

THE LIMITED AIMS OF CUSTTAD

INTRODUCTION

A version of the following comments was prepared for a presentation in Royston Primary School to a group of Head Teachers from Glasgow Primary Schools. The presentation was preceded by an opportunity to view the Custtad facility which at the time was a well-established resource within the school.

Those who attended - approximately forty Head Teachers or their Deputies - were there at the invitation of Glasgow Education Special Needs Department. Most had no previous knowledge or experience of the work.

Our preferred model for the use of the approach is, as indicated in the following comments, a self-staffed on-site resource. Of the twelve facilities which are now established in South Lanarkshire this is possible in only three schools i.e., those which also have a trained Custtad worker on the staff. All Custtad facilities are part of a network which is integrated into the Authority's Inclusion Provision. The facilities are utilized by members of the same service who take referrals from throughout the region.

For present purposes some of the information which was accurate at the time of the initial presentation has been updated.

WHERE CUSTTAD CAME FROM

During a period of several years in Canada I had a number of experiences in education which proved to be relevant to the work I am commenting on here. They included teaching Guidance in Olds, Alberta, a year as a Grade 7 class teacher in Masset, Haida Gwaii, British Columbia and fifteen months in a nursery school in the nearby village of Old Massett.

They were experiences which influenced my decision, on returning to Scotland, to take up a position in one of Glasgow's two Primary Day units for children who were considered to have emotional and behavioural difficulties. There, for seven years, along with other colleagues, I was run ragged dealing with children whose underlying difficulties were rarely understood or addressed.

SPECIAL NEEDS

During a year out on a Special Educational Needs Course at Jordanhill Training College Glasgow (where again the focus was more on how to modify behaviour than to understand what was causing it) I accidentally discovered the existence of sand trays and wrote a dissertation on the development and use of small toys in making therapeutic contact with young children.

On returning to the unit, I introduced sand trays into a classroom already well-resourced with creative materials. The change of emphasis in how I wanted to work was supported by the

Principal Educational Psychologist in Strathclyde with the proviso that it did not interfere with my duties as an Assistant Head Teacher.

The materials proved to be a catalyst in the gradual transformation of the classroom into a special facility which became a resource available to all the children in the unit.

The whole school population was usually no more than twenty-four and consisted of four classes with five or six children in each. That facility was the forerunner of the one in which the practice of Custtad now takes place.

That entire phase of the work's development lasted about eight years during which practices and procedures were modified to underpin and align with the task which slowly emerged as being central to the children's needs. The nature of that task and its perceived relevance to Custtad will be commented on later.

Almost everything that was made, said and done during that period was recorded in words and photographs. And, during an extensive reading program, it was to these records I continually returned to appraise the applicability of various theories and ideas to the children's work.

By the end of those eight years, I had taken the work as far as I could and on leaving the unit I wrote an account of my experiences there. The purpose was twofold; to make my own sense of all that had happened and as a means of explaining the work to others.

THE BOOK

That explanation became a book entitled *Balancing the Request to Be Good*: an account of a visit to the outskirts of child psychotherapy. And it comes with a caution. The approach has gone through numerous changes, from slight adjustments to the total discarding of some practices and, whilst a reading of the book can contribute to an understanding of where Custtad came from, it can be a hindrance to understanding what Custtad now is.

THE SCHOOL

During the time I was writing the book, a facility, based on the one in the unit, was established in Royston Primary School, Glasgow. Those of us who have been involved in the work have, from its earliest days, been convinced of its potential usefulness for children in a mainstream primary school setting.

Also, over those early stages of the work's development I had given several presentations to small groups of clinicians in the Department of Child and Family Psychiatry, Yorkhill NHS Hospital, Glasgow. And, following the publication of the book and a further paper to the

Department's Academic Research team, it was decided, in the spring of 1996, to set up a facility and have the work evaluated in one of their community-based clinics.

The chosen clinic was in the northwest of Glasgow and the facility was closely based on those which had been established in the unit and in Royston Primary School. But there was a major change in how it was used. Whereas in the unit I had worked mostly with groups of children and only occasionally with individuals, I now moved to seeing children on an individual basis only.

THE CLINIC

During the following four years in the clinic, I met with over two hundred children for assessment and treatment purposes. The evaluation of the work, covering issues of treatment, assessment and transferability was carried out by the Department's Consultant Clinical Psychologist and one of her assistants and the outcome was predominantly positive. A number of clinicians tried out the approach in their own practice and, drawing on this experience, the foundations of a training program were put in place. This program was subsequently developed further in co-operation between the Department and South Lanarkshire Education Authority.

South Lanarkshire has played an important role in the development of the work. And at the time of updating this document, as noted in the introduction, there are twelve Custtad facilities in use in the region. Also, over forty Custtad workers, mostly from within that authority, have been trained.

Parallel with those developments I was spending a day each week working with children in the facility in Royston Primary School. The head teacher had by this time taken part in an Introductory Training Course and a senior teacher from the school had completed the full Custtad training. As she began to work with the children in the school I moved to a more supervisory role. Two more teachers from the school were subsequently trained in the approach.

