A STUDY INTO THE SUGGESTED INTRODUCTION OF COMMUNITY MEETINGS TO THE KITEZH PROGRAMME

BACKGROUND

In Therapeutic Community work since the 1950's methods have had to be developed to enable emotionally damaged children to understand their feelings and the history of their often traumatized early childhood. They have needed to experience security in group processes rather than hiding their problems away and even denying them to themselves because it is in groups of one kind or another that most of us live eventually. Whether or not we succeed in those groups depends on how well integrated we become as people.

The Therapeutic Community should come to represent an enabling process for the child who is lost in his fearful past, disempowered by his fears and trapped in his retarded emotional development. Until some progress has been made on these problems his capacity for learning in any formal sense is limited.

Whilst some of this essential work with the child is accomplished by skilled workers acting as individual therapists for the child on a one to one basis yet more is done by the trained and integrated parenting figures in his life.

One further strand in the process is by the use of group processes in which the child becomes a participant rather than a witness to increase his feelings of empowerment, for him to discover that he has opinions that other people want to hear and that his contributions can make a difference to the way he and others live their lives.

All adult team members involved in these three processes, - therapist, parenting figures and group workers need to work cohesively and by enabling each other and constantly evaluating the outcomes on and with the child. The contribution of Community Meetings to the therapeutic programme has been seen by most communities as being an inescapable feature which has served their purpose well.

DESIGN OF THE COMMUNITY MEETING

Each community has designed its own form of the community meeting. The key questions have been

1. How old and what is the nature of the children for whom we are designing the meeting?
2. How skilled are the staff who are to play a crucial group therapist role in the meeting?
3. Does the meeting have a Leader skilled enough to lead such a meeting without being deflected from the task?
4. Will the community commit itself to the regular and unassailable place of the community meeting in the programme?

Inevitably the pattern of community meeting first adopted is modest in its aims and becomes more sophisticated or not as the best choice of option becomes clear. Some communities have overstretched themselves at the start, been too ambitious and have had to scale down their operation in order to avoid the collapse of the process.

One model for Kitezh to consider was designed originally for children of low, average and high intelligence aged between 9 and 17 years of age working together with a staff team of teachers - all trained and qualified, group workers (parenting figures) all trained, half of them unqualified and domestic staff, cooks, cleaners, drivers etc., all of them trained in the community and none of them qualified in child care. It can be seen therefore that an eclectic model of community meeting had to be adopted for this holistic working community where every member of the staff team made a contribution to the therapeutic task. Children and adults sat together in a large circle or oval with adults seated strategically to assist the process as ably as possible.

PLAN OF THE MEETING

1. Children and adults gathered in a room used specially for the community meeting. Meetings which were the spiritual start to the day were held in another room.

2. The Leader was always FIRST to arrive and settled the group down by his presence.
3. The community meeting started with a short STILLNESS or silence. It was settling and symbolic of the fact that something of importance to everyone was about to happen.

4. APOLOGIES for absence were offered for children or adults not attending for some overriding important reason.

5. ANNOUNCEMENTS.

These were to announce simple ‘neutral’ pieces of information which children and adults needed to have. They might be for a timetable change, visitors in the meeting or arriving sometime before the next meeting, a trip to the town for which children could ask for a place etc., etc. This section of the meeting allowed the group to ‘warm up’ before the serious and challenging section.

6. PROBLEMS.

Adults and children were invited by the Leader to state any problems there were in the community which they felt were best dealt with by the community rather than outside it. The Leader made a list of these on a board for all to see together with the name of the person who brought it to the meeting.

After about eight problems had been identified the Leader asked the group to prioritise the problems in order of importance. Once this group process was complete and a consensus arrived at work could begin. The person (usually a child) bringing up the problem would be asked to state the issue. Then others would be asked to comment and the process of clarifying the issue and finding a solution embarked upon. Sometimes details of the issue were disputed. The discussion could be heated and angry, sometimes it could be very sensitive and best finished off outside the meeting and the outcome reported back at the next meeting. All children would be encouraged to participate according to their involvement or ability. Some problems could take a disproportionate amount of time, others were quite simple.

The role of the Leader in this process was as an enabler who only rarely imposed his own will on the group. He would skilfully move from one child or adult to another bringing about a better understanding of what was happening in the group and leading the meeting towards resolution of each problem. He would often interpret for the group what children in particular were saying or feeling or call upon an adult particularly significant to the child to undertake that task for the meeting.

