

*Adapting our Psychodynamic Practice:  
The Challenges & Complexities of Delivering Psychodynamic  
Psychotherapy & Counselling in the Secondary School Context  
and of Training Child & Adolescent Counsellors*

**This is a copy of the paper given by Sue Kegerreis, Director, Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex at the A Space/ University of Essex Symposium held at Iniva, Rivington Place on 11 July 2013 (copyright Sue Kegerreis)**

As Angie Doran is going to be talking a great deal about the first part of this title, I will take most of my time in thinking those perspectives that are particular to me, as someone who is and has been for a long time involved in the training of counsellors and also as someone keen to promote research into counselling and psychotherapeutic practice. I guess I am also here in the role of someone who has been a school counsellor for a long stretch so can listen to what we have learned from the research with that experience very much in mind.

First I want to say that it has been such a pleasure to be involved in this research project and to just how much learning has emerged from it. We are not yet nearly research-minded enough in this profession, but a project like this not only teaches a great deal of very real value in its specifics, but also shows us see how much can and needs to be learned from systematic research into what we do, how we do it, and very importantly how we feel about it.

The focus of the PhD element of the work has changed a lot over time, from being something that was primarily aimed at creating protocols to help early career therapists manage better the beginnings and endings of their relationships with children to something that is much more about the development over time of therapists' own styles and adaptations of what they have learned in their training to the particular demands of school-based work. This has had some uncomfortable messages in it for those of us involved in training.

As Angie will be telling you in more detail, one of the messages of the research is that beginning therapists in schools feel uncomfortably unprepared for the role, and carry with them into the work an image of how they are 'supposed' to practice which can make them uneasy with how they find themselves working. It made me remember my own painful journey from being a teacher while on a course at the Tavistock towards working out a way in which I could make my training useful to me. As some of you know I was so struck by the difficulties of bending psychoanalytic

thinking into something I could use in a teaching role that I wrote a paper about that very struggle, which has just been reworked and updated as it goes on being extremely relevant for those trying to get an educational job done while being sensitive to the emotional dynamics of the classroom.

When I started working therapeutically in a school it was while on the observation course at the Tavi, not yet a clinical training. At the time I was deep into reading Freud and Klein, and while I knew I couldn't do it, I still kind of thought I ought to talk like them. Some of the memories that can still make me cringe or wake up at three o'clock in the morning are of moments when I spoke to children or parents back then while still very much under the sway of my reading. (bad breasts, good breasts and I don't know what else!) While I was training as a psychotherapist we were still being encouraged to use some language that now I cannot believe was still in use, even all those years ago, I have a great deal of respect for the children who were able to make good use of our help despite technique which now seems so out of touch.

So I do really know, and recall vividly, the problem. However, I had thought that things had changed and that today's counselling and psychotherapy trainees were not exposed to this to the same extent. I actually do think that this is true, but there remains more to be done. Perhaps what it shows is that some elements in the problem are inevitable, even if some are not.

In a way it boils down to some key questions: What does a trainee counsellor need to learn before and during the first stages of becoming a practitioner? How can we help trainees prepare for placement and support them in it in a way that is practical and realistic, giving them the theoretical background they need without giving them what can be felt to be a template for their work which does not fit the reality they face? Can there be any shortcuts to developing their own style, their own personal blending of what they have learned with what their particular setting and client group require?

We learn a lot from those who have gone before, who have painstakingly put together and refined the psychodynamic framework within which we learn to think, to discern the dynamics internal to the client, between the client and ourselves and our own contribution to these. This has its basis in psychoanalytic work, which is ideally open-ended, five times a week, mostly with adults, on the couch and privately contracted. How tremendously far away this is from a busy secondary school counselling room, with young people coming once a week at best, for a short time, often against their will initially or only marginally and conditionally agreed to, sharing a counsellor who is publicly visible and deeply connected to their educational experiences.

We've moved a long way since then in what we teach, but we do still go back to seminal texts in our training as this gives us a depth of appreciation of the concepts we are using, and perhaps trainers can miss how much this can still come over as being a message about how we should practice.

There is a real tension here. At one end of the spectrum we have a classical *psychoanalytic* training that pays little attention to the differences of setting and client. On the other end we might imagine a training that is intensely practical, even manualised, only using texts that are based on the practice to which the trainee is headed and concentrating purely on what to do and how. Somewhere in the middle is the a way of learning the key theories and technical tools, while also recognising their infinite subtlety and flexibility so we can then make them our own, using the overall set of ideas and applying them in ways that work for us, in this setting, with this young person, on this day.

Trainers need to take these issues very seriously and work out how best to manage something like this middle. We want the training to be a supple and benign resource, not an unhelpful internal tutor telling you you are getting it wrong and should be doing it the 'right' way.

There are other elements here which need mention though, which I can use to mitigate somewhat my sense of uncomfortable responsibility! Trainees maybe want to be given and to hold on to certainties, for obvious reasons, and maybe hear their tutors 'telling them what to do' when their tutors do not think they are doing anything of the sort! When I found myself a bit dismayed by the vision of the training I received when looking at what was said in interview, I reminded myself of the number of times we wrestle in work discussion groups with the uncertain, messy realities of school work, with a clear eye on how flexible and resourceful a practitioner needs to be in such a setting and how differently one would be seeking to work than the way demonstrated in psychotherapy papers. I know as a practitioner how often I do things that my tutors would, I think, have blanched at, so by extension know just how much freer my practice is from that of my version of the earlier style of work. So if today's trainees feel somewhat the same, maybe that is to some extent the effect of the particular training, but maybe it is also the way in which we maybe have to oversimplify what our tutors are telling us so as to take it in, and then need to reinvent, rediscover, the complexities for ourselves once in practice.

