

Chunks of the Scaffold of Child and Youth Development — Rick Kelly

Background

The focus of this workshop is based on over 10 years of project, research and work placement opportunities for students from the Child and Youth Worker program. This is a three program to educate and train individuals to become professional Child and Youth Workers. This is a well-established profession within the Canadian context where education now extends to the Ph. D level. George Brown College is located in Toronto, Canada.

The type of work that Child and Youth Workers undertake takes place in the “life space” of children and youth (Brendtro,2004). Life space refers to the immediate context where one finds children and youth. . This can include any of the following: schools, homes, alternative educational settings, day treatment setting, residential group homes, children’s mental health facilities, the street and community settings to name just a few.

This CYW program has the distinction of having as one its 4 pillars that anchor its curriculum, a restorative practices pillar. It is the only CYW program in Ontario that has such a distinction.

In addition the program offers the advanced skills training annually in restorative conferencing to those who chose to use this opportunity.

The therapeutic activities profiled were either undertaken individually, by College students, in the context of work placements or in concert with myself for specific projects and initiatives. They were implemented in the context of introducing restorative concepts and ideas to children and youth to increase young people’s understanding and coping with the various stresses in their lives in order to support them to be more resilient.

The approaches and activities profiled in this workshop were based on a number of concepts which include:

- The central role of relational dynamics (Brendtro,2004)
- neuro-scientific understandings (Perry,2006)
- Being trauma informed.(Steele,

Using activities, art and drama that are visceral allows the worker to engage the minds of children and youth which uses the right side of the brain which is the seat of emotions, memory, pictures and images.(Brendtro, 2009)

Child and Youth Work with the Brain in Mind

Working with children and youth who are risk is decidedly a challenge. Using a restorative approach enhances this work, but only if Child, and Youth Workers or other child/youth serving providers do so keeping the dynamics of the brain in mind.

Many children and youth that one encounters whether in schools, residential settings and children’s mental health facilities have experienced a variety of stresses which range situational to the more profound forms of trauma in their lives. Appreciating that the functioning of the brain is compromised due to trauma (Perry,2006) stress (Brendtro, 2009) and emotions (Goleman,2006) allows workers to structure and design activities and approaches that match where children and youth are at both developmentally and in relation to the functioning of their brains.

In simple terms the impacts of trauma and stress affects the ability of children and youth to utilize their higher order thinking and decisions making abilities. Thinking, logic, words,

language, problem-solving are all compromised. Therefore verbal, rational approaches do not have the impact desired since there is a mismatch. Their brains are more focussed on the emotional content of their lives and what is around them. This finds children and youth:

- on alert (Levine,1997)
- more primed for flight or fight (Levine,1997)
- being “adult-wary” (Brendtro,2009).

The reptilian brain is at its most active at this point (Levine, 1997).

Relationship building becomes a challenge in such a context. Therefore working WITH children and youth through activities allows them to watch and assess adults from a safe distance. Taking into account that emotions are the lens through which children and youth are viewing the world also requires that there needs to be safe ways of engaging young people around issues that are important to them (Burns,2006). This is one reason that activities, such as art, drama, role-play, cooperative activities place issues at a safe distance outside of the young person. When they can externalize issues through activities this is less overwhelming but allows children and youth to deal with and be more able to work with the complex dynamics of emotions.

Encouraging expression through expressive arts allows for the location and identification of the effects of events which includes thoughts, feelings, physical reactions and behaviours. It is also a way of enhancing emotional literacy and intelligence (Goleman,2006). However, this is a process that takes time to surface the various impacts of events into consciousness. Therapeutic activities support children and youth to be able to:

- **represent** items that may not be easily captured just in words
- **name** the various dynamics, impacts, thoughts, feelings
- enhance both **awareness** and **understanding**
- develop new **perspectives** on individual experience (theirs and others)
- develop **skills** that support enhanced coping strategies and choice making.

Chunks and Scaffolds

The different activities are the “chunks” referred to in the title which are arrayed around and on the scaffold of child and youth development. Lev Vygotsky, in his work on child development believed that “cognitive development results from a dialectical process whereby a child learns through problem-solving experiences shared with someone else, usually a parent or teacher but sometimes a sibling or peer.” (as cited in Cole, 1978. P.174).

In other words he has described this process as one where the adult provides scaffolding which is placed in the zone of development which is juxtaposed to their developmental ability (“proximal zone of development”) but is also able to expand their capacity. Child development is then enhanced and supported.

The two together hopefully create a graphic image of building scaffolds round children and youth that sits right up next to where they are poised to grow and develop. However I have taken this idea and expanded it in two different ways. Many children and youth who are at risk do not have the capacity at the point of, or following on experiences of stress and trauma, to engage in dialogue and problem-solving Hence, there is a necessity for utilizing creative and engaging activities in the work that those undertake with those who are at risk.

The Restorative Scaffold Extended

This idea began to have a resonance when I began to think about merging the practices of restorative conferencing and practices as equally a scaffold around children and youth (Kelly, 2004). This was generated through research that was undertaken to explore the relevance and effectiveness of using the conferencing model with children under 12. This was funded by the Canadian Federal Department of Justice as a two year pilot, demonstration project from 2002-2004. It could be envisioned as a scaffold for children and youth who engaged in behaviours that could be dealt with as criminal if they had been the age of criminal responsibility. However out of crisis comes opportunity (Brendtro, 2004)

This idea began to graphic resonate when I began to think about what the conferencing process mirrored and what was had been described for other child development contexts. It too was a scaffold for children and youth's development. The "zone" though was often a crisis. Out of crisis there existed an opportunity for growth.(Brendtro,2004)

The PowerPoint presents a variety of different activities that can be used in a number of ways to facilitate young people “getting to circle:.. By enhancing young people’s emotional intelligence and skills this can often prepare them to more full participate in processes that are more verbal and language based. These activities can be done in conjunction with circle processes or as part fo the lead up to higher level circle processes. Feel free to mix and match, and adapt and create.

Chunks Again

Activities included are:

Raccoon Circles: Icebreakers for building relationships (Cain,2007)

The Peacemaking Shield: Creating values

The Tree of Shame: Understanding the impacts of shame

The Compass of Shame: Identifying how we react to shame

The Masks of Justice: Supporting young people

If Only I Had A Voice: Victim’s voice and needs

Take the Labels off: Building a Resilient Self

Body Mapping: Identifying the Impacts of Trauma

Drama and Role Play: Discussing perspectives on harm-doing and forms of Justice

Group Mural: Restorative Community

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