

## **Camphill's holistic approach to education, therapy and care**

One has to acknowledge at the outset that the term Curative Education probably sounds strange to most ears, suggesting perhaps that one hopes to cure learning disability through educational means. Hopefully, however, after this brief introduction to the subject, the main aims and methods of Curative Education will be clear, and perhaps too, some of the differences but also similarities between Curative Education and Special Education. Because clearly there are common threads, and in certain areas these two disciplines are converging as both develop and change.

Obviously with any educational approach one's starting point has to be the child, and in this case, it is an holistic view, assessment and diagnosis of the developing child that we are striving for, a view that acknowledges the practical reality of body, soul and spirit as contributing and interacting elements of the developing child. What does this really mean?

Well, quite specifically, physical development is seen to be affected by and in turn affects the emotional well-being and spiritual integrity of the child. For example, it is now well documented that not only can emotional deprivation lead to stunting of the child's physical growth, but even the mother's emotional and psychological wellbeing during pregnancy can have lasting physical effects on the child she is carrying, particularly in relation to the onset of hypertension and other circulatory disorders in later life.

From a different angle, the practical nature of this extended viewpoint is highlighted in the significance we attach to the healthy and balanced development of these three fundamental attributes namely, the metabolically based will forces of the child that are primarily expressed through movement and physical activity; secondly, the emotional or soul life of the child, classically and linguistically seen as being focussed on the heart, as in warm hearted or cold hearted, having a heavy heart, or a broken heart etc. There is a wisdom in language that we perhaps nowadays too readily dismiss—yet probably many have felt their hearts gripped as in a vice when under the impact of some particularly strong emotion. And thirdly, we must take note of the child's intellectual and sensory capacities which, though rooted in the central nervous system and sense organs are, along with the child's own sense of self, of a more intangible or spiritual nature. In every developing child these three aspects of their being should be addressed and supported. In a child with special needs the disturbance in one or more of these areas, and hence lack of balance between them, is likely to be profound, requiring a sustained and wide ranging response if optimal development is to be achieved. Camphill attempts this through the integrated holistic approach of Curative Education.

What then are the main aspects of this approach? If we turn first to education, which takes place primarily in the classroom, but on different levels occurs throughout the day; here the importance of nurturing intellectual capacities and imparting knowledge is taken for granted. Reading, writing and arithmetic, along with a wide range of subjects such as history, geography, biology, physics and chemistry are all taught. However, the manner in which this is done is coloured by an approach that has a strongly artistic element, which also engages the aesthetic feeling life of the child. This effort to expose the children to beauty along with a carefully nurtured life of religious observance that includes age-appropriate non-denominational Sunday Services, as well as the celebration of Christian and other festivals throughout the year, pays due respect to, and regard for, the developing morality of the pupils. Finally, gym and sports, and particularly a variety of crafts that again have a strongly artistic bias, are pursued as a means to train motor skills, promote motivation and will power and, in the school-leavers, a sense of work ethic. In all these class based activities an awareness of 'class spirit' is fostered whereby pupils of similar age but with differing abilities and disabilities learn the value of mutual interdependence. Thus a gregarious child with Downs Syndrome can do wonders for a withdrawn pupil with autistic features and likewise an emotionally deprived youngster with very poor self esteem benefits greatly from being able to assist a more handicapped peer who is nonthreatening and appreciative of such support.

The care aspect of curative education is of course based in the residential life of the schools, where an environment is fostered that enhances healthy physical and emotional development. Here a secure home life is based on an extended family model that aims to complement and support the natural family home. Establishing and maintaining healthy rhythms is seen as fundamental: good patterns of sleep, meals, recreation and work are vital, with careful attention being paid to the quality of the environment, the house, the diet, the toys etc. Many disturbed and distressed children respond to this environment within a very short time, though a small minority can present a major ongoing challenge with severely disrupted sleep patterns and aggressive or self injurious behaviour.

Just as the school life primarily addresses the child's cognitive faculties but includes the emotional and motivational needs of the child's development in its remit, so too does the house life focus, particularly promoting

good habits and motivation, especially around the acquisition of selfhelp skills and the care of belongings, the house and its environment, whilst at the same time aiming to bring in pleasure and fun through recreational activities, and, as mentioned earlier, continue the process of learning.

