

Consultancy Observation – A Methodology to Promote Group Reflective Capacity

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Abstract

This abbreviated version of our paper outlines the development of an observational tool, 'consultancy observations', for use when practitioners in early years settings have concerns about particular children in their care. The methodology facilitates the development of a shared reflective capacity, allowing staff teams to think together about a child's whole experience in their setting. This process encourages staff teams to consider their feelings and actions towards the child in question, gaining a deeper understanding of what the experience is like for the child. Often members of staff gain insights into children's particular vulnerabilities and strengths. Through thinking and talking together, **reflecting**, staff behaviours change in subtle ways, thus changing the child's experience, for the better.

Background

The Pen Green Centre in Corby, Northamptonshire is a fully integrated provision for children and families, combining early education, health and social care, which opened in 1983. Historically we have drawn on psychoanalytic theory to support our work in groups with parents and children, and our understanding of relational development including 'holding' (Winnicott, 1965), 'containment' (Bion, 1962) and 'attachment' (Bowlby, 1969).

Drawing on these theories we began to introduce 'reflection' and 'pre-reflection' times at the beginnings and ends of group sessions where we were working with parents, infants and children up to three years of age. These times were used to reflect on the functioning of the group, and to think about how we might prepare ourselves for the group ahead.

Research Projects and Interventions

Over some 15 years different approaches were taken to 'skill up' staff members in relational and psychoanalytic theory including :

2000-2004: Emotional Well-being and Resilience Project (Laevers, 1997).

2005: A seven week training programme by the Anna Freud Centre, exploring Parent-Infant Mental Health using the Bick Tavistock method of observation (Bick, 1964)

2008: A consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist was introduced to support practitioners to think about the complexities of their work with vulnerable families and process their emotions which is still in place.

2008: A psychologist and expert in group relations and organisational consultancy was introduced to support the Centre Leadership Team to develop their ability to understand and make use of organisational dynamics in identifying new approaches to challenges faced by the organisation. This intervention still takes place every six weeks.

The Emotional Roots of Learning – the beginnings of Consultancy Observation

In 2012 The Emotional Roots of Learning – An Infant Observation Course was set up in conjunction with the Northern School of Psychotherapy, to take place at Pen Green. The aims of 'Emotional Roots' were to enable participants to:

- Extend and develop their awareness and understanding of young children's emotional development
- Develop their observational skills
- Use psychoanalytic concepts as a framework to understand children's interactions, behaviour and play.

The Young Child Observation

The Young Child Observation must be made in a setting that is not the participant's own, of a child they do not know. Participants are required to undertake the observation using the 'Tavistock, Bick' method of observation (Bick, 1964).

Fortnightly Seminars

During the fortnightly seminars the morning is given to reflecting on and discussing the psychoanalytic literature that participants have read prior to the seminar. Concepts from the papers are linked directly with participants' observations and experiences (Shaw & Tait, 2014). In the afternoon two participants have an

opportunity to share their child observation and one participant their work discussion. Similarly the seminar group focuses on the emotional communication within interactions with colleagues, children and parents when the work discussion is presented.

A Small Scale Research Project

A small scale research project was undertaken in the hope of identifying how Emotional Roots had impacted on participants personally, professionally and organizationally. Six of the twenty course participants were still employed within the organisation and indicated they were happy to take part in semi-structured interviews in order for us to understand their “*experiences in as rigorous and detailed a manner as possible*” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p782). Two of the semi-structured interview prompts were:

- Please give me three adjectives that describe your experience of Emotional Roots.

Once the adjectives were given the participants were asked the following:

- Please give me a specific example from your experience that illustrates your adjective.

This method seemed to take participants to a ‘feeling’ place. One participant commented, “*Oh, my goodness that gets me right to the nub of it*”. It evoked emotion in participants - the technique really did seem to ‘surprise the unconscious’ (George et al, 1985).

The three most common adjectives supplied were:

Challenging

“*The reading material...the academic nature of some of the papers...some of the content as well*”.