On concluding my four years of working for the Department of Child and Family Psychiatry the Custtad facility in Royston Primary School was reconstituted. This was achieved by returning the units which had been donated to the clinic by Royston and by incorporating most of the toys and materials which had been accumulated during that period of time. It was therefore in a much-improved resource that the training program began to be administered.

CUSTTAD'S RELEVANCE TO CHILDREN IN A MAINSTREAM PRIMARY SCHOOL

To explain why Custtad is seen as relevant to children within a mainstream primary school setting, I need to return to the unit to comment on what I found out during my time there.

What occurred with the introduction of the sand tray materials had not been anticipated. As I see it now, we had inadvertently created conditions which were conducive to the children sharing many of the concerns they had. And for some children they were concerns which they had been holding on to for years.

They were concerns which varied from the relatively easy to sort out, which could be managed within the unit (usually with the help of their class teacher) to the very complex, which would require the assistance of their parents, carers and/or workers from other agencies.

The concerns also had certain common features; a major one being the difficulty the children had in sharing them. And a significant factor in the not sharing was the fear of the consequences. Those fears ranged from being seen or thought of as bad to the expectation that they, or someone in their family, would be killed if the concerns were spoken of to another person.

The concerns were also in what might be described as an unmanageable state i.e., they were pressing for some sort of resolution or expression whilst the children had neither the appropriate means or strategies to deal with them. And the more inappropriate responses they adopted included making strange noises, shouting, swearing, being aggressive, sitting on fences, climbing on roofs - **and all the other ingenious ways children find to let it be known that something is bothering them.**

Also, many of the concerns, were both available for conscious recall and amenable to verbal expression. And, although there was a noticeable deficit in many of the children's ability to find the words they needed, it was an ability which, although difficult to prove, appeared to benefit from their use of materials provided. This was evidenced most frequently at Talk and Draw, a procedure which began to take shape in the unit, and which has been increasingly formalized during all subsequent stages of the work.

That these concerns were capable of being talked about distinguished them from those which were expressed mainly through the sand tray materials - a widely accepted and excellent medium for non-verbal symbolic expression.

This form of expression also plays a crucial role in the Custtad work, both in its own right and through its inter-related use with Talk and Draw. The employment of the sand tray materials has also been formalized into a procedure which serves our particular purposes. We refer to it as Making a Tray. Talk and Draw and Making a Tray are the two core procedures of the approach.

One other issue requires mention. This is not the place to comment on the subject in any detail but many of the concerns which the children were most in need of sharing could be encompassed within a broad definition of trauma. We included in that definition any incident or event which a child had experienced as painful, scary or horrible, and whose 'impact' had remained with them in a decidedly discomforting way.

Once such concerns had been shared (apart from the immediate relief which was often observed) there was usually a reduction in the acting out behaviour. Children became more settled and showed both an increased ability to respond to the challenges of the school curriculum and an improvement in their relationships with both members of staff and other children. On a more general level, in the unit overall, the atmosphere was calmer.

I have been placing an emphasis here on those behaviours which manifest themselves in ways which are usually difficult to ignore, but the facility is set up to be just as accommodating of children who internalize their upset in ways which are likely to make them withdrawn or depressed or unwell. And obviously it is just as important to be alert and responsive to the child whose difficulties are of a less demonstrative kind.

As to the prevalence of 'traumatic concerns:' I am not suggesting that the experience in the unit in which I worked would pertain to the population of all such establishments. But it was noted, at one particular review, that twenty of the twenty-four children attending the unit, had brought, or were in the process of bringing, such concerns to our attention.

Their longer-term impact also requires mention. Much has been written about the degree to which unintegrated and unresolved traumatic experiences can become permanently established to form the basis of adult psychopathology; Custtad's claim to be an effective

preventative mental health measure is based on its capacity to provide an on-going on-site means of helping children to deal with and manage such concerns.

As regards the relevance of Custtad in a mainstream primary school setting and reflecting the experience in the unit we have based our position on three inter-related assumptions: the concerns which were most troubling for the children in the unit would have been just as difficult for them to manage in their local school: those same concerns would have been heavily implicated in the behaviours which had precipitated their exclusion from their local school: and the children would have been better served by having had access to such a facility, in their local school, BEFORE they had been excluded and had arrived in the unit.

THE TASK

To return to the task, mentioned earlier, as being central to the children's needs This is to provide and maintain conditions in which children feel as supported and comfortable as possible about sharing any concerns they might have - **if and when they feel able or inclined to share them.**

BUT there is an important qualification: if children on a visit to a Custtad facility choose merely to explore their ideas and concerns without sharing anything then that would also be an acceptable outcome - with whatever gains the child might make being theirs alone to contemplate. The bottom line in this work has always been to provide children with an opportunity to be constructively creative in a pleasant well-resourced and ordered environment.

