

# A Quiet Place: A Healing Environment

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The often subtle and longer term effect of the learning environment on both teachers and children has been an important focus of the work surrounding the Quiet Place Project in Liverpool schools. The Project itself has established a series of quite distinctive and purposeful environments in a number of the City's primary schools, with the aim of providing a focused approach to working with children who are experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties. This approach embraces solutions based psychotherapeutic interventions, combined with a range of body therapies and environmental effects to engender change in children who are already experiencing problems learning effectively in the classroom. These are children who have emotional difficulties or are "at risk" of disaffection through low self esteem, relationship problems, and other factors associated with social deprivation. The progress of the first cohorts completing the project have been evaluated, and more detailed evaluations of further cohorts is currently underway. (Spalding 2000).

The Project had its origins in the work of the Liverpool LEA Early Years Behaviour Team established in 1993 to work with children showing signs of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the early years of education ( 3 – 8 years of age). The team worked with children referred by educational establishments and others and developed a wide range of interventions using conventional behavioural and therapeutic

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techniques, as well as a variety of complementary approaches. The team was able to work most successfully where families (often mothers) could be engaged in the process. One to one work with parents, parenting groups and outings, engagement in solutions based therapy, massage, reflexology and aromatherapy all combined to reduce stress and tension, and allow parents to re-engage with their children in a more positive state of mind and hence be in a better position to develop new strategies for tackling difficulties as they arose.

However, there were still a large number of children who were causing concern to the schools, but where it was difficult to engage with the parents at the level necessary to facilitate lasting change. It was to address the needs of these children that the Quiet Place Project was established.

The concept was developed from a positive model of health and well being, founded upon a holistic approach to personal development and growth. It involves the establishment of a “therapeutic” room within the school – a special place whose visual, auditory and kinaesthetic qualities engender in the child or parent a feeling of well being, relaxation and calmness, where they are enabled to open out on a physical and sensory level in an atmosphere of security and safety (Greenhalgh 1994). Within this environment a variety of therapeutic approaches are implemented in a more focused way to address specific issues and problems. These include brief approaches to therapy (Oaklander, 1997), neurolinguistic programming (Bandler & Grinder 1982), sand play (Bradway 1997) and story telling & metaphor work (Mills & Crowley 1986). They also include a range of body therapies, such as head and face massage (Field, Quintino, et al. 1998; Cigales, Field, et al. 1997; Field, Morrow et al. 1992), systematic relaxation and

reflexology (Olness & Cohen, 1996, Day, 1994) to enable the client to be able to take some control over their own stress levels and be in a better position to address the problems that face them (Massy 1998, Trotter 1998). Access is also available to computer software based on biofeedback techniques to promote relaxation.

The approach overall is client led, and focuses on specific anticipated outcomes, both long and short term, which are identified and articulated by the client themselves. It supports clients in their own ability to make informed choices in their lives with a fuller knowledge of their own patterns, strengths and weaknesses. Implicit in this process is the notion that the balance and preservation of energy within the person as a whole provides the set conditions for each individual to find the personal resources necessary for increased self awareness and self healing. The approach relies upon the provision of an appropriate and nurturing environment to complement the range of therapeutic approaches which are on offer.

The facilities are devoted to the therapeutic work with a group of children who use the room intensively for a six week period, coming out of class for three sessions of approx 40 minutes per week. They then give way to another group. Children with higher levels of need may then revisit the Quiet Place for further sessions after their six week intervention. The Quiet Place also provides a place for all the children in the school to experience storytelling, circle time and related activities. The most recently established Quiet Places have adopted an outreach facility to offer the therapies to a wider range of clients in a range of community settings.

Quiet Places have been established in five primary schools in Liverpool, and several others have been established in other parts of the country. The Liverpool Quiet Places

have been funded by a combination of European funding, assistance from the LEA and the schools themselves. The Quiet Places are staffed by a team of fully qualified, free-lance therapists. Once established, the running costs for one year amount to approximately £25,000.

In every case the room has been provided by the school and the support of the staff and headteacher has been invaluable in its establishment. Prior to the initiation of the room, staff have undertaken training to raise their awareness of the purpose of the room and the techniques applied there. They have also been encouraged to make use of it themselves.

#### Establishing a “therapeutic” environment

The room has been so designed as to promote a sense of peace and relaxation and comprises a range of soft furnishings, bean bags and ‘mini-environments’ including tent like areas, cosy corners, water cascades, soft toys, plants and musical instruments. Each room has its own ‘theme’ such as a “dolphin cave”, or “dragon's nest” to foster the creative imagination.

The rooms have as one of their objectives the "opening out" of the senses. In many of the children attending Quiet Places their sensory channels have become restricted through anxiety or other powerful feelings generated by their life conditions. The Quiet Place allows them through the medium of colour, touch, light and sound to unfold - there is no bombardment of the senses in the Quiet Place but an organisation of sensory materials which allows for an unfolding.

