

A consideration of whether an English University could replicate the level and system of support for people with autism and their families offered by the department of an American University in North Carolina?

Since the 1960s The University of North Carolina has gained a reputation as a world leader in the way that it has developed and supported statewide provision for people with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs). Aspects of its practice have been widely adopted in the UK while the Netherlands has moved even closer to attempting a total replication of the service. The Autism Centre, based within Sheffield Hallam University has been asked by the University to assess the potential value of adopting the practice of Division TEACCH in Sheffield. I am based within the Autism Centre as a Senior Lecturer in Autism. I began my professional life in Autism 20 years ago and have always admired the work of TEACCH. The name of its founder, Eric Schopler, is a 'legend' within my field. It seems a daunting and perhaps impertinent task to attempt to offer a similar service within Sheffield. All of the key systems of working with people with ASDs such as TEACCH (Runck & Schopler 1979), Lovaas (Lovaas 1987), Options (Kaufman 1994), emanate from the United States (US) or