TCES
Research Report

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An evaluation of the interventions utilised by the TCES Group Socio-Educational and Therapeutic Milieu model of working with Children and Young People with co-morbid Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs and/or Autistic Spectrum Conditions.

Introduction

This research report examines and evaluates the interventions utilised by the TCES Group Socio-Educational and Therapeutic Milieu model of working with Children and Young People with co-morbid Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs and/or Autistic Spectrum Conditions.

TCES seeks to educate, inspire and support students by removing barriers to learning, fostering a lasting enjoyment of education, positive behaviour and maximising social and academic potential. An emphasis on a safe, nurturing environment helps all students to flourish.

This in-depth, qualitative research study comprised a thematic analysis of two focus groups and individual interviews carried out with nine young people who graduated from TCES within five years. The report discusses emergent themes and examines the delivery of the curriculum and its implications for the lives of these young people after graduation. As a therapeutic, educational community, an emphasis on relationship underpins learning and this report presents our findings thematically, demonstrating the efficacy of this approach.

Prior to entering TCES, pupils have typically experienced between two and five permanent exclusions from schools and it is recognised that this group of young people are more likely to be unemployed, develop severe mental health problems and go to prison later in life (Gill et al 2017). Yet, as the interviewers, we found ourselves in the presence of young people who were cooperative respectful, mature, and insightful, all pursuing meaningful interests and careers. Our research investigation centred around how this transformation happened.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from Goldsmiths, University of London. To protect confidentiality, all names in the report have been changed.

1. Research design;

i) Aims of the research

This qualitative research study aimed to examine and evaluate the interventions implemented by TCES staff, from the perspective of the students. TCES have a no permanent exclusions policy, taking on students who have experienced multiple exclusions from other institutions. The social, education and careers prospects would typically be poor due to their complex learning and behavioural needs and often adverse childhood experiences. Yet, for the past two decades TCES have demonstrated that 90% of their students' progress on to education, employment and training. The research project investigated how TCES was able to effect such a dramatic transformation.

ii) Method

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, J et al, 2012)[1] was a good methodological fit. A focus on a relatively small number of cases elicited in-depth research data, with enough participants to identify similarities and differences.

Participants included three black and six white students, of whom there were eight young men and one young woman. Participants had a range of complex needs including those on the autistic spectrum (AS) with socioemotional differences[2] those diagnosed with Social Emotional Mental Health needs (SEMH) and a number had co-morbidities, including Anxiety disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). They came from a variety of family circumstances and backgrounds. They were selected to represent a range of those having recently graduated, to those who had graduated five years ago.

All participants attended a focus group and then each attended two semi-structured interviews, conducted by two researchers from Goldsmiths, University of London*[3]. The approach in the focus groups and the interviews was to invite conversation without leading participants in any particular direction. The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. In a subsequent thematic analysis of the transcripts, the researchers concentrated on key emergent themes across all interviews.

This report will identify and evaluate the themes that arose.

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[1] IPA is an approach to psychological qualitative research with an idiographic focus, which means that it aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon.

[2] Holt (2007) used the term 'socioemotional differences' to represent those who are disabled by normative expectations of behaviour in everyday school spaces particularly those defined as having emotional and behavioural difficulties.

[3] David Woodger is an established academic in Community Studies at Goldsmiths. He has developed, researched and published on the value of Group work in education. This focus has been on the development of Group Work as an educational, therapeutic, inclusive and empowering process. He also researches and works on race equality and institutional racism. Caroline Frizell has worked with young people with complex needs since the 1980s as a teacher, community dance artist and body-based psychotherapist. Caroline is also a lecturer and researcher on the MA in Dance Movement Psychotherapy professional practice programme. Central to Caroline's ongoing research is inclusive practice, particularly in relation to disability and she is currently engaged in a PhD by publication.

2 Themes:

The themes centred around relationship and included identity, attachment and loss, transformation and empowerment and group process. These themes were pivotal in supporting the participants to turn their lives around to become thriving individuals.

2.1 Identity:

i) pride and purpose

Identity is an individual's frame of reference for decision making and for making sense of lived experience in order to '*maintain a meaningful sense of self-sameness and self-continuity despite the random events and inevitable changes they encounter during their lives*' (Berzonsky et al: 2013: 893). This frame of reference underpins life decisions, the formation of goals and personal beliefs and values.