I need to say more about that qualification. It may seem like merely a difference in emphasis, but it is much more a difference in ethos. **The aim and purpose of the facility is NOT to probe or press to access any concerns a child may have but to CREATE A SETTING in which things can be shared if the child is so minded.**

When considering which children might benefit from using a Custtad facility this approach has, over the years, demonstrated its effectiveness in relation to some but certainly not all the difficulties which are likely to be encountered in a school. There will be those children for whom traumatic concerns may be an issue but who are also in need of some very basic training and nurturing. Custtad has been used alongside Nurture Groups in South Lanarkshire and in Royston Primary School.

Custtad is also unlikely to provide enough for the child who has been struggling within the system for far too long, for whom disruptive and anti-social behaviour has become more of a way of life than a means of expression and who, in every aspect of their life, is being overwhelmed by the negatives. But even with the most troubled child there is always the possibility of making some gains, not perhaps in any significant life changing way but at least relieving some of their more acute difficulties **And, based on my own experience, unexpected and positive outcomes cannot be totally ruled out.**

As for those children who present a much more complex picture involving specific learning difficulties and constitutional or genetic factors; this does not preclude them from having the same kind of concerns as those identified here or exclude them from the possibility of receiving some assistance with them.

It is only through experience and the use of the approach within a school that the task of deciding which children can benefit most from spending time in a Custtad facility becomes more manageable and more effective.

To return to the subject of nurturing; in the unit, issues relating to food and feeding were an important consideration and they are viewed as no less important in a mainstream school setting. But they can be effectively incorporated into a whole school policy and taken up in relation to occasions like the morning break and lunch times.

Our position on this subject has not changed although it is now only briefly referenced through the use of an image on the home page of the web site at www.custtad.com. On the original site it had its own page entitled Custtad with Milk or Water or Juice. There it was suggested that the benefits of giving out and sharing food in companionable circumstances should not be under-estimated.

CUSTTAD'S PLACE IN A SCHOOL

Custtad is intended to be an integral on-site, self-staffed resource. Children, ideally, should become gradually familiar with the existence of the facility within the school and be as comfortable about the prospect of spending time there as they would be about going to the dining room for lunch. For some children, having a facility in a school, just knowing it is there, can in itself be reassuring.

Each school, within certain criteria, works out their own particular way of informing the children and involving staff, parents/carers and all other agencies of their intention to set up a Custtad facility and how they plan to use it. The criteria and working out a Plan of Action as regards all aspects of the work's implementation, are covered in detail in the training program.

Describing how a Custtad facility functions within a school or what exactly occurs inside a facility is a subject for another kind of presentation. However, the manner in which the room is presented to the child is representative of the overall character of the work and a few comments will hopefully be illustrative of this.

Firstly, it should be made clear that no child would be using the facility without their parent's/carer's agreement. After a brief explanation of the facility (and the words for this and for introducing the various procedures in the room have been carefully worked out) a child is invited to try out the room, to decide whether or not they think it might be useful to them.

The room is purposely set up to be as attractive as possible, to assist the child's engagement, **but it is entirely their decision whether or not they take up the offer.** A child is never told that they will be going to the facility or will have to go there or should go there **and the offer or invitation is never presented in the form of a bribe, an enticement, a reward or as a response to the child being upset.**

But supposing a child were to listen to one's explanation of the facility and decline the offer, or get as far as the door, look in and decline the offer, all would not be lost. The child would have understood something of what the room was about, noted the terms on which the offer was being made and know, if they felt inclined to use it at some future time, how it would be made available to them.

And, if a child should take up the offer, and if they did have concerns with which they would need assistance, then this would be provided with as much of their involvement as possible. There would also be no hesitation in drawing on the services of anyone or any agency able to assist and this would be managed as speedily and effectively as possible.

IN CONCLUSION

There are many claims made for rooms which employ similar kinds of materials and procedures as those used in the Custtad approach, and we accept those similarities exist, but in the way this method of working is now structured there are also distinct differences. We

speak of The Limited Aims of Custtad because we are content to concentrate on those issues of concern which I have identified here and which in my experience frequently reveal themselves to be implicated in the kind of acting-out behaviours which are difficult to manage in any setting.

By focusing on those concerns which can be talked about we are not reluctant to accept that other gains might be achieved through the believable if unproven benefits which are claimed for symbolic play, in safe protected spaces, with an appropriately skilled worker. But if they are we would consider them a bonus.

As to what might be expected from having a Custtad facility in a school: at the least this would be an increased understanding of some of the more unsettled children and an improved prospect of making informed changes in what the curriculum, in the widest sense, should have on offer. Too often it is still the children, in spite of the extreme problems with which some of them have to deal, who are expected to make the adjustments.

As regards counteracting the negatives (an essential element of this work); what more positive message can there be for a whole school community than to witness a very unsettled child begin to take control of their concerns and find a constructive focus for their energy and creativity. It is towards such an outcome that Custtad aims to make a contribution.

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