The learning environment is defined as that which surrounds and has an influence on personal receptivity as well as psycho-social, emotional and physical well-being.

It embraces all those factors which have a direct, and at times more subtle, effect upon the learner – lighting, temperature, sound, colour, fragrance – as well as interpersonally determined factors such as supportive relationships and places for privacy, personal space and quiet should this be required.

Certain aspects of the environment enhance the overall effectiveness of Quiet Places:

### Lighting

The lighting level assists with the process of moving inwards, bringing the child both outwardly and inwardly into a different realm. The lighting is soft and masked to enhance the feeling of “otherness”, mystery or wonder.

It is dimmed to reduce the sense of “reality” and harshness and to enhance the development of the creative imagination and sense of potential for “magic” and transformation. It represents the sensory communication of a turning point for psychological change – the “miracle” aspect of brief therapy (Oaklander, 1997),

Dark and dim places within the room are important for the child to be able to retreat into and find comfort and security. As one child put it:

“The grotto is good because you can go in there and have secrets with the teacher”

Providing a safe place or secure retreat for children who find themselves under pressure in the classroom, either on account of difficulties in learning, social relationships or emotional turbulence is a key feature in the overall “healing” spectrum of the room.

### Colour

The colours are soft and relaxing, enhancing the overall effect of stillness and “otherness”. They enhance a sense of mystery for storytelling, blend in with the use of art therapy and modelling and provide a non-intrusive background for expression in a variety of media. They are on the whole pastel shades, interspersed at intervals with glittering and jewel-like effects, such as “waves” of fairy lights above the dolphin cave, to enhance the sense of “magic” and “otherness”.

Colour contributes significantly to the way in which the child perceives the room as distinct from other places in the school and contributes to the evocation of a sense of wonder; as one child visiting the Quiet Place recently remarked:

“ Miss, I’ll dream of this room”

### Auditory

The “sound of stillness” in the room is also an important feature. As one of the therapists remarked:

“ It is so quiet and such a contrast to the rest of the school - particularly the hustle and bustle of playtimes and dinner breaks.”

This is also often remarked upon by the children using the room:

“ It’s very nicely decorated, it helped me to be quiet. It is a very calm place, a place to be calm. In class you always have people screaming down your ears”.

The calming effect of the room is also something that was picked up on by a number of the parents:

“After her period at the Quiet Place she seems to still have loads of energy, but has calmed down – she hasn’t mentioned her dad so much and doesn’t appear to want to see him as much as previously. She is not ‘kicking off’ so much and appears a lot calmer in herself. Her arguments with her sibs now seem more like the normal sort of thing that goes on in families, but she is still not sleeping regularly.”

When appropriate, background sound or music will be used. – particularly works by Mozart or baroque composers– those who tend to generate an openness to learning (Hallam & Price 1998, North & Hargreaves 1997, Savan 1996)

Water features are also used to provide a subtle background flow and rhythm.

#### Kinaesthetic

Softness of form throughout is used to counteract the child’s experience of harshness in the outside world. Hence the colours are soft, flowing hangings and drapes as well soft furnishings contribute to a sense of warmth; bean bags allow for relaxation during storytelling.

There is always a wealth of natural textures around, soft and rounded shapes such as driftwood & shells, plenty of green plants, as well as softening materials such as velvet and corduroy, cushions, blankets and throws. There are also dens and dark, warm, private, comfortable places.

Provision is also always available for physical activities including the “letting off of steam” and opportunities for physical “centring” – small trampolines, balancing toys and engagement in breathing and stretching exercises.

Many of the children who visit the Quiet Place are in a physically agitated state for much of their time in school, restless and fidgety in class, and on the whole overwhelmed by the bombardment of sensory stimulation and academic and emotional demands of the classroom. The establishment of a physical equilibrium in their state of being is an important aspect; bringing arousal levels down, opening up their range of perception and facilitating the process of increasing self awareness and reflection rather than impulsivity. Many need to find a secure place within themselves from which to begin to re-engage with the world. Otherwise their lives remain predominantly reactive, responding to whatever happens around them in an impulsive way which does not allow for growth and development. As some of the children who have visited the Quiet place note:

“It helped me a lot. I calmed down a lot. It made me more relaxed. When my mum and dad split up it helped me sort things out. They were having lots of arguments - it helped me forget the problems”

“I used to get into fighting with other boys, this has helped me to settle down and calm down. I don’t get as worked up about things as I used to”



## Aromatherapy and Massage

In The Quiet Place essential oils are chosen by the children and placed on a tissue. The child then carries the tissue around for the rest of the day. Although the oils offered to the children are selected for their uplifting and relaxing properties (Sanderson & Ruddle 1992, Buckle 1993), the main therapeutic outcome is an association of memories. The olfactory system of the brain is closely connected with the limbic system; when the children smell the tissue throughout the day they are not only reminded of Quiet Place but the whole body responds as it did during the massage. It is both calming and uplifting. During the massage treatment the children receive the benefits of therapeutic touch (Field 1995). For some children therapeutic touch, which has neither overtones of sexual intrusion or aggression, is completely missing from their lives.