Adolescence is an important time during identity formation, as young people begin to identify, evaluate and select values and roles that locate them in the adult world. (Crawford et al 2004, Hamman & Hendricks 2005, Erikson 1968).

Participants introduced themselves, identifying strongly with a religion and or a profession, for example:

'I'm a Muslim'
I'm a Christian',
'I'm a Poet',
'I'm a 'Businessman'
'I'm a 'Mechanic'
'I'm a Musician'

This expression of identity was accompanied by a commitment to pursue further training. For example, Ricky told us how he was working towards his long-term goal of becoming a mechanic and had found that TCES supported him to develop his skills. He said:

'They have me encourage myself and once I know what I'm doing, you can just leave me for hours and I'll be able to do it.'

Jon's response to the question 'So, what is your next step in life?' was:

'*Well, I guess to become a vehicle technician and then eventually … an engineer. But apart from that…. probably to travel the world.'*

Ricky's and Jon's attitudes are remarkable given the low self-esteem and reckless behaviour that characterised their lives before TCES.

ii) Exclusion and shame

Participants described how, prior to attending TCES, educational relationships had broken down and they had internalised a self-concept as 'bad'. For example, they said:

'Getting kicked out was my own fault.'

'It'd make my parents look bad and my family look bad when it wasn't the case at all. It was me as an individual.'

'Before I went to the school I was a little troublemaker. I was just rude, naughty, didn't pay attention'.

Along with this poor self-concept and shame prior to joining TCES, participants described vividly their destructive behaviour with comments such as:

'I was really, really, really naughty, I was going out partying, doing things I shouldn't be doing, in fights all the time and I never went to school.'

'I was kicking off a lot of the time and I kept getting myself arrested.'

iii) Isolation and rejection

This difficult behaviour was a deeper communication of distress, as these young people found themselves increasingly isolated. Jake articulated how:

'When I'm angry, I don't really have feelings; I don't care about no one when I'm angry, I'm just in my own little world. I don't really think about no one else but myself when I'm angry.'

Jake is aware that his angry feelings obscure his empathy for others, which makes it hard for him to reach out to, or to be reached by others.

Mathew similarly described how he found himself isolated. He said:

'Before TCES I had like this kind of buddy program. I was such a kind of introvert….a guy was paid to just like play tennis with me or like he would kind of go in my room, and I'll just tell him to go away, slam the door on his face. '

Participants struggled to understand the behaviour that led to their exclusion. Ben described his experience as;

'random outbursts…. it was like I could not ..control myself .. and I did not really know what I was doing'.

even to the point of scaring themselves;

'I had a fight in a school which kicked me out and the girls had to go to the hospital … since then ..I haven't had a fight because it scared me'.

Students have typically experienced between two and five exclusions prior to entering TCES. These experiences caused them to feel alienated from an educational system that is unable to tolerate, manage or accommodate this distressing behaviour without excluding. Andrea remembered how after multiple exclusions she:

'…..had nothing.. nowhere to go in terms of education.'.

Other participants described how they had attempted to develop trust with teachers, but experienced these attempts as being ignored, leading to feelings of resignation, distrust and '*acting out*' as Ben described :

'They didn't want to try and understand me for who I was, I tried trusting people and this fell apart and so I would make a scene to get out of school - I hated school as no-one had any time for me'.

The reckless behaviour was an effective defence against experiencing the painful feelings of deprivation and rejection and the impact of scapegoating, discrimination and bullying.

Participants were acutely aware of how their complex needs were a low priority to over-stretched, under-resourced professionals. Reshad explains how:

'they did not have things in place to help children like me. There was like one or maybe two people in the whole school that was dealing with these issues'.

Ricky noted that, prior to TCES, the school did not follow his care plan and he was drawn to others who were disaffected, joining in with causing trouble, leading to his exclusion. Similarly, Andrea remembers how her difficulties were medicalised and her behaviour spiralled out of control. She says:

'I just didn't care…that I was getting…diagnosed with ADHD. I was always under all different medication trials and .. some medications made me worse. Then it just got to the point where I was …like really out of control'.

Participants were articulate about the chaotic personal and educational histories, resentful of being judged by their past, but confident about the significant shifts that they had made at TCES. Reshad said:

'… some people are really judgemental. Like a lot of people chuck a lot of stuff in my face, like you've done that, you've done this. I'm like yeah, I know. You don't need to remind me, I know I've done that. There's nothing I can do, it's done.'