Interesting

"I found it was interesting as I found I was very focused...it helped me gain a deeper understanding of theory".

Thought Provoking

"Raising your awareness of own feelings and own mind...also asking those questions you might avoid".

Findings

The findings were overwhelmingly positive with all participants reporting the positive impact the course had on them both personally and professionally including:

"I had heightened my awareness of why people behave as they do, including myself – you can find yourself not getting so cross"

"It definitely made me consider other ways of analysing and taking into account how I'm reacting to things...it goes everywhere with you"

"I think I've been more reflective about the way my 'baggage' and 'being' at the moment can influence how I work with others and be aware of that"

"It's the permission to 'feel' – it's just so powerful...makes me much better at my job"

In relation to whether they felt the course had impacted on the organisation the responses were far less positive, with participants stating:

"I can't say it's embedded across the centre as I wouldn't know"

"Not enough I don't think...It's not wide enough yet, but there are people that are seeing it and value it...we've got to drive it forward"

Participants reported feeling as though they understood the complex theories when they were in the seminar group with other participants and the psychotherapist, but when they returned to practice they found it hard to articulate their learning and

share these ideas with colleagues. In a team where a senior member of staff as well as a practitioner had undertaken the training this was not the case. This seemed a critical point. In addition to finding out the impact the course had had on participants two additional themes emerged from the interview data; 'Reading Material' and 'Love'.

Reading Material

In relation to reading material these statements were made:

- *Some papers were really challenging and I would still say I haven't got my head around the concepts...didn't feel confident.*
- *Some of the theory I found quite...I wasn't sure about...I wasn't convinced.*

Participants seemed to struggle with both the 'intangible' theoretical content and the time commitment of reading and marking up papers ready for the seminar group.

Love

Comments made that either directly or indirectly indicated strong feelings, identified by some participants as love were:

- *I loved her from the first moment...I still love her.*
- *I was astonished at how attracted I felt to him...how much I cared about him.*
- *I fell in love with him the moment I saw him...he was just so beautiful I really loved him so much.*

Participants seemed to feel a real emotional connection to the child they were observing, almost from the beginning, without ever having met them before and without interacting with them during the observation period (Page, 2011). This was interesting and was not expected. Several of the participants spoke about how they believed the particular study child knew that they were being observed and

that the observer was *'there for them'*. One participant described how on her second observation she went into the setting and her study child was alongside another child. The other child looked up and waved at my colleague. The study child then hit him on the arm and said *'Hey, she's here for me'*. This was fascinating. The child understood and was able to articulate that she knew the person who had never spoken to her was *'there for her'*. This led us to consider how it feels for children in settings. Do they *'know'* at some level if someone there is an advocate for them? Do they *'know'* when they are not liked? What impact might that have on them? This realization was the beginning of our conceptualization of *'consultancy observations'* (Ringer, 2008).

Pilot – Consultancy Observation

Through discussions we decided that it would be appropriate to pilot this method of observation in the nursery setting when staff had concerns about children in their care (Elfer et al, 2003). We hoped it would be a way to consider children's behaviour, staff members' feelings towards particular children, and the reasons behind the behaviours and the feelings.

Case Study of Pilot Consultancy Observation on Joseph

Joseph was concerning his Family Worker (Whalley et al, 2007) and the rest of the team. His Family Worker had spoken about Joseph in both her individual supervision and team meetings. It felt appropriate to pilot the consultancy observation to consider Joseph.

The Family Worker reported that Joseph kept *'pushing, pushing, pushing other children'*. There was almost an element of desperation in the way the practitioner articulated his actions. The staff team cared deeply about getting it right for him, but at the same time they were finding his behaviour really challenging. It had become hard for some members of staff to *'like'* Joseph when he was pushing and hurting children in their key groups (Elfer, 2003). A senior leader who did not know Joseph was asked to undertake the observation which was then shared with other members of the team for discussion.

