

Helping the helpers

With the current educational ethos all about inclusion rather than exclusion, schools are working with increasingly troubled and complex children. Here, Dr Chris Nicholson, from the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies, explains how an innovative course at Essex is offering school staff the support they need to meet this challenge.

“ Schools face the enormous responsibility of taking children on a transitional journey from a place within the home to a place within society.

During the journey, apart from managing children's natural liveliness and rebellion and equipping them with a formal education, the school must also instill the morals and ethics of the society into which they will pass.

But, with the current climate favouring inclusion over exclusion, the pressure of

delivering this is even greater with schools having to “extend” and adapt to cope with children with very complex needs.

Helping schools meet this challenge is an innovative degree course at the University of Essex which has been fine-tuned to offer the training to staff alongside their full-time jobs. The course was born out of a frustration from several local children's homes and schools who found themselves unable to provide a sufficient standard of training for their staff in therapeutic work with troubled children. At

their request, the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at Essex worked in partnership with them to design a Foundation degree aimed at enhancing the academic understanding and practice skills of those working with troubled and traumatised children and, hence, the course *Therapeutic Communication and Therapeutic Organisations (TCTO)* was born.

But what makes this course so special is that it allows full-time employees the chance to take their degree without interfering with the important and difficult work they do with the

children who rely upon them. The course is taught intensely one afternoon a week and, by using social media, students take a taught seminar at any time over a weekend from their own homes.

The course is thriving, attracting students from an ever-wider range of children's services and roles – from teachers and learning support assistants to youth workers and foster carers. Until recently, many of these people would have struggled to find any suitable career pathway, but this is just what TCTO offers.

With all the staff who teach TCTO being current or previous frontline professionals within troubled children and adults they can offer real insight and understanding.

Couple this with the fact that a mentor meets with the student each week to help the student see exactly where their new learning and skills fit into the organisation, it is no surprise this course has been so successful in helping the helpers who support the children and adults who need it the most.

”

Dr Chris Nicholson talking to some of the students on the *Therapeutic Communication and Therapeutic Organisations (TCTO)* course

Supporting staff who go that extra mile

It is not just schools who have benefited from staff going on this course. Gill Jackson, Headteacher at Longview Adolescent Unit in Colchester, was supportive when staff member Paula Hockley wanted to join the TCTO degree course.

“As a result”, explained Gill, “what Paula and our team have gained from this has surpassed my early hopes. She has developed an understanding of herself and others, giving her a sincere and measured approach to the young people.”

Three staff from the Haven in Colchester, which offers support and treatment of adults with a personality disorder diagnosis, are currently on the course. Dr Heather Castillo, Chief Executive of Haven, said: “In a matter of weeks of the course beginning I became aware of useful reflections being injected into the team. Much of what was being learned added the theory to what was a daily reality for my staff.”

Positive impact in schools

Debbie Lamont, Lead Teacher for Learning Support at Philip Morant School in Colchester, said: “The course has helped staff to really think about the reasons behind pupils' behaviour.” Mentored by Deputy Headteacher Philip Hurst, Debbie was able to bring a theoretical perspective to some of their strategic developments. As a result, the school developed the ‘oasis centre’ which supports students who are at risk of permanent exclusion.

Using the TCTO course as inspiration, Market Field, a special school for children with learning difficulties in Elmstead Market, developed some innovative ways to work more therapeutically with its pupils, including establishing a girls nurture group to address concerns about how vulnerable some girls can be because of poor social awareness or a poor ability to assess risk.

Sue Anderton, Assistant Headteacher, Pastoral Care and Family Support, said: “These interventions undertaken by the team have transformed the school culture in a few months, with some dramatically positive outcomes.”