In recognising the challenge of being defined and judged by others, Andrea reflected:

'..,So that's when I get really annoyed when people treat me or act, talk to me how I was back then and it's like, I'm not that person no more, people can change. Just because I was like that doesn't mean I'm going to be like that forever.'

Before joining TCES, these young people presented with severe identity crises. Unable to locate themselves within the master narrative of an education system, they adopted alternative narratives that counter social norms and expectations as a way of 'implementing their own sense of agency' (Hihara et al 2018: 330) and regaining control.

2.2 Attachment and Loss:

i) Avoidance to connection:

We, the researchers, wondered *how* the curriculum enabled this transformation and an overarching theme was the relational approach to teaching and learning. The young people described a safe facilitating environment (Winnicott 1968 & 1971) in which there is the potential to encourage and establish healthy attachments, in order that learning can take place within 'affectional bonds' (Bowlby 1999: 126).

There is a body of research that links the significance of attachment behaviour to a young person's capacity for self-regulation and this is particularly important for those with intellectual disabilities (De Schipper & Schuengel, 2010). An experience of being valued by a significant other supports an individual to establish purpose and meaning (Dewitte et al 2019: 2251).

Students enter TCES with trepidation and mistrust. They have little capacity to manage difficult feelings, either acting with a reckless abandon, or withdrawing. Their arrival at TCES is not always smooth, testing the containment of the environment. Jamie describes how:

'Even when I first got there I was naughty all the time. I didn't really care about anyone but myself, to be honest. It took me a while to .. focus and start listening, but eventually I did. But….I kept getting myself in trouble.'

Jon described how:

'On my first day … someone said something to me and I lashed out and smashed my classroom up and done a lot of damage.'

He remembers how he easily became:

'*Angry, really really angry. I use to just slip just like that and I just couldn't stop.'*

Our interviews suggested that staff at TCES are able to meet students where they are and respond to what they need, with a long-term goal of building safety. For example, Matthew said:

'I suffer from anxiety, sleep problems and for the first month they allowed me any time during the first half of the day just to go up there, have a rest for a couple of hours and they'd always say that as long as you're here, you're making improvements, you're showing your determination to arrive and the willingness to learn. So over time, I naturally progressed .. not a lot of people would support you in that way, it's a very unorthodox approach …, quite unique'.

It was clear that the young people experienced TCES' commitment to them, offering the opportunity for attachment, often with one particular member of staff. These relationships were pivotal in providing a sense of being valued and welcomed. TCES staff demonstrated an ability to manage, contain and respond to difficult and disruptive behaviour, rather than to retaliate and / or to resort to permanent exclusions.

This inclusive approach has a deep and lasting influence. Participants noted how it contributed to their stability and security. Ben recognised his repetitive, provocative behaviour that perhaps has a less conscious motive to test the safety of the environment, to find that "they don't give up'. He says:

'Yeah, they don't give up….You could tell them a thousand times to basically go away, and they will still stand there. It doesn't matter what you say or do. I don't know how they put up with it..I mean, to be able to still stand there and be like, "No, I'm not giving up on you pupils." You've got to genuinely care … to take that sort of thing every single day of the week.. You've got to be passionate and you need to care to be able to do that 100%.'

The following comment illustrates how the continuity, persistence and predictability of the environment eventually becomes internalised;

'There's always expectations that has to be met in the school regardless .. It's like as much as you want to push them away, it doesn't really work because you're there six hours a day every single day during the week. So, eventually, it will get drilled into your head '.

The participants described how they learned to self-regulate and to access learning opportunities. Nathan remembered:

'Yeah, something of the way he was. He was friendly, he was nice and he's that kind of person that would never give up on you or push you to do a lot. And he was there sort of just pushing you gently to do a little bit more, a little bit more'.

ii) Fostering empathy

This sense of being valued and thought about, combined with a gentle and sensitive approach that models deep listening, contributes to an effective learning environment. Participants recognised that key to being able to learn was having the right attention. For example, Jerome said:

'With my learning difficulties. They could sit me down and just help me, kind of explain to me a bit more, which helped me understand it more, which also help me complete the work.'

