

TRAINING FOR THERAPEUTIC CHILD CARE

In our field of therapeutic child care, it was initially hard to locate appropriate models for the *content* of a training programme, let alone for its process. This was because, although there was an extensive range of settings in which this practice is carried out, the staff of these settings did not necessarily identify themselves as coming under the same professional or conceptual umbrella. Some of them would identify primarily with social work and some with nursing, special education, group analysis or child psychotherapy. However, our own experience in practice (as a residential worker and play therapist) had suggested that across this wide range of settings could be found a large number of staff all attempting to achieve broadly similar therapeutic objectives with some deeply troubled young people and probably all needing to draw on each of the perspectives mentioned above.

The real difficulty was that, if these staff had had *any* previous access to training, this would have been within one or other of the above disciplines, but not usually geared sufficiently to therapeutic work in the group care context, which has somehow remained relatively under-conceptualised. We therefore set out to assemble and in some areas to create, a theory-base for this work which would span across the settings. In the first part of the book we give some indication of this theory-base, although there has not been space to be comprehensive.

We have drawn upon the literature we have found to be most

useful in our own practice in terms of explaining the behaviour and feelings of children and young people and especially how these connect with their relationships, families and others. Primarily, it is a psychodynamic approach, but whereas many psychodynamic writings focus mainly on clinical work, whether with individuals or with groups, our own focus has been very much on applying these understandings in non-clinical settings and using them to explore the connections between individuals, groups and the overall context of the group care setting. From within child care literature this means that we have drawn especially on the work of B. Dockar-Drysdale and D.W. Winnicott, whereas from the broader therapeutic literature we have also drawn on fields such as group analysis and the therapeutic community. Among the problems encountered has been the fact that, often, much of this literature, while it is exceptionally helpful in terms of understanding children's relationships with their families and others, overlooks other key aspects of children's experience, such as the reality of racism and gender stereotyping and the harsh context of poverty and oppression within which many families struggle. We are reminded continually of these realities by the accounts of their practice which our students report and we have tried to take due account of such factors in our work both in the training programme and in this book. However, we acknowledge that we have in fact only just begun this process and that there is much further to go in this respect.

THE PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH

We are aware that in using a psychodynamic approach we may encounter various objections: some find it 'ideologically unsound' or elitist because of its continuing gaps in addressing issues such as gender, race and social class and we are in some sympathy with this objection and wish to work further at filling in the gaps. Others, however, may object that they find this approach complex and daunting, partly because the terminology and concepts seem strange and often mystifying and partly because the task of working psychodynamically can appear very complicated and difficult to undertake. People are reluctant to dabble because of a reasonable fear of doing harm rather than good, or of getting out of their depth. We are in sympathy with this objection too and feel that it is a real and in some respects inevitable difficulty.

Psychoanalytic theory is complicated and sometimes hard to

understand, probably because it is attempting to explain complicated and confusing concepts, such as the nature of the emotional experience of very young children and how it may connect both with the child's relationships with its parents and with its later emotional and psychological development. There is much about this field which is hard to fathom. Beyond a certain point it cannot be learned simply by reading the theoretical texts or by relying on personal intuition to guide one's practice. One of our themes is that the ability to think clearly depends on the ability to be clear about your feelings: theory and personal experience therefore need to be brought together to help people arrive at new ways of understanding. This book demonstrates some of the ways in which these elements can be brought together. In the process it describes a distinctive approach to professional training in higher education. The focus is on how people learn in both therapeutic and educational contexts. Throughout the book the parallels between these processes are explored and developed.

A further objection which we sometimes encounter to the psychoanalytic perspective on training and practice is that some people feel it is somehow too introspective and even self-indulgent. In particular, our students sometimes have to contend with colleagues or managers who dismiss this approach with references to 'the "feely" end of social work' and to 'navel-gazing exercises'. The reality, of course, is that working in this way requires the greatest mental discipline and emotional resourcefulness. It is also true that even some of those most concerned with social work for troubled children can find it awkward at a personal level to deal with the power of the feelings involved and with the necessary focus on understanding the detail and dynamic of human emotions. Being aware of such dismissive comments can make it hard for us and our students to assert confidently the value of a strong focus on the emotional world of children, but in some ways it makes it all the more necessary. If the workers themselves feel awkward and inhibited about it, then how much more difficult and humiliating must it be for those children who have suffered abuse and neglect to face talking about such things?