Turning now to the specifically therapeutic aspect of Curative Education, there are the obvious medical requirements that a number of our pupils need such as anti-epileptic medication for those with epilepsy. In addition, we are fortunately able to provide physiotherapy and speech therapy in spite of the familiar limitations of National Health Service resources we all have to work with. However, most of the speech therapy and all the other therapies available at Camphill have been developed and are provided out-with the context of the National Health Service, something that clearly needs to be reviewed if partnerships between the different providers of services in these fields are to achieve their full potential. The treatments and therapies referred to are generally described as complementary — we do not see them as being alternative. They have been developed out of the holistic view of the child that has been described and are seen as being part of a widened and essential therapeutic response to the manifold needs of the child, aimed at harmonising the constitutional and developmental disturbances expressed in the child's cognitive, emotional and behavioural life. Besides homeopathic and herbal medicines, the spectrum of therapies available at Camphill is truly impressive covering therapeutic art, therapeutic music, eurythmy, which is a form of movement therapy, play therapy and counselling, rhythmic massage and hydro therapy, and also riding therapy.

Education, therapy and care are the three fundamental responses of curative education to the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of the developing child, and the life-sharing community that Camphill aspires to aims at integrating these three overlapping areas of the work into a seamless whole. However, a community like Camphill cannot be introspective if it is to evolve and remain relevant to the needs of the times, and here the whole concept of partnership comes into play. Partnership clearly implies very different forms of inter-relationships, depending on the organisation, people and circumstances involved. In the context of Curative Education and Camphill, partnership might be considered as 'enabling and empowering one's partner to achieve further growth and development'. To the extent that this is possible, one can hope to be likewise sustained.

Obviously, many different forms of partnership have been developed by Camphill over the years, that with the parents of our pupils being one of the most enduring. Much more recently, the exciting and innovative partnership with Northern College in Aberdeen around the accreditation of the course in Curative Education has been established. This is a major step for Camphill and the students on the course in Curative Education, and in the sense of partnership spoken of, it is hoped the students of Special Education at Northern College will also benefit. For Camphill's students the change asks for a more committed engagement with their studies —more questioning of the content and more demanding in terms of what is expected of them—I believe these are appropriate requirements for a nationally accredited course.

However, with this greater emphasis on the intellectual capacities and will power of the students, that third aspect of their make-up, their soul life of feelings, also needs attention. So, let us focus on the single most important relationship one is engaged in as curative educators namely, the special form of partnerships cultivated with one's pupils. The essential core of these partnerships is not dependent on any formal training or accreditation, and is not subject to care plans, programmes, monitoring or reports. It is perhaps best described by the ancient Gaelic expression *Anam Cara*, which literally means soul friend or friend in spirit. One of the tragedies of disability is the separation and isolation it can induce in relation to one's environment and other people, and challenging behaviour, which can present with disability, compounds this problem, with carers and professionals often feeling lost, overwhelmed and impotent in the face of it. And yet this behaviour is often a reaction to the loneliness, frustration and isolation that is suffered. The committed, accepting and caring relationship of the soul friend or *Anam Cara* is the first step to healing, and the basis on which further development can be sustained in true partnership. This has been confirmed time and again in the work of curative educators. It is vital in the present climate that this is acknowledged, valued and fostered. This aspect of the work of Camphill is perhaps especially significant in relation to the many idealistic young co-workers who come to offer their soul-friendship and support to our pupils; for many of them it is one of the most important and formative experiences of their lives.

So, let us finally revisit the term Curative Education: it is an holistic response to the needs of special children that recognises the pain of their disabilities for themselves and their families, but also searches for meaning in it, not, I emphasise, as retribution for supposed past karmic misdemeanours, but as challenging opportunities for growth and change. 'Curative' then, in this sense, refers to overcoming disability to the extent that it is possible, maximising potential development, and coming to terms with what one has to carry.

In conclusion quoting briefly from John O'Donohue's beautiful book *Anam Cara*,\* In everyone's life there is a great need for an *Anam Cara*, a soul friend. In this love, you are understood as you are without mask or

pretension. The superficial and functional lies and half-truths of acquaintance fall away. You can be as you really are. Love allows understanding to dawn, and understanding is precious. Where you are understood, you are at home. Understanding nourishes belonging. When you really feel understood, you feel free to release yourself into the trust and shelter of the other person's soul.

This is also the essence of the curative educator's relationship to the pupil with special needs.

Dr Nick Blitz,

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\* John O'Donohue Anam Cara Bantam Press 1997