

Love as security and community in a nursery and school

Introduction

I am Head teacher and caretaker. I am a realistic idealist, or perhaps an idealist realist.

A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though it was a very large mammal, its throat was very small.

The little girl stated that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher said again that a whale could not swallow a human; it was not possible

The little girl said, "When I get to heaven I'll ask Jonah."

The teacher asked, "What if Jonah went to hell?"

The little girl replied, "Then you ask him".

I am a Christian who happens to be a Baptist. I work in a Church Aided Infant school and Nursery Unit. They employed me not because of my certificates but because I am Christian I am told. I certainly felt called to be where I am.

I have been to Millgrove over many years. This has honed my thinking about working with young people. Whilst I would love to reach out more, into more areas, our core purpose is education. I have looked to work specifically on security and community as a result of many discussions with Keith White and travel to other communities in the world. Not to say the other three areas don't happen. We hit all of the areas based on a big foundation. It is the obvious one. That is listed at the end. By itself.

We have found Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs helpful as a way of describing to the staff how children might have needs. Obviously this is not popular in all quarters.

There is only so much we can do because of our core role. To translate it into something we can work with we use these principles from Millgrove to further describe what we need to do.

The five principles are defined in the 'Growth of Love', Dr Keith White;

1. Security
2. Significance
3. Boundaries
4. Community
5. Creativity

Educational Success through security

We are one of the most deprived schools in Warwickshire. In the bottom 12. We sent the children out in the top 30(last year), above average this year. OFSTED would define the results now as 'good'. There are 210 schools in the authority. We are adding huge value to the children. This is not measured by conventional CVA (Contextual Value Added) as we are only infants. The reasons? A good team? Perhaps we do more?

TELAC

If we look at our TELAC children (The Education of Looked After Children) we **should** have 19% leaving at average levels. This would be 2B. The two children had an impossible time. One eventually went for adoption, one was in long term foster care. Both got level 3's. Above average.

How did we succeed? Providing those things they needed. We bridged the gap for safety in the family. We provided a lot of that. Listening, stability, support, checking on progress, discipline!

CAF

We now find that we can intervene earlier and be bolder about it. To really get involved with the families. The CAF (Common Assessment Framework) gives us the ability to go in at an earlier level. (Also known as Enhanced Support Networks.) These can kick in before we have a need to go to social services directly. The really obvious thing is that there must be a desire on the part of the family to do it. The lead professional plays a huge role in that. We simply bought a tumble dryer and offered links to other professionals. Behaviour in the child got better and better. It is apparent to all. Mum said on Monday "I've been out on the town". Meaning she'd got out the house, had some fun and was feeling human again" Success!

To support we are committed to the teachers. They don't get the same treatment., no tumble driers. They are not as rose tinted and 'liberal' minded as me. They provide the other adults in 'the village'. They are the ones who meet different needs to me. Children know if they need one to one, they can talk to me or their perceived significant adult. This is explained with the teacher, otherwise it fails, because the teachers try to protect me It still can annoy the staff up that children are so free. But after a night of hell at home children sometimes need to talk. A bit of security. The children know that they will get a good education as well from the others in 'the village'. What really winds the staff up is if they just need to 'be'. This is not seen as productive in terms of educational attainment. We are all learning still.

We don't know the half of what we do. Good or bad. Hopefully, academically we are doing well which tells us everything below, safety, food, shelter etc are in place. In reality our children give us a hard time. They cause endless grief, but we are not letting go. I have heard to shouts of "I hate you", equal cries of "I love you more!" Staff are creative in their responses. Some do lose it, but then others will step in. Our community, who we are and how we act are important to us. When the children included other 'village elders' from outside of school, their evidence caused us problems but was essential in knowing the whole child. (We had complaints about behaviour).

CAF can be seen as a way of improving attendance, behaviour. It does that, but it is tempting to make it based as a solution to a data problem rather than as an outcome to caring. Perhaps we are the ones subverting the system?

Slow Time

We have huge pressures of time on the curriculum. It is so easy to apply it to all in school. We try not to. We don't stress the children with time needs, we go as fast and as far as they can, led by them.

Children can take forever, they can seem to change with the wind but a part of their security with us is in 'slow'. A way of getting off the rush in society and being themselves. Those children we can see as being neglected by being on their own and down the park are learning valuable skills, without adults directly and in their own time. There can be middle paths of safety and freedom. Sue Palmer, 'Toxic Childhood' is an advocate of slow time. She is right.