The capacity to form a healthy attachment encourages empathy. Staff model an empathic stance; as Ben illustrated:

'When you talk to him, he's very good at listening to your information. And he's very good at talking to you and giving you information and giving you advice. And he was just a really kind man I got along with. .….yeah…mostly his kindness... '

Participants recognised the importance of empathy through reciprocal relationships and receiving an empathic attitude from staff, allowed them to offer empathy to others. For example, in talking about supporting other students, one participant said:

'I would try and Include them …to help them to join in…. For instance.. if we're in a group and the other kid didn't want to be, I will try and help them out by saying "It's okay, you can come in. Everyone's welcome." Try and include them so they'll feel welcome and loved…everyone deserves to feel loved.'

This feeling of being 'loved'; that is, valued and held in mind provided a platform for learning. Within a safe relationship, students are able to build resilience that includes tolerating failure, as part of the process of learning. Reshad put this process articulately, saying:

'There were times when …I would feel like I can't do this, I should just give up. I've seen that these teachers have helped me and tried to encourage me to do it and tried to help me to do it. And there were times where I've kind of given up on the school and I felt like these guys would never change or I feel like it will always remain the same. And they were quite tough times but I feel like now, I feel like I've never given up on the school and things have changed now.'

The participants responded to a relational, person centred approach from the staff at the TCES schools allowing for the opportunity to form meaningful relationships. This was key in enabling the development of empathy and reciprocity.

2.3 Transformation and Empowerment: from disaffection to engagement

The explicit and implicit teaching and mentoring approaches established by TCES empower the students, as they are also supported to understand their particular learning needs. This underpins the process of transformation, as students begin to lessen their defences and become self-directed.

The development of a strong attachment supports an individual to manage and tolerate the ebb and flow of successes, failures, struggles and achievements. The gratitude and depth of feeling with regard to these learning relationships at TCES was evident in all the interviews, with comments such as:

'She taught me so much and I couldn't thank her enough. She just taught me how to love myself… how to love education….'

'I never witnessed something like it before…. I found this to be the most ..caring, considerate, compassionate..system'.

''I appreciate everyone taking the time to help me understand..'

'*I mean they're brilliant… I don't know who I would be if I wasn't at that school….they played a massive part…. they helped me find myself. I think it was them just genuinely understanding me and me letting them help me*'

Participants expressed an empowered self that could connect with others meaningfully. They recognised that relationship underpinned the process through which they could imagine themselves differently, with expectations that went beyond their perceptions of what was possible.

Andrea Illustrates how she was listened to when she found that the initial mentor relationship wasn't working. She said:

'*'Then one day I had a massive row with her … I was calling her names and stuff, was being really horrible to her. A lady pulled me to the side and had a chat with me and that.. really woke me up… just made me realise how I was talking to people. Like people don't deserve the stuff I was saying to them. Then I said from that day…I said I don't…I don't want her as my teacher, and then that got put in place*'.

Despite the best efforts of some staff, a personality clash might render the relationship unviable and there is the flexibility within TCES to recognise this. This student found that her best interests were at the heart of professional decisions.

Within that relationship, participants identified that they had also benefitted from specialist knowledge and practical strategies. For example, Jerome said:

'*Understanding that I have autism and that there are times where I have difficulties … they were there and they were supportive. I'm more in control now than I was before.*'

The teaching of practical strategies, particularly in relation to self-regulation, were also apparent in comments such as:

'*She taught me how to calm down (and) so many incredible things that I still do now. Like now, I'll think about what I say or do before I do it and think, is this the right thing to do?*'

'*an understanding that not everything needs a reaction*'

Jerome demonstrated the capacity to manage his anxiety in the moment when he responded to an interview question with:

'*Can I come back to the question? I can't really think right now.*'

He went on to describe how he was supported to regulate difficult feelings, saying:

'*So, any time I felt upset or angry, I would go to my teacher and he …would talk to me one to one and find out what was the problem, how did it happen, what was the cause, and how can we solve it. And another strategy I learned was to count to 10 in my head, so I take myself out of the situation, go for walks, go for a bit of fresh air and then come back once I feel I'm ready to come back.*'

Participants considered that staff responded to their specific needs, discerning emotions and behaviour, helping them to develop an emotional literacy, autonomy, and responsibility. This empowered them to understand themselves more fully and to take charge of their own learning. These pivotal relationships enabled the participants to withstand failure, developing their resilience. The interviews revealed the importance of a secure attachment relationship to foster a sense of belonging as a valued member of a community.