I also found myself thinking that the trajectory described in Angie's research, which is keenly focussed on the way in which school therapists have to adapt their training to their particular setting, is the same in clinics and even in private practice. In a CAMHS clinic we learn how to work with parents and families, alongside practitioners from other disciplines, with children who are also 'sent' for therapy,

who need to be engaged and turned into clients in their own right and who are just as, probably more, suspicious of what we have to offer. In private practice another whole array of difficulties arise to do with the nature of the contract, the need to attend to the practicalities of the engagement etc etc. So in every setting a new practitioner has to learn how to make the relationship between therapist and client work, and for **every** new practitioner this is a steep and painful learning curve. We need to find our own voice, staying true to the underlying psychodynamic approach but not being constrained by a mythical idea of what the 'pure' version of this would look like.

This idealised version is ripe for the denigration it then gets, but perhaps it doesn't quite exist as much as a new trainee might think, or even wish for. It has a destructive effect if it becomes something in relation to which we are somehow falling short or compromising in ways that 'they' would consider too extreme. But it can also engender a **benign and useful rebelliousness** – 'they' told me to do it this way, but look, I can do it that way and make it work better, look how I have learned to create my own language, my own repertoire of techniques, my own ways of engaging and connecting to young people.

So we have many babies, lots of bathwater, and everyone learning how to do the bathing in their own inimitable way. To overwork this metaphor horribly, it might seem a lot easier to use wet-wipes but I think we know the water still needs to be deep, and warm, and a little bit out of control, otherwise for a start the baby won't get clean, but more importantly he won't have all the fun with the splashing, bubble blowing and the bath-ducks!

We are talking about the painfulness of learning from experience. Training – which in quantity and quality must be continually revisited and improved - can only do so much, and wherever we work we have to do the much harder job of acquiring experience and learning from it as we mature as practitioners. We cannot, however much we might wish it, short-circuit this process. We need to be able to tell the difference between when we are adapting our practice in genuine and helpful ways to the exigencies of the job, and when we are being pressured by anxiety and/or the pain of managing difficult feelings to relinquish something of real value. This is never easy. In one sense it is out of this kind of tension that all the developments in psychodynamic work have emerged, with concerns at all stages that the value of the new way of working is does not make up for what has been lost which comes from a real anxiety, but one that is often misplaced and based on an idealisation of something that is not essential.

Moving on to the other focus in my thoughts today, although much more briefly, the need is made very clear by this project for in-depth research into the processes and practices of therapy, whether in schools and elsewhere. It is happening, but

nowhere near enough. We need to know how we work, so as to do away with the stereotypes and unhelpful idealisations/caricatures. We need to know how we feel about how we work so we can help practitioners more accurately in training and in supervision. Research can get behind the usual structures, people are honest with a researcher in a way that perhaps they don't feel they can be with a supervisor or tutor, and so research can be a way of homing in on what really needs attention rather than us acting on what we think we already know. We need to be more honest about what we do and what works. Maybe we need to start videoing our practice so there is no longer the process recording model of supervision. My experiences with this are that one learns in a very different way, and that it means that one really encounters one's own practice in a way that is quite different, challenging but far more helpful than the inevitable sanitising that happens when recalling and reporting later. We need to be brave, both as practitioners and trainers, and let ourselves see the truth, know the truth and learn from the truth. For this we need robust research and an open mind – then the profession can move confidently forward to help many more young people in ways best suited to the work rather than ways that are devised to keep our own inherited and invented internal supervisors and trainers happy!

---

## What did you think of this resource? We want to hear from you...

### Contact Us:

	<a href="mailto:info@inivacreativelearning.org">info@inivacreativelearning.org</a>
	+44 (0)20 7749 1247
	<a href="http://www.inivacreativelearning.org">www.inivacreativelearning.org</a> Rivington Place London EC2A 3BA UK

### About Iniva Creative Learning

Iniva Creative Learning is a not-for-profit partnership between [A Space](#) (arts and therapy service, Hackney) and [Iniva](#) (the Institute of International Visual Arts). We share a commitment to producing art-based resources and delivering initiatives which promote emotional learning, personal development and psychological growth.

### Emotional Learning Cards

It is now widely recognised that well-being in every part of life depends on successfully building understanding, insight and emotional resilience. **A Space** and **Iniva** have been co-



in partnership with A Space

publishing **Emotional Learning Cards** since 2008 and they now occupy a leading position in the growing fields of **emotional learning and psychological therapies**.

**Each boxed set of Emotional Learning Cards includes 20 cards:**

- **On the front:** visually rich images of a contemporary artwork by a variety of culturally diverse and emerging artists known for their engagement in social or political enquiry.
- **On the back:** open questions and discussion prompts around the theme 'What do you feel?', 'Who are you? Where are you going?' and 'How do we live well with others?' for group or one-to-one use.

Suggestions for using the cards in different contexts such as school, home, gallery workshops and individual or group therapy settings are offered in a **fold-out leaflet**.