Year 1, an eternal problem to get right, works for us. The teacher waits until the children are ready to move on. Then does move them, as fast as they can. Progress is outstanding. Time to do the right things has paid off.

Staffing

The team need to feel secure in themselves so you have to build them carefully too. You need a village worth of skills. You need the old grumps, the fiery, the hot heads, the carers. It is so tempting to fill a place with clones of . . . me. But the children deserve a wider skill set than me. Using management speak to get in 'subgroups' is a good way to do it. Shay McConnon is worth a read if you like it very clear, simple and colour coded.

The Christian parallel is the 12. How mixed were they? Yet they did the job. Secure staff? It comes from the top. They know you are thinking of them, working for them, fighting for their rights and giving, giving, giving to them.

This security feeds to the children.. Only a secure staff can give its little bits of spare time to the children. Only a secure staff can challenge each other (and their leaders) and the children. Only a secure staff can play team tag when you have had enough. They move it forward.

Children need to be secure daily. The past is too risky for them. It has also gone. The future unknown. They need to be secure daily. As God does something new for us day by day we can strive to do the new for the children. Change, growth, learning.

The past is behind. A foundation for some, rickety for others. It can hold us up because of what we have learnt, how we have changed and grown.

Our present should be of steady constant love and care, not the next plan, the new, the next budget bid, but now, small continual steps. Day by day steady constant love and care, low key, genuine and real. We lose the children if we are not real, honest and genuine. They know.

I know of a staff member who rarely smiles, who rarely meets in the staff room, who rarely is exuberant. Yet the children in her room excel. She cares. They know it, and they learn ferociously. I know another who on passing through seems to be forever cleaning cupboards, tidying jig saws, not seeming to bother the children. But she has a real gift in slow time with the children. Accurately knowing where they are and moving them forwards at their best pace. Tidying is actually getting ready for the next piece of learning. The children adore her and learn well. I also know a staff member who is useless with paper work, but gets on with binding everyone together. That person's gift is team building. I also know a staff member who challenges everything. Delighting in playing the devil's advocate. That is such a positive support to our work.

Children's Voices

A school council tells the children we care. We listen to their voices. Even the local authority has listened, and it is appreciated. The children like to be outdoors to learn. They told us that. We had a local authority wide consultation and they were very involved and listened to.

The children are secure because they have rules and discipline. They feel at home in a place which nurtures them where the streets around don't always.

Care with Christ's Love

It is important to us that we care. We care with deep Christian, painful love. Because we should. Not for the next pay check, but because we should. And we are taken advantage of, but what's better? The self preservation society or a functioning society?

Actions to take

So we make most children secure (I hope. It's going to be embarrassing at the Pearly Gates if we've got it wrong, led a few astray!) How can we do more of that? Shouldn't we be out there changing the community? John West Burnham said this at a Warwickshire conference on community. Get political. It's one of the big areas we can change and make a difference to the children. So who's what here? How would we do it? Why should we put up with the status quo? Why aren't we marching for our children's welfare rather than us? Aren't we given responsibility?

We have to take risks for security. My school risked employing me. It's been a roller coaster at times. And you do feel that as we near the top the only way is down. But our security rests in God. We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds it.

God is surprisingly interested in more than the church. For those Christians working in the world (all of us) our challenge is to look for God in different unexpected places. He will be out there. Everywhere.

Community.

We have been having 'Eucharist experiences' at school. Small groups of children with adults. At a school level it works brilliantly. At a spiritual level I hope it is too. This is a glue which binds us. It makes it easier to support difficult children if we have shared something together.

The children love to chat over lunch. They will invite you to sit with them. It is not always pleasant but eternally fascinating. If you have heard of fictitious giraffes meeting with new ponies in front gardens you have probably sat with us.

We also go out, visiting retirement homes to take what we do to those like us (sheltered, protected communities) This affects everyone who goes in a variety of ways.

We work with other local schools at inter sport events. We are infants. We relearned at our last one that there are huge benefits to sport. Our least well behaved children were the ones selected by the Junior Leaders for having put in maximum effort. We'll do more of that.

Community, is God's answer to defeat. (Ecc 4) We receive what we need from community, we get our rough edges knocked off, we get guidance, practice and support. Who better to support than Christians?

Who better to build on hard experiences than those who know these things to help build our lives. Not to wealth and riches necessarily but to a life of obedience, character and holiness. Our hurts have shaped us, we should be jolly good at supporting others and helping them grow.

Now, the obvious Foundation.

Love.

But in the mean time, whilst awaiting perfection;

Do we care? Really really really really care?

Mark Ingham