In addition to the emphasis on relationship, TCES have developed a curriculum that is accessible, relevant and responsive through diversification, differentiation within a person-centred approach.

2.4 Differentiation and Diversification in the Curriculum: school centred to student centred approach

Participants stated how, prior to entering TCES, educational environments had been unsupportive, unpredictable and unresponsive to their needs. They recalled how, as pupils, they had little capacity for self-reflection; there was no hope and no point in thinking that the future might have any meaning. As Ben describes:

'I used to create a scene….So, some days I'll…be so frustrated because I've had to go into school. When I'm in school, everybody .. would frustrate me even more.. I think it was just the fact of I didn't want to go to school'.

Participants described a person-centred curriculum at TCES that sought to identify the unique gifts of each student and encouraged individualised learning. This approach made learning relevant and accessible to students who might have become resistant through a history of alienation and exclusion. TCES support students to build skills over time and to conceptualise ideas about future careers. Ryan described how:

'They just helped me one-to-one to do things and sit in class, which would help me with my maths and with other sort of stuff. Yeah. Even if the class was ahead, I would still be behind having help, which I didn't mind because it was helping me out.'

TCES is open to the different learning styles of individuals with co-morbid Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs and/or Autistic Spectrum Conditions. The focus, application and commitment demonstrated by these young people has been fostered at TCES within a curriculum that has the flexibility for differentiation and diversification, rather than a rigid agenda. This mirrors the contingent response that underpins a healthy attachment relationship (Gerhardt 2014), that is, responding to the presenting need, rather than to an external agenda. Participants emphasised the importance of having been given time to take in information, to digest it and then, in the words of one participant, to '*crack on and focus'*.

The encouragement from the staff was evidently a motivating factor. Nathan said:

"My teacher would always tell me "You should do more." And ..the times where I struggle with a test or something and I'll just leave question he'd be like, "Try and

see if you can get through it….Read the question properly and see if you can solve it. If you can't, I'll come and help you." So, he motivated me to do more and that's how I managed to get a lot of the qualifications….. he tried and help me solve ..things that I ..have difficulty solving. So, I guess my teacher was kind of like my inspiration.'

The achievement of sitting and focusing on learning in the classroom was a revelation to many participants, for example:

'I would just come in and naturally just sit down and do work, and that was a massive… achievement for me…people used to say to me, ..you're never going to get through education, you're going to be a failure. Then, I did…I got through it.'

Other participants expressed how they would surprise themselves with their achievements: Matthew said:

'Sometimes you do it without realising and then you realise after, I can't believe I've just done that.'

The participants shared how they were supported to build skills over time and to conceptualise ideas about future careers. It was clear that these participants had managed to step up to the demands of studying and pursuing meaningful interests and career opportunities.

Within this diversified curriculum, participants spoke of a strong emphasis on group process that supports the intra and inter-personal development of students within a community setting.

2.5: Group Process: Isolation to belonging

Group process provides significant value for individuals to develop interpersonal functioning. It can be useful when helping to confront concerns such as isolation or meaning in one's life. It provides opportunities for self-understanding, altruism, catharsis and individual learning (Yalom 1985).

Woodger and Anastacio (2013) identify how group process gives opportunities 'to develop conceptual understanding of earlier life and experiences and their meanings in terms of personal growth…developing stronger sense of ourselves, our place in the world and impact we have on it… supporting participants to take responsibility for their own learning'. (ibid: 58-59)

All participants mentioned the centrality of group process and its power and significance. Ben reflected with hindsight:

'I mean, it was more ..like everyone just sort of sitting in a circle and basically saying how the week's been or the day's been, what have you found difficult or what do feel like you've achieved during the day, that sort of thing. I mean, don't get me wrong, at the time it was a bit rubbish because I don't really want to sit there and speak about that, but to be fair now looking back at it, it was a good idea ….just to figure out how someone's been during the day.'

Participants valued the interactive approach to teaching and group discussions. This, coupled with being motivated with space and time for themselves as rewards for their efforts, meant classes were enjoyable. This is illustrated in the following participant statements:

'.., our class wasn't for necessarily learning or anything, it was more like chitchat sort of thing. Like, we would get work done here and there but it wasn't just, you go in there, sit down and do your work…. It was more just like a little group and you would talk and have conversations and stuff like that.'