Where reparation or compensation was seen as a desirable option because a child had offended against another child, an adult, someone outside the community or the whole community itself, then the child could be invited to offer a compensation he considered to be fair. Sometimes he might need the assistance of his parenting figure or a close friend or two friends from amongst the children. The view taken was that compensation that was imposed without negotiation was not compensation but punishment. Only in the rarest of circumstances was it permitted that punishment took the place of compensation. Success in resolving difficult problems or a clear change of heart or attitude by an offender would often be greeted with congratulations, expressions of hope or even applause. Other problems of course did not involve any offence by a child.

7. EXPECTATIONS

Anyone could make an expectation of an individual, adult or child, a group or the whole community. One child once made an expectation of the Prime Minister and since it was not foolish, the community sent him a letter.

8. APPRECIATIONS

This section moved the community towards a harmonious and successful conclusion to the meeting. However hard and long was the ‘problems’ section it was essential that the whole process be completed and that ‘expectations’ and ‘appreciations’ also be included. Just very rarely the community omitted ‘expectations’ but never ‘appreciations’. Children and adults thanked each other for kindnesses experienced either to themselves or to others. The Leader had to monitor each contribution to ensure it was genuine and not fabricated. There were
no material rewards just a realization that giving kindnesses was a reward in itself. Watching children who had been thanked glow with pleasure was worth watching - adults too sometimes.

Concluding and very brief wisdom from the Leader followed by a short STILLNESS and the community meeting closed with adults and children leaving together to have some fruit juice and biscuits in the dining room (a mixture of comfort and celebration feeding). Adults were not permitted to talk together afterwards in the meeting room but needed to accompany and support the children a small number of whom might be vulnerable.

OTHER ADVANTAGES AND REQUIREMENTS

1. It was essential that all adults saw their role as one of supporting the process. By giving verbal and nonverbal encouragement to children in the meeting they could assist the process. Adults were asked not to be passive watchers but active participants. Their contribution though should not overshadow that of the children and should, wherever possible be positive, direct and constructive. They should also realize their significance in the period following the meeting in helping to deal with unfinished business. No adults should miss the meeting if at all possible. It was seen as a vital part of their function to attend and play a part.

2. Children and adults could anticipate a meeting which, in this case, they knew would happen at the same time once a week, at the same time of the day and last as near to one hour as possible and no longer. This meant that children saw that meetings were not called just when there were problems. Sometimes an emergency community meeting would be called when a situation which could not wait had arisen. Some communities saw it an advantage to have the community meeting every day of the week. I would not suggest this for Kitezh although some variants are possible with less high powered meetings happening more frequently.

3. Children definitely grew to be more expressive and articulate. They interacted better and in these respects were often performing considerably better than other children attending day schools elsewhere. Qualities of understanding, courtesy, kindness, consideration for others, appreciation of another child's difficulties or an adult's point of view grew in many children. Some younger children needed particular looking after by their parenting figure during the meeting because of their short concentration span and low tolerance threshold.

RECOMMENDATION

Kitezh might like to consider this model which offers some structure and therefore predictability to the community meeting. Other models have no structure and participants just sit for an hour and sees what happens. This is interesting but seems to work better with children already articulate and of high intelligence. It can also lead to physical violence.

The current situation in Kitezh where a number of adults are currently disconnected from the main task of the community suggest that, initially at least, an adaptation of this model would need to be experimented with. The adult group could comprise the properly functioning professionals together with a group of children who could pioneer the process. Attendance from then on could be by invitation until the group widens to embrace all adults and children over - say - the age of 11?

It should be understood that the community meeting is empowered to make decisions at some levels for the community. Others will need referring to the Kitezh Council. This decision making function is a real responsibility and obligation which should be taken seriously together with an understanding that occasionally mistakes will be made.

I suggest that child involvement in the life of the Kitezh may increase, that the principle of shared responsibility may develop especially with small groups of adults and children delegated by the community meeting to continue working on an important issue and that, as a culture carrying exercise for the community, it would be a strengthening process for everyone. Kitezh's attempt to move away from a strong hierarchical structure might find, in this process, a valuable ally and enabling device.
Ownership of the community would then more truly represent more of those who live in it and who exercise their responsibilities with increasing competence.

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