Connected with the above is the fact that a great deal of therapeutic work which is undertaken with children is never properly acknowledged as such. Many of the practice examples described in this book come from ordinary children's homes and family centres managed by local authority Social Service Departments, rather than

from prestigious special units labelled ‘therapeutic communities’. It is our experience that, given the right support and training, staff in these ordinary settings can achieve extraordinary results, even though at times neither their managers nor they themselves recognise the true value of this work. If senior managers are uncomfortable, as sometimes they appear to be, with viewing their children’s homes and family centres as having therapeutic aims, our response would be, ‘If they are not therapeutic, then what are they?’. We would argue that it is not possible to have a children’s institution which is neutral in this respect: either it is focused on providing skilled and intensive help to children and their families, in which case we would argue for it to be set up as a therapeutic resource, or it is not.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In [Part 1](#) we focus on therapeutic practice and on some of the theoretical frameworks which we have found helpful. We draw on the ideas of Donald Winnicott and others to outline the concepts of the inner world and the ‘holding environment’ and look at their implications for therapeutic practice. There is a strong emphasis on the group care setting as a context for therapeutic work and on the ‘therapeutic community’ approach as a model for harnessing the overall context of team, place and people to the therapeutic task.

In [Part 2](#) we begin with a discussion of the ‘matching principle’ and in the ensuing chapters we outline the detail of our use of this principle in the design and operation of a training programme, looking at what is required of both staff and students. We show how this approach addresses the connections between the personal, the professional and the academic and we include some reflections on this theme from students of the programme.

In [Part 3](#) we include a number of examples of ways in which people who have experienced this approach to training have applied their learning back into the practice setting, both in therapeutic communities and in less specialised settings. Finally in [Part 4](#) we bring together the many ways in which we have used the idea and concept of ‘reflection’ throughout the book and return to the theme of the matching principle, looking at how it can be applied to other forms of training. All practice examples in the book have been ‘anonymised’ to protect confidentiality.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

We have aimed to create a logical journey through complicated terrain and to offer signposts and reminders along the way, so our hope is that the book will make most sense if you work through it from start to finish. However, we do recognise that some of our readers will have a main interest in the details of therapeutic practice in group care settings: if this is your main interest, you may prefer to read the book ‘back-to-front’, perhaps even starting with one of the shorter chapters in [Part 3](#) such as ‘Alice and her blanket’ and working back through some of the other examples before turning to the theoretical frameworks which these authors have drawn upon (and which are introduced in [Part 1](#)). Others may have more interest in detailed suggestions about training for therapeutic work: if this is your interest, you may prefer to start in [Part 2](#) with the various chapters on aspects of the MA programme before engaging with the theoretical background. We also argue, of course, that no book can provide all the answers anyway and we concede that there is something paradoxical about writing a book which argues that you cannot learn it all from books. We have learned to live with this paradox. We hope you will find a path of your own through our ideas. Whichever path you take, we hope you will enjoy the journey.

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Part 1

A basis for thinking about therapeutic practice

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Chapter 1

The inner world and its implications

Adrian Ward

How can we understand the needs of troubled children and young people? My aim in this chapter is to set out one way of doing so, drawing upon some of the ideas central to a psychodynamic approach to helping children and their families. This is not intended as a full account of the field, but as a brief introduction to some of the ideas which we will be drawing upon later in the book: those requiring more detailed discussion will be referred to other places where fuller accounts are given. Neither is this approach claimed as the *only* way of understanding and addressing children's needs: other approaches – and indeed other versions of this same approach – have been successfully used by many others and it can certainly be helpful to draw upon a wide range of ideas and techniques. Our argument is simply that this approach is one which we have found useful and productive as a basis for thinking about both how to help and how to provide training for those learning how to help. The central theme in this chapter is the concept of the 'inner world' in human experience and its implications for those who experience special difficulties in childhood. The next chapter will explore ways of trying to reach this inner world in therapeutic work.