'I liked it because I thought, yeah, it's like you go in there you can have a little conversation, you can go on the laptops to watch YouTube..it was good. … I feel like when you do it that way, people are more inclined to do what they're supposed to do because they get rewarded for it. ….People are then more inclined to do that because they feel like they're getting a reward at the end of it.'

The creation of the community and developing friendships across the school is significantly enabled through the group process. Reshad identified how:

'They always made sure that we would interact with other children there, 100%. I mean we were forced, so the whole school was based around just being a massive group and working as a team….So, you would always be forced to basically speak to the other pupils….., so that way you would always make friendships in whatever that way, so that's I suppose their way of basically getting you to'.

All members of a community needs to have their voice heard in order to feel a sense of belonging, It is clear from the comments of the research participants that this is a priority for TCES. Jerome stated:

'..I feel like I did have my voice heard… sometimes I felt like .. people weren't listening to me. There were times .. I felt that no one was listening. But now I feel like my voice is getting heard and I feel like things are changing in the school. …Yeah, in the way they run things, in the way how things are dealt with. Like for instance… before, things were not really dealt with properly, like if someone got upset or angry… But now I feel like it's changed positively. It changed in a positive way.'

It was evident that these students had internalised a sense of group process and this was demonstrated by their capacity to engage in our immediate focus group with most of them encountering each other for the first time, yet able to be open and willing to share and reflect on their personal experiences and lives together.

3 Discussion

It was clear as we conducted the interviews, that these young people had made significant shifts in terms of their capacity to self-regulate, their perceptions of their own self-worth, their inter-personal skills and in their capacity to engage in education. These shifts are remarkable, particularly given their educational and personal profiles and that TCES serves as a last resort.

The participants were diagnosed with a range of complex needs including those on the Autistic Spectrum (AS) and those diagnosed with Social Emotional Mental Health needs (SEMH) with co-morbidities as well as having a record of multiple exclusions before joining TCES. Each student had challenged the school system to the extent that neither mainstream nor special schools were able to manage their needs. These are, therefore, some of the most difficult young people to engage in education and their multiple exclusions reinforced the notion of them being written-off in terms of education.

A pattern of broken relationships at school has been internalised, impacting on any new relationship, complicating their entry into TCES. The emotional damage of exclusion compounds existing complexities of disabilities and life experience, as well as disadvantaging these young people in terms of missed classroom time (Gill et al 2017). A powerful capacity to sabotage relationships might have given the young person a sense of control, in environments in which they had no control, either internally or externally, as well as being a cry for help. This pattern is then repeatedly enacted, often at a less conscious level, recreating a cyclic pattern of relationship breakdown. There is a logic to this defensive position, when their historic experience has borne out a specific narrative.

TCES has a 'no permanent exclusion policy', offering commitment, security and reassurance premised on a belief that these young people have unique potential. However, students are bound to challenge these boundaries, testing the resilience of the organisation. We see from the participants' reflections, that it took time for students to settle at TCES and to trust that they were in a safe environment that would find a way to support their needs. Winnicott (2011) suggests that deviant behaviour is a 'moment of hope' (Winnicott 2011:106) through which young people less consciously are communicating their sense of deprivation and asking for help. TCES are able to meet these 'moments of hope' with tolerance and understanding, offering the young person a reparative experience.

The research participants all stated that they discovered, for the first time, that professionals were investing in them, as learners irrespective of how they reacted. The impact of this commitment on the lives of these young people was transformative. The function of this primary relationship provided a secure base for students to develop an identity. Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development tracks stages of personality development and an import aspect of this is the development of a sense of well-being through the consolidation of identity in adolescence. Successful resolution of identity crisis provides young people 'with a clear sense of themselves'' (Crawford et al 2004: 374). This process supports the young person to locate themselves more clearly socially and educationally. 'Identity consolidation thus emerges as the cornerstone of the capacity to do well and forms the basis of self-acceptance and self-esteem.' (ibid). All participants had made profound transformations in terms of their sense of identity.

