

Borstal boys talk out problems round table

The article which follows is reprinted from the Daily Telegraph and Morning Post for 4th January, 1960. It deals, from the viewpoint of an outside observer, with the use of Group Counselling at H.M. Borstal, Pollington. This is described as one of the most radical experiments in British penal history.

POLLINGTON Borstal is a nissen-hutted camp set among the bleak ploughlands of South-east Yorkshire. At first sight it does not look a promising place for humane experiments in correctional training, but it is here that one of the most radical in the history of British prisons has been tried out during the past two years.

Three times a fortnight during the eight months or so he is there each boy sits down with eight or nine of his fellows and a member of the staff round a table. Then begins a process which to those who think of borstals in terms of iron bars and bread and water must seem revolutionary to the point of foolhardiness.

For 90 minutes borstal officer and inmates, most of whom are between 17 and 20, are on the same footing. In this discussion nothing is barred. Sometimes the deepest problems of youths perplexed both by themselves and society are brought to the surface and discussed.

Often nothing of the sort happens and conversation ranges determinedly over anything but the boys themselves. Sometimes there is even unbroken silence.

U.S. Gaol 'Curriculum' Group Counselling

Group counselling, as the method is called, originated in the United States, more particularly California,

where it is part of the "curriculum" of many prisons. At its most probing it comes close to psychotherapy of the sort practised in many mental hospitals; at its mildest, to an Army Bureau of Current Affairs.

Simultaneously with its introduction to Pollington two years ago, it was started at Wakefield Prison. But, where, at the latter participation is voluntary, at Pollington it is compulsory.

There are signs that, having passed its first trials, the method is spreading more widely. Though welcomed by its champions this has led to some fears that it may be misused and fall into disrepute.

Before visiting Pollington I talked with Dr. Howard Jones, of Leicester University's department of social studies. The department and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations were responsible for a course in group dynamics in which the Governor of Pollington and the Deputy Governor of Wakefield both took part before introducing the method to their establishments.

Control Needed Evaluate Effectiveness

"There is a feeling that the time has come to pause and evaluate what has been done and its effectiveness," said Dr. Jones. "I think it is very important that there should now be some sort of control."

The prison service is mainly a lay service. However willing its members, comparatively few are equipped to deal with the delicate psychological problems which can crop up in the emotional atmosphere of a group. The staff I spoke to at Pollington gave me the impression they would have welcomed a psychologist's advice and guidance. This they never had throughout the time the method has been on trial.

Ideally, group counselling should lead the individual on the first steps to mental control following what the text-books call "the shock of recognition." This is achieved through the interchange of ideas, advice and candid opinions among people who are all in the same predicament.

Apart from its therapeutic value and the new standards and values it may be fostering, the method has had at Pollington the possibly even more important effect of developing a remarkably confident relationship between the staff and the inmates.

Staff View

'Best thing ever happened'

"It is the best thing that has ever happened in the prison service," said two members of the staff quite independently. "Before I came here," one of them said, "I was at a preventive detention prison. I saw more discipline here in my first 10 minutes than I'd seen in 10 years at the P.D. prison."

In the group sessions, it is important that the officer who acts as counsellor, or group leader of a sort, should never step back into his official role. However much he is insulted, abused as a "screw," or even ignored, he must never lose his temper or close the session.

One young officer told me that boys had even dared one another to flick his tie out. "But once you show

discipline in there you might as well give up."

On the staff, whose usual wear is a schoolmasterly tweed jacket and grey slacks, is heaped much of the hostility which, in the outside world, might have fallen on the police or that nebulous middle-class entity, "them."

Though what goes on in the sessions is strictly confidential, I gathered that things can go badly awry. To sort out problems of that sort and also ease the tensions which the strain of group counselling can cause among the staff themselves, the staff hold a group counsel of their own once a week. "We have found them absolutely essential," said a housemaster.

Civilising Mission Governor's Comment

Mr. N. A. Bishop, the Governor, is frank about the problems of group counselling, not least the virtual impossibility of measuring its success.

Pollington is an open borstal and the boys sent to it are As and Bs: those who, according to the prediction tables, are in the group which has the best chance of responding to correctional training. But even in this category the reconviction rate is about 25 per cent.

Mr. Bishop sees Pollington's mission as a civilising one. Whether group counselling combined with kindness, considerable freedom and a guided democracy, under which the boys themselves discipline minor offenders against camp rules will cut the reconviction rate, remains to be seen.

"Group counselling is trying to get people to see reality more clearly," he said. "Delinquents see things in black and white. If your training methods are valid, you can make a lad see shades of grey as

well. If we could estimate the extent to which that takes place, it could serve as a check on what we are doing."

Conflicting Opinions Boys' Reactions

All the boys I spoke to were either entirely for group counselling or entirely against it. "A waste of time," said one boy. "Who wants to talk about yourself and what you've done? You want to forget all that. Anyway I decided before I came in I'd go straight."

Another boy, aged 19, said: "It's done me a lot of good. It's made me more thoughtful, more sincere."

Even my mother said I was more sincere, when I went home for a week-end."

How did he mean "more thoughtful, more sincere?"

"Well," he said, "when my jacket got wet I hung it over the back of a chair instead of slinging it down any old how. I know that doesn't sound much, but it's something I wouldn't have done before."

Rather remarkably, no one, whatever his opinions, had anything to say against the staff.

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