

# CONDUCTIVE EDUCATION DEPOSITORY

## Co-operation between parents and experts

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# COMENIUS PROJECT: THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

## Cooperation between parents and experts

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### “Experts”

When I was asked a month or so ago to make this presentation, here in Newcastle, to the title of “Cooperation between parents and experts” I immediately grabbed the nearest piece of paper – this envelope – so that I could jot down my first thoughts. I wrote:

*Parents* are the experts as far as their own children are concerned. Not only parents but siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, wives and husbands, and carers too. All those closely involved in the lives of our clients.

This of course is not only *my* opinion. It is the conventional wisdom expressed across the whole field of working with disabled children.

Later the same day, after writing those first notes on my envelope, I grabbed a second envelope to expand upon my ideas. There are two points on it:

1. The *experts* are the parents, carers and partners of clients, and of course the clients themselves.
2. In English we *never* use the word “*expert*” in the sense that is implied in this title, not when talking about ourselves. It makes one sound foolish. The people who actually work with the child and the adult clients are not

“experts”. We can call them “professionals” or, better still, “practitioners”.

In German, one of my clients has described me as a *Vermittler*, a mediator.

## **Competence**

We conductors are practitioners. As with other practitioners, it is our job not to be expert but to be *competent*. It is our job to know what we are doing. Being competent does not make me an expert. To be called “an expert” in English is embarrassing, especially when it is said in front of the people we work for. It should never happen in this country.

Part of our conductive competence is to serve the people we work for, the *real* experts - the parents, carers, partners and the clients, both children and adults. Being competent at my job does not make me “an expert”.

If we as practitioners are expert at anything at all, we are expert at “bringing together” the relevant knowledge to pass on to our clients or for our own use. This is precisely what the word “conduction” means, a bringing together of parts to create a working whole. That is what conductive pedagogues do, this is the central point of conductive upbringing.

## **Some aspects of conductors’ competence**

Let us look at some aspects of this competence. I have written a few in my list. I am sure there are many more that could be added.

On my list are:

Confidence

Humility

Reliability

Adaptability

Lending a listening ear – interactively!

Being not a friend but friendly

Compassion

Enquiring and researching

As a conductor, and one who has worked extensively in the homes of my clients, both children and adults, I can never forget that our work is *a two-way process and that the balance is continuously changing*. This is one of the things that is meant when we say that conduction is dynamic. Sometimes I learn as much, if not more, from my clients and their carers as they do from me, at other times I am taking the guiding role. Often I am guided by them in my work just as much as they are by me. In all this, *both sides* need the competencies that I listed earlier: confidence and humility, reliability, adaptability, an interactively-listening ear, compassion, an inquiring mind, while offering each other a friendly relationship but not friendship.

When I first began to think about this presentation I was considering the question of competencies as those of a conductor, as a practitioner, but after only a short while I realised that all of these, and more, apply as much to the clients or carers as they do to practitioners.

Now let us look at some of these aspects of competencies.

## **Confidence**

The dictionary tells me that confidence is the belief in somebody's trustworthiness, or reliability, or in oneself and one's own abilities. Through our experiences and variety in our work our self-confidence grows and we become more self assured. In our relationships with our clients we must never be seen as someone who is overconfident or arrogant, but as someone who has the ability to observe, establish the needs and search for solutions together, as an equal with our clients and other practitioners.

Whose confidence am I talking about? I am not just talking about my own self-confidence, nor confidence in knowing more than my clients or their carers, but my confidence in my ability to communicate, to help, to share the skills and knowledge that I have and confidence in my ability to find out what is needed and to mediate. When I am confident in these areas it does not matter whether at first a client, parent, partner or carer is nervous, because through my own confidence I can begin to build a relaxed atmosphere. I can be reassuring and understanding, thereby increasing the confidence of the people I am working with at the same time.

In fact for the practitioner and for the client alike the acquisition of all these competencies relies so much on each other that we see the same spiralling

upwards and outwards as we see in all our practice in which development, learning and transformation is taking place.

I may not be working with the parents of the child, or the husband or wife; perhaps I have a meeting with a physiotherapist, a swimming teacher or a riding instructor. The other practitioners have as much to share with me as I do with them and here I must also be able to talk about my own ideas and the aims and needs of our clients as confidently as I do with the families themselves. Having respect for one another and acknowledging the various skills that each other has is very important in developing confidence and creating confidence in each other. Being able to rely upon each other is something that develops as the confidence in our own abilities and in each other's increases.

## **Humility**

As a conductor I must not be over-confident or arrogant but humble, showing humility, that is having the ability to step away from my own self and my world and to see the totality of my clients in their worlds. I must have the ability to see and to say that the parents, the partners and the clients often know better than I do what is best for them, and that the achievements gained are as much or more to their credit than to mine.

If there is really equality then all this should apply to clients and other practitioners too!

## **Reliability**

Conductors need to be able to rely on the families who they work with to do the best that they can in their conductive living, and to ask for help whenever needed. Just in the same way, families need to be able to rely on conductors and other practitioners to refer them on to different sources of help or information when necessary. Clients and families, and conductors need to be able to rely on each other, once again in a two-way process. All concerned must be confidently assured that they are moving towards a common aim, the totality of the clients' lives.