CHILD, FAMILY AND OUTSIDE WORLD

We are probably all aware, from reflecting upon our own childhood experience, that every child develops with some sense of 'self' and identity and that a central part of this self is what might be called the 'inner world': the internal psychological and emotional picture which we evolve of the world and the people in it. This inner world consists of a mixture of the conscious and the less-than-conscious: thoughts and feelings, fears and imaginings, understandings and

misunderstandings, dreams and nightmares, images of people and places and assumptions about their meaning or importance. It is gradually built up out of the experiences the child has from its earliest days and especially out of the learning the child achieves from these experiences. To the child this inner world is real and important, although some parts of it may be a secret and private world which is not disclosed to anyone. Equally, some parts of it may be hidden from the child itself, partly because some of the experiences upon which it is built are absorbed without their emotional impact being consciously understood at the time, but also because some experiences may be too painful or frightening to keep in mind at a conscious level and may therefore be kept somewhere out of reach – although still within the scope of influence.

One of the best ways of learning about the inner world – apart from talking with children and reflecting upon one's own experience – is to read biographies and autobiographies. Many such works skim over the earliest stages of childhood to get on to the racy days of young adulthood as soon as possible, but some of them dwell most revealingly on the early days. One such is the autobiography of Jean-Paul Sartre, who turns out to have been a precocious thinker and a valuable source for our purposes as he conveys a vivid picture of his developing inner world from quite a young age. In one passage, for example, he describes his childhood anxieties about death and dying:

I saw death. At the age of five: it was watching me; in the evenings, it prowled on the balcony: it pressed its nose to the window; I used to see it but I did not dare to say anything. Once, on the Quai Voltaire, we met it: it was a tall, mad old woman, dressed in black, who mumbled as she went by: 'I shall put that child in my pocket'. Another time, it was a hole: . . . I was playing at horses, half-heartedly and galloping round the house. Suddenly, I noticed a gloomy hole: the cellar, which had been opened; an indescribable impression of loneliness and horror blinded me: I turned round and singing at the top of my voice, I fled.

(Sartre 1967: 60)

However remote Sartre and his upbringing may seem now, his intense and sometimes bizarre memories of his early childhood conjure up some of the intensity of the inner world of the child.

If we reflect upon our own recollections of childhood events, most of us can provide evidence that children not only experience the world and the people around them, but also make their own active interpretations of these experiences. These interpretations sometimes hold great power for the child, so that it may feel impossible to reveal them to anyone else. Problems can arise for the child when these interpretations of the world around them are based on misunderstandings, or on inaccurate information, or when, as Sartre indicates, the child's own version of events and feelings differs from what other people try to tell them. For example, in one passage Sartre says that his mother insisted that he was 'the happiest of little boys', even though he knew this was far from true. Another version of this mismatch arises when the child knows a truth which others wish to deny or refuse to hear: what has sometimes been called 'the hopelessness of not being believed'. Most people can recall some childhood experience of being unfairly accused of doing something wrong, but in work with troubled children the question of believing what a child is saying may hold much greater significance, e.g. in sorting out the truth in cases of suspected sexual abuse.

Our inner world remains with us through adolescence and beyond, although some people feel that by the onset of puberty some of its magic has gone, to be replaced by an awareness of the impingement of reality (which may also bring periods of depression or cynicism as well as times of mature understanding and realisation). On the subject of magic, most people are probably familiar with the idea of the magical thinking of the young child, whereby inanimate objects are treated as living beings with thoughts, intentions and feelings. This is also closely linked with the young child's view of herself/himself as the centre of the universe and thus as the *cause* of all events whether good or bad. This latter aspect of a young child's thinking is crucial to bear in mind when assessing what sense a child has made of traumatic events.

For most of us these childhood feelings are manageable and healthy, even though they may cause us considerable pain or confusion at the time: but for children who have experienced the trauma of rejection, neglect, or abuse, their inner world is often in even greater turmoil than the 'real' world around them. Other children experiencing traumatic events may seek refuge in a 'magic' inner world in which people and events can be changed, destroyed or denied as the child tries to insulate itself from knowing and feeling