The aim is to achieve marked changes in behaviour and attitude through the effect of the room as a whole. The environment is very calming, there is often a marked calming of the voice when children enter, and sometimes a marked change in their attitudes, as one of the therapists noted:

“One of my clients was a very aggressive and destructive boy who became during sandplay terribly careful and protective of the objects he was playing with - it is as if the room had generated in him a sense of wanting to protect objects that were in it instead of destroying or breaking them”

On the other hand, however, the room is stimulating, allowing a secure place for exploration and sufficient sensory stimulation to awaken interest in the child. In many

ways the therapist acts as a facilitator allowing the child to fully explore the environment. It is a key empowering experience for the child to choose to do something and also bring it to completion. One child, for example, focuses particularly on the fish tank, and as he watches other feelings and thoughts come in to play - he can begin to get in touch with another part of himself, other aspects which are otherwise blocked out. It allows children to explore things they would otherwise not explore: sand, finger paints, drums, making noises with rain sticks, etc. As one of the therapists noted:

“One child had completed a power shield of her own achievements, and we allowed her a magic bubble to stay with those positive thoughts about herself; we placed the rain stick on her head and she allowed the vibration to run through her acting as an anchor for those positive thoughts.”

The room allows for an intimate and safe exploration of sensory and psychological areas not otherwise facilitated in school or at home. It bears marked similarities to Montessori approaches - the room is already well prepared in advance leaving the environment to do half of the work (Montessori 1988). The children often seem to change physically; the environment is conducive to allowing them to unwind and to focus on themselves and look inwards in a safe uninterrupted space. In a way they enter a dream world with completely different rules and conditions.

There is a richness of stimulation, but no bombardment. There is also an important element of surprise. Coming out of class the child comes into a world which is deliberately different and is designed to generate feelings of calmness, curiosity, safety and wonder. It is also important that the room finds its place within the environment of the

school as a whole, directly accessible and available to all, and seen as a necessary complement to the range of opportunities the school offers for learning and growth.

## The Classroom Environment

Outside of these quite discrete environments, however, guiding principles may be carried over in to the more general learning environment of the classroom, to create an atmosphere which works “behind the scenes” to optimise the teacher’s and learner’s openness to learning (Lucas 1999).

In terms of lighting for example, natural, full spectrum lighting is most appropriate for most learning situations, but can be manipulated for different purposes, e.g. story telling, work on the creative imagination and visualisation.

Thought can be given to the effects of colour in the classroom, particularly it’s potential for the engagement of whole brain learning for kinaesthetic and visual learners. Fabric and drapes can also be used to soften corners, emphasising flow and movement.

Sound is also a key variable, dependent on individual temperaments & preferences.

Teacher’s use of their own voice, the conscious use of modulation for particular effects is a well acknowledged variable in the setting of a supportive and calming classroom climate. Some schools have made use of an enhanced electronic acoustic to reduce the strain and effort required by teachers to communicate effectively with their classes. Many teachers make use of music as a cue for certain activities, coming in and settling down, getting on quietly with work, etc.

All of these subtle variables add up to an environment which can facilitate calmness, reduce tension and over-arousal and enhance an openness to learning.

The Quiet Place intervention has had a positive effect overall on the emotional development of the children who attended. Evaluations of the first cohorts completing the programme showed marked progress on measures of emotional growth and behavioural disturbance when compared to a control group from neighbouring schools (Spalding 2000). Amongst the most telling remarks during this evaluation, were those of one of the headteachers involved, who noted not only the relief of having somewhere immediate to refer children and families who were in distress (without having to wait for appointments and subsequent attendance problems), but also the overall calming effect the provision had on the school as a whole. The other most telling response was that of the parents, many of whom are living in some of the most socially deprived circumstances in Britain, who saw the Quiet Place as a haven and point of growth not only for their children, but also, in many cases for themselves.

There has been a considerable amount of interest generated in the provision and its potential for addressing emotional and behavioural difficulties early on in the process. Some schools are also consciously integrating "Quiet Places" or "Quiet Rooms" into their future building plans. There is potential for enhanced multi-disciplinary work, particularly in socially deprived areas, in such settings. A variety of other schools, both primary and secondary as well as special, have expressed an interest in developing their own "Quiet Places", and in some cases schools have gone ahead and developed their own "Quiet Rooms" which provide some of the facilities available in the "Quiet Place", but without the full specialised therapeutic input. It is envisaged that further monitoring and evaluation over the longer term will provide evidence sufficient for the model to be taken on by the joint services commissioning bodies.

In an ever more pressurised world, dominated by materialistic concerns and targets for achievement, attuning children to alternative ways of being which can offer a more grounded foundation for reflection and reassessment of the issues and stresses that face them is increasingly becoming a priority. By allowing children space and support for emotional growth our education system comes closer to addressing the needs of the whole child.

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