## **Adaptability**

“Adaptability” is a word often used in connection with Conductive Education and conductors, but we must not forget that this is a competency that *everyone* needs to have to function in society. We need to be open to change and we need

to be able to adapt our behaviour, even change how we think – and often quickly – in changing circumstances. A considerable degree of personal and practical flexibility is needed, and the ability to acclimatise and to learn. My ability to adapt quickly has been invaluable to me as a peripatetic conductor. This is the competency that has held me in good stead when I work within families' homes. My confidence while fitting in, while observing and quickly summing up what is happening in the family, gives the family members the confidence to try to do the same, to adapt their own ways of life to suit a conductive lifestyle.

Without adaptability species become extinct. It is essential to learn to be adaptable to become better suited to the environment that we live in and this goes for conductors and other practitioners, as well as for our clients who we wish to help along their conductive road. We *all* have to evolve.

### **Listening, let us call it active listening**

What is the difference between listening and active listening? Active listening is listening with understanding, plus something more. This means that while listening we have stopped thinking just about what *we* might have to say, but are focused on the words of the client. If we do not understand something and wish to hear more about it then we need to judge the moment when to ask a question that will improve our understanding. We need the skills to do this in a way that it indicates that we wish to continue to listen, that we ask for a bit more explanation of some points and wish to hear more of the story being told. This makes our listening not just *active* but also *interactive*. Listening *actively* on both sides of the equal-client-practitioner relationship that we have formed can strengthen relationships and reduce misunderstanding. It can encourage cooperation between all people involved in reaching the “totality” that we should all be working towards.

### **Not friends but friendly**

Working in a friendly way but not offering friendship is an important boundary to keep. This is especially important in my work within the family home when fifteen years of coming and going could easily result in my being greeted as a visiting Auntie and not as a pedagogue, practitioner and mediator. This can become a fine line when such work continues for many years. I was recently visiting a home of a younger client. As I left, her mother unthinkingly suggested to the child in her arms, as she would with other departing visitors, to give me a kiss goodbye. The child looked askance and I responded by saying “We don't

kiss”. The mother asked “Really? Not even in the group if there are tears?” I explained: “No, those are times for hugs and calming words, kisses are for mums and dads, grandmas and granddads, brothers and sisters, and friends.” Mum was very pleased with this explanation and my little client looked at her as if to say: “You see, that’s how it works”.

## **Compassion**

This is a part of what Dr Mária Hári always referred to as “intelligent love”. Compassion is the capacity to sympathise and empathise with our clients – but *not* to feel sorry for them. To care in an intelligent way.

Again it comes down to treating our clients as equals, by behaving with them as we would like to be treated ourselves. Compassion is an important quality needed for forming social connections between human beings, the basis of all forms of learning and transformation.

## **Enquiring and researching**

This relates back to having confidence. Conductors need to feel confident to ask questions. We need to have the confidence and the knowledge to discover what is needed by clients and families and then to go out to search for it. To do research and find out what alternatives there are available. To ask other clients about their own experiences and to pass these on when and where needed.

Our clients will learn this ability from us, as we communicate with them and encourage them to make decisions about their lives and discover new activities and ways of living.

I am an avid looker-upper, in dictionaries, YouTube, Google etc. I am an asker of questions, and reader of books and magazines. I am an eager tryer-outer of new or untried (by me) methods that come along, so that I have first-hand experiences to discuss with my clients. I am surprised when I discover that many conductors and practitioners are not the same, but I am always pleased to find that many clients are. It is part of my job as a conductor to encourage colleagues and clients alike in their quest for information and knowledge, and I do my best to steer them in directions where they may make new discoveries.

## Conduction – getting it together

All of these competencies of course apply to parents, partners, carers and clients too, and the best way for us to share them is to work together as *equals*.

Our job must involve sharing our competencies, always remembering that this should be a two-way process, and never forgetting that *we* have as much to learn as the families who we work for.

I have emphasized the words “*never forgetting the two-way process*” because, although there is a considerable published literature on the subject of “parents as experts”, this principle is often forgotten. Even though people *write* about it and *talk* about it, this does not mean that they always *do* it – or even really *believe* it.

I Googled “Parents as experts” and came up with so many articles, even whole books, dealing with gathering information and ideas from parents, and looking at the role that parents should have in decision-making when it comes to care, education and medical provision for their children. Most of these were written between the 1980s and the year 2000. Surprisingly I found relatively few recent studies. I wonder why. Has it been forgotten?

I have recently read some of the British Government’s Green Paper: *Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special needs and disability.*” In Section Two, under the heading “Giving parents control”, it says:

“Parents know their child best”.

Later in this first paragraph it continues:

“It is crucial to families that these services work together and that parents are empowered to make decisions about their child. Unfortunately, this is not what many families experience.”

So even at government level there is acknowledgment that the two-way process *still* gets forgotten.

## Who are the real “experts”?

In Conductive Education who are the experts at bringing it together? Parents, the partners and carers are, and often too the disabled children, young people and adults who are the focus of this all. Conductors have a hand in helping them to do this but we cannot do it all ourselves.