The Discussion

Together the staff team and senior leader talked, some of comments made during this discussion included:

- *He was seeking our attention*
- *We had missed him*
- *He was trying to get us to notice him*
- *I missed him...I really missed him*
- *All the children he's hurting are smaller than him*
- *He's getting negative feedback from us*
- *What can we do differently?*
- *How can we make sure we don't miss him?*

The team thought about whether Joseph was acting 'bigger' and 'stronger' than he was. Was he feeling vulnerable himself? Was his behavior a 'defence against anxiety'? (Klein, 1952). Together they thought about their responses to Joseph and how they could be mindful of him in the space and facilitate the adult connection he seemed to need.

What about Joseph?

Through the process of undertaking and discussing the observation the team began to see Joseph's vulnerability and his need for them. This allowed them to begin to think about him in a different way. The team talked about it being easier to 'be with' him. He was not pushing nearly as much.

Staff Reflections

A short time after the observation had been carried out and discussed, the team reflected that actually they were thinking about Joseph differently and therefore possibly behaving towards him differently. The senior leader fed back that she had noticed staff touching Joseph gently as they passed him by. This was something that had not happened during the observation. The changes in their behaviour seemed to be out of their conscious awareness (Fonagy et al, 2005). The staff team appeared to have become more emotionally available to him, which for Joseph would have been a containing experience (Bion, 1962).

Making Sense

This methodology seemed to give staff the permission to both feel and express the negative emotion they were feeling when Joseph was pushing children they were responsible for. Earlier in this paper we considered practitioners 'loving' children they did not even know (Page, 2011). This felt like the other end of the spectrum where, rather than it being frowned upon, staff were actually encouraged to voice their more negative feelings about a child – they could honestly think about their feelings about Joseph and therefore begin the process of understanding his world and being able to respond to him more effectively.

An Ethical Consideration – What to Share?

Historically at Pen Green we have always shared all our observations with parents. In the psychoanalytic tradition, when undertaking infant observation training, the raw data of the observation is not shared with the parents of the child being observed although, of course, consent to observe the child is gained from the parents. However, Joseph's Family Worker spoke with Joseph's parents about her concerns for him. She shared that she would be considering Joseph in both her supervision and team meetings, and identified this as an opportunity to think together about how to support Joseph most appropriately. In moving forward it was decided that all parents would be informed that their child may be observed and considered in team situations in order to ensure staff teams were responding to their particular child in the most appropriate manner. The focus being the staff team's understanding of a child's experience and *their own* responses.

Locating Consultancy Observations within a Framework of Support

As an organisation it was important to locate consultancy observations within the existing and developing framework of support for staff members. We held a team training day during which all staff members were asked to consider the different forums they could access to ensure they felt well supported in undertaking the complex work they were engaged in. The different forums were identified and discussed in groups:

Supervision

'Reflective supervision' (Morrell, 2003; Finlay, 2009) occurs for each individual member of staff on a monthly basis and is an opportunity for personal and professional development discussions, including sharing concerns about children and families staff members are engaged with.

Co-ordination Meeting

A Coordination Meeting occurs twice each month. The purpose of the co-ordination meeting is to share information, across the centre, about families receiving intensive support

Safer Practice Meetings

An opportunity for workers to call a meeting to discuss situations they are concerned about.

Work Based Discussion Group

A termly work based discussion group facilitated by a Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist.

Consultancy Observation

The pilot consultancy observation was shared on this day with staff members from the whole organisation.

Implications for the Organisation

It is critical to continue to embed 'consultancy observations' throughout the organization, for the benefit of the children attending the setting. This technique enables staff to reflect together on a child's whole experience and promotes the idea of reflection, and *'the potential for each group member to develop his or her own internal reflective space'* (Ringer, 2002, p231) in addition to the development of a group reflective capacity.

We will begin to offer 'consultancy observations' and opportunities for organizational reflection both within our own organisation and elsewhere. In

addition to this it will be important to continue to offer an Emotional Roots course, skilling up practitioners in their observational skills and understanding of psychoanalytic theory.

Finally, we will implement an 'Advanced Emotional Roots Course', for previous participants, 'to keep the learning alive'.

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