In discussions about achievements, such as obtaining GSCEs and other vocational qualifications, they focused on their pride for the inner transformations, developing a strong sense of agency in relation to their own futures. All except one participant is either in employment or at college and two are employed with TCES as learning

mentors. Their experiences in these work and college environments provides evidence of the quality of education they received at TCES. TCES certainly provided the opportunity for each participant to discover and pursue individual interests and gifts from poetry to mechanics.

The research project validates TCES internal year on year NEET statistics. In the past two decades 90% of their students' progress on to education, employment and training, having entered the organisation as young people who typically would not do so.

The participants presented as thoughtful, self-reflective individuals with good inter-personal skills, each of whom expressed an interest in meaningful activities, including a commitment to a specific career path. An emphasis on attachment, along with a diversified and differentiated curriculum, with group process at its core, allowed these young people to feel understood, to feel welcomed and to learn the social and academic skills to engage with all aspects of life more productively. The process of attachment encourages a deep relational, emotional connectivity that provides a secure base, enabling an individual to tolerate and manage life's successes, failures, gains and losses (Bowlby 1999). Simply put by one participant '*everyone deserves to feel loved'*. A person who feels loved (ie. experiences a secure attachment) is better able to manage and navigate the vicissitudes of life.

In emphasising staff as attachment figures, the young people were given an opportunity to self-regulate within a safe facilitating educational environment. Underlying the comments from the participants was an appreciation of the way staff at TCES invest in students and make them feel valued. It is widely acknowledged that developing meaningful relationships is a key process in effective interventions with young people (eg: Cahill et al 2011, Edwards 2018).

Group process is an important component of the curriculum and it was clear that participants had internalised the process. In the words of one participant '*it (group process) gives everyone a voice'*. The flexibility of the guiding boundaries operated in the best interests of the pupils, rather than as inflexible power positioning (for example, the implementation of one strike and you're out and zero tolerance policies).

The emergent themes locate the delivery of the curriculum and the students' learning experiences as a departure from standard practice within an educational landscape in the UK. Participants identified the importance of adult-student relationships as vital in their capacity to access the learning opportunities, and the prevalence of this real relationship elevates TCES as a genuinely therapeutic learning environment, providing the reparative experience that these young people deserve in order to thrive.

It is this capacity to feel the emotional investment of staff at TCES that increases self-esteem and provides a secure base for learning. This relationship-based practice links to TCES organisational value of 'Very High Expectations' and 'Hard Work' for both students and staff. Staff begin from a position of believing in the potential of these young people. The attitude of 'never giving up' cascades into the student experience.

This emphasis on attachment and diversified curriculum provides a safe and inclusive environment that welcome pupils from a wide range of backgrounds. Staff and management provide role models and sources of inspiration for the pupils, encouraging pupils to settle more easily.

Conclusion

The outcomes of this research project demonstrate that TCES is effective in transforming the lives of its pupils educationally, emotionally and socially.

On entering TCES, young people have typically experienced multiple exclusions and gaps in their education, in addition to living with complex learning needs which had caused them to feel isolated, alienated and rejected. However, all the participants in the study were successful, optimistic and resilient. We can therefore conclude that TCES provides an authentic model of therapeutic education, with an emphasis on staff/pupil relationships that fosters constructive identity formation. Prior to TCES, these young people had been written off by the education system, yet now presented an identity imbued with respect for self and other and impressive self-awareness, Each participant demonstrated a focus on pursuing meaningful interests and careers.

The centrality of the Group Process model contributes to an exceptional person-centred and relational based curriculum. This is underpinned by values of 'very high expectations' and 'never giving up'. This approach is reinforced by a 'no permanent exclusion' policy, with none of the 3000 pupils with complex needs ever being permanently excluded to date. This inclusive philosophy creates a facilitating environment in which both staff and pupils collaborate democratically to identify ways forward. The participants in this study described vividly how healthy attachments and relationships with TCES staff were the key to unlocking their potential, providing a 'secure base' that enabled them to learn. TCES Group delivers an exceptional person-centred and relational-based curriculum which has the flexibility, differentiation and diversification to optimise and respond sensitively to the unique qualities of each pupil.

The themes that arose all indicated that TCES had supported these young people to make remarkable transformational shifts in terms of their sense of self and their agency as learners, as citizens and as potential leaders. Central to all these themes is the theme of relational connection. The outcome of the central research question concludes that the participants are living proof that TCES Group's extremely successful interventions have had a transformational impact on these Young People in their life to date.

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