The most important aspect of all is that parents and carers have to be expert in something that practitioners cannot be, *in dealing with the totality, and pulling it all together*. Practitioners can deal only with parts of the totality, however much they may know their own parts of the overall picture and mediate between those who deal with other parts of the whole. *Inevitably this goes for conductors too*, however much they talk about and write about using a “holistic method”. Everybody talks about conductive pedagogy/upbringing as dealing with *all* aspects of clients' lives but few conductors are able to deal with clients' whole lives *as parents or partners routinely do*.

It is only when practitioners become a parent, a partner or a carer that they do and discover the reality of dealing with the totality rather than being simply a practitioner and a mediator.

A few conductors *have* been in this position. I have done it myself. I have despaired at practitioners who believe that *they* are the experts, I have despaired at the wheelchair-provider who thought he knew better what my partner needed than he or I did, I have despaired at two in the morning, just as parents often do, and eventually sorted out everything that needed doing for myself, just as parents do.

In the end the only experts on clients are the clients themselves, and their parents or partners. They may benefit from the services of practitioners and mediators to help them along the way to make the parts of their expertise come together. Ultimately *though*, the problems are *theirs*, and *they* have to become the best possible experts in solving them.

There are times when we may hear from a parent that Little Johnny can only do that with his Granny, or that Jane can only do that with her Dad. Good practitioners know and acknowledge these aspects of a client's life and can do a lot to help. We have to be sensitive to this and the fact that the Mother may believe that this is the only way possible. A practitioner who does not recognise this may just be another problem for the parents and clients, hindering rather than helping.

### **Getting it all together – we call this “conduction”**

In Conductive Education it is bringing together the totality that is the defining feature – that is why it is called “conductive” – but *all* practitioners have to recognise that bringing disabled children's lives together into a totality is more important than the parts that make it up. Parents “*live*” this totality. Conductors

– by the very nature of conduction – ought, more than other practitioners, to be able to talk with parents, or partners about the totality and this task, the need to bring all aspects of life together. Parents often recognise that conductors are also talking about the totality of the child’s life and this may encourage them to work together as equals – perhaps that is one reason why parents and clients may have such confidence in conductors.

Where there is *real* equality between practitioner and client, and not just *talk* of it, and the parents and partners can share their own core expertise with the various practitioners concerned, then conductors should be very aware of the totality of everything that is being done on their clients’ behalf and how important it is that everyone’s efforts should be brought together as a single whole. This has implications for the conductor’s role where there is multi-agency work” or a multi-disciplinary team”.

### **What clients say about this**

In anticipation of this meeting I have spoken to some of my clients, to ask them what they think on the subject of experts and equals, practitioners and professionals.

One client, an adult with hemiplegia and aphasia, told me that in her opinion an expert is someone who knows all about machines, like an engineer does, but not someone who works with people. How, she asked, can *anyone* be an expert on individual people except perhaps for those people themselves?

It was she who also told me that for her the practitioners in her life are “mediators”. She told me how important it is for her that I pass on information from one client to another. She feels very confident talking to me about her progress and it helps her to hear about my other clients and *their* different approaches to problem-solving. Her insight here identifies a level of conduction that I had not anticipated and have not previously heard described. She pointed out how I gather experience from my clients, from parents and their children, from adults and their partners, and carry this around with me like a library, to pass on to others clients as and when they need it.

She says that the *real* experts, my clients, can therefore indirectly pass on their personal knowledge through me about their conditions, about their illnesses, about their aches and pains, about their good days and bad days, their progress and their setbacks. I can then “catalogue” it and reach for it whenever needed.

For the last twenty years my clients, especially the children, have always asked me how what's-his-name is doing who lives three or four hundred miles away. The children have never communicated directly but often their parents have.

My client is right in her allusion to a library – and it is not only from my clients that I gather my information and experiences to pass on, but also from fellow practitioners. When I go to try out a different method, like a Therasuit or a Giger cycling machine, or to watch a school lesson in progress or to meet with the classroom assistants, I come away with another metaphorical shelf-full of books, but only if I approach the experience as an equal, with the wish to cooperate, and not as an expert.

I also spoke to the mother of one my younger clients about how she felt on the question of who is the expert. She said immediately that she knows her child better than anyone else – except of course for the child herself. She told me how as a parent she is happy to be working with a conductive team because we are involved in so many aspects of her daughter's life. She described how our suggestions and recommendations, our discussions with other practitioners who work with her daughter, the riding teacher, the speech therapist, the school teacher, the bus-driver, the bicycle-provider or the shoe-maker, make it much easier for her to bring the life of her child together. This mother encourages us to find new activities or clubs, discover a computer device or suggest new means of getting from A to B for her daughter. Although she feels that she is the expert on knowing her daughter she does not want to be her daughter's therapist or conductor. She wants to look after and know the totality, and wants the conductor and the other practitioners to help her to find and bring together all the different parts that make life for her daughter active and exciting, and out there in the world.

*She does it all rather well. “Expertly” in fact!*

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