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Book review

Embodied Approaches to Supervision: The Listening Body

By Celine Butté and Tasha Colbert

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Corresponding author:

M Macfarlane, Therapeutic Services Co-ordinator, Common Thread.

Embodied Approaches to Supervision contains ten chapters written by dance movement psychotherapists, who each present their views of the ways in which embodiment practices can be used in supervision. Embodied practice utilises the mind-body connection and is described in the introductory page of the book as 'the intimate and dynamic interaction between mind and body'. Embodiment approaches may be particularly applicable to young people in residential care, who may have experienced bodily traumas such as physical and sexual abuse and may not always have the language to communicate their experiences verbally.

Supervision is often described as a safe space, which can mean different things to different people, but for Butté and the other psychotherapists in this book, safety means whatever we need it to mean on a specific day. And, if we don't know what it means or what we need, that's what we bring. There are several examples in the book of supervisees who felt uncertain, shamed, and guarded, and in each example their supervisor met them there without judgement; these types of experiences are reparative and can provide healing for times when we only encountered judgement, which is mirrored in the reparative attachment experiences we are offering young people.

The writers illustrate their views with vignettes from their practice: the one that stayed with me after reading was an example in Chapter 6 from contributor Julie Joseph, where she explores our understanding of mirroring with another, and questions whether it can trigger a subconscious shared knowledge. During supervision over Zoom, she invited John (not his real name) to 'collect items to use for the creative exploration of his supervision dilemma', before following her impulse to collect items of her own. When both return to the computer screen, John has collected 'a long power cable, all tangled up', and, following some exploration of what they notice and wonder about John's choice, Joseph presents hers: 'tangled cables and the bamboo bowl I had put them in'. John and Joseph talk about the significance of the cables being contained within the bamboo bowl and its relation to his own practice. Joseph then explores the offer of containment to those working in the therapeutic field, arguing that the adults offering the young people attuned care and containment need to be offered the same. Professional supervision provides a space where the offer can take place,

in safety and with boundaries. Particularly relevant to current supervision and other forms of therapeutic practice, is her discovery that mirroring can take place for two individuals occupying rooms in different houses while working together on a video call.

In Chapter 7, 'Reflections on Thresholds and Containers in Supervision', Butté describes supervision as 'a place where supervisees can feel supported, and able to be themselves, strengths and vulnerabilities included' (p. 92). The last four words resonated with me, as in many ways to be a residential childcare worker on shift is to hide, deny, control, or even apologise for, your vulnerabilities. As our relationships with individual young people evolve there are opportunities to share and discuss vulnerabilities, which can provide reparative experiences for both young person and adult. However, during our first months in the job, and at many other times during our career, we are required to manage our vulnerabilities, so Butté's offer of a place where that management isn't required is striking.

One of the barriers in providing attachment and trauma informed care in a residential childcare setting is the turnover of staff, with each staff member who leaves representing another broken relationship for the young people with whom they worked. Residential childcare workers are asked to provide immersive care for some of the most vulnerable young people in Scotland, and the nature of their role means many methods for managing vicarious trauma used in other professions cannot be used to full effect. Embodiment approaches offer staff strategies they can use in the moment to calm and anchor the young person, as well as themselves, without relying on verbal communication. Embodied supervision practices allow staff to expand their understanding of themselves, their experiences, and their potential, which is particularly valuable in a field where long-term outcomes for young people remain inexcusably poor.

We need to keep expanding our understanding and use of supervision to contain and care for frontline staff, and I see many applications for the practices outlined by the contributors to *Embodied Supervision*. The common thread throughout the book is the reminder of our own intuitive expertise, should we take the time to listen. I wonder how often we already know what a young person needs, with

the obstacles to providing it lying in not listening to our intuition and trusting what we hear.

Through understanding embodiment and other ways of working with trauma, staff can provide healing experiences for their young people at every stage of their placement and can empower themselves to realise their expertise and capacity for effecting change, while also empowering the young people to recognise their own resilience and abilities. For example, at a conference in London, I listened to a dance movement psychotherapist describe her use of mirror neurons with a client in crisis; the client was in her thirties but when re-experiencing her childhood trauma, she would become a highly distressed child unable to verbalise. The therapist noted her desire to comfort the distressed child, and her inability to do so due to the client being stuck in a fear response within which physical contact with an adult would be unwelcome. Instead, the therapist utilised mirror neurons by sitting in front of her client with a cushion on her lap, which she gently stroked while rocking slightly. She played out the comfort she wanted to offer her client on the cushion, incorporating rhythm as a grounding technique, and used her own body rocking as further rhythm.

In my own practice, I have seen the usefulness of rhythmic games such as catch in easing a young person back from overwhelm, such as using scrunched-up paper as a football for passing back and forth across a table in a busy café. These techniques, and others within the book, empower both staff and young people; as staff we regulate ourselves through helping regulate the young person, thereby increasing our confidence in our professional mastery, and the young person experiences true connection with an adult and learns strategies they can use with others or by themselves, whenever needed. In supervision, we can experience the holding and connection we offered the young person given back to us, while learning further strategies we can use and share.

About the author

Marianne Macfarlane is the Therapeutic Services Co-ordinator for Common Thread, a residential childcare provider with houses and schools across Scotland. Marianne has worked for Common Thread since 2011 and is interested in the

impact of complex trauma on both the young people and the adults caring for them. This book review represents the author’s own view.

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.