

Group Counselling at Pollington

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In our last issue we reprinted an article from the Daily Telegraph and Morning Post which gave an account of the use of Group Counselling methods at H. M. Borstal, Pollington, from the viewpoint of an outside observer. The article printed below deals with the same subject but was written by a borstal officer who has been engaged in this work at Pollington.

AFTER THREE YEARS' experience of Group Counselling at Pollington I am writing these notes on the subject which I hope may be helpful to officers who probably will be taking up work in this sphere in the future.

I am dividing this article into two parts. Firstly, the introduction of Group Counselling to borstal inmates here and, secondly, my own impressions.

When Pollington re-opened as a borstal in 1957 two changes were made from the old borstal. Firstly, the Mannheim-Wilkins Prediction System was introduced to select good "risks" and, secondly, Group Counselling was introduced. The aim of Group Counselling is to encourage inmates to discuss their problems and difficulties in a group in order that they may perhaps have a clearer indication of where they went wrong and to use this information for the benefit of other group members. These sessions at Pollington take the form of three 1½-hourly sessions per fortnight. The whole institution is covered by twelve Counselling Groups run by thirty-three staff members.

The Pollington system is modified from the American Correctional Association whose

handbook "An Introduction to Group Counselling" by Norman Fenton, Ph.D., has become the standard textbook available to the Prison Service. From a handful of these textbooks and twenty lads the Pollington system, as we know it to-day, has developed.

As time passed and the number of inmates grew, it soon became apparent that the small number of pioneers would be insufficient to cope with the heavy group programme. Therefore Staff Study Groups were formed consisting of the Governor, Housemasters and officers who were interested. These groups are now divided into two which meet for approximately 1½ hours each week to discuss techniques and problems. The importance of this internal training cannot be over-emphasised for unless the Counsellor understands the psychological make-up of the inmates with whom he is dealing he cannot tackle his task with any degree of confidence.

Part of the Pollington staff have been very fortunate in being able to attend a series of lectures by Mr. Ottaway, M.A., B.Sc., of the University of Leeds, entitled "Group Psychology". These lectures have given us a far greater insight into our subject than any textbook and a further

series of lectures have been arranged during the Autumn term.

When told that Group Counselling was to be introduced, I with the majority of the officers looked upon this as just another brain-wave of the Commissioners which would be a further encroachment on officers' free time. Therefore when I was asked if I would take part in Group Counselling it was with a considerable lack of self-assurance that I accepted. I felt this was not a subject that one could take up without considerable staff training and failed to see how this training could be carried out under institutional conditions. Gradually, after many initial mistakes and misgivings I found myself taking my group with a much greater degree of confidence.

The Group Counsellor will find through bitter experience, however, that he will not be able to conduct a 90 minute session of "all good group stuff". He will find, instead, a great deal of resistance and hostility from the group either towards himself or the authority he represents, or towards other lads in the group. This takes the form of long silences, stupid irrelevant remarks, attempts to turn the conversation into any channel but where the leader intends. The leader must not ignore these diversions however, but in a tactful way must try and guide the flow of conversation along suitable lines. Attempts will be made into making the Group Counsellor give "Yes" or "No" answers; these questions should be avoided. Attempts will also be made to discuss the leaders' domestic affairs or to play off one officer or department against another. Questions will be asked about the thousand and one

happenings which go to make up a lad's daily life. These questions, again, must be considered by the leader, as many have a hidden meaning which, if probed, may have considerable bearing upon the lad's problems. Alternatively the answer to many questions is already known to the lad, or matters are raised to which the answer must be sought in a different sphere, i.e., Governor's applications, etc., are not within the scope of the counselling session.

Sometimes after a busy day and a difficult counselling session in the evening I have returned home feeling tired and depressed and wondering if this is all worth while. Alternatively there have been occasions when my group and I have really been able to get to grips with things and at these times I have felt quite elated. I think there is a great difference between compulsory Group Counselling for borstal inmates and voluntary Group Counselling by the intellectuals of the prisons as practised at Wakefield. Prisoners, I would think, are more apt to be set in their ways and ideas, but the minds of lads between the ages of 16 and 21 years are much more easily moulded along the right lines.

To offset this, however, while a percentage of lads genuinely enjoy their group work, a percentage take part in groups only because they see this as a method of obtaining an early release and a percentage are the inhibited characters who find it most difficult to talk about themselves or on any subject. (The latter are the lads who I consider derive the most benefit from group sessions). Lastly, there is a minority who

hate and detest Group Counselling in all its forms and only attend sessions because they have to, using their time to try and disrupt and disorganise the group.

The Group Counsellor must not be deluded into thinking all the brains are on his side of the fence as both borstal and prison inmates make very good amateur psychologists and can put forward excellent arguments to justify their past mode of living and misdemeanours.

After giving this a great deal of thought I would perhaps think that three 1½-hourly sessions per fortnight are too long and three one hourly sessions would suffice. I would also think that ten inmates plus a group leader is an admirable working number and except for training purposes there should never be more than one officer attached to a group. Also if this officer is on leave the group should discontinue their sessions until his return.

There are many textbooks available on Group Psychology. Personally I find these are difficult to read as they are rather 'stuffy' and are perhaps better for

reference only. Staff Study Groups and Training Groups by experts of Mr. Ottaway's calibre are of much more value I would think. We have also been fortunate in that Mr. Morrison, Principal Psychologist at Wormwood Scrubs has been visiting Pollington each month for the past year and his technical knowledge and advice have proved extremely useful.

It may never be accurately estimated what value Group Counselling has in the training and rehabilitation of borstal inmates. On comparing the old Pollington system with the present one, I am convinced there is a lessening of tension in the institution not only between inmates and inmates but between staff and inmates. Secondly, through Group Counselling many lads have for the first time in their lives given thought for others.

Potential Group Counsellors however, should not delude themselves into thinking they have to be psychiatrists. Any mature officer of average intelligence and sincere interest in his subject can make a modest success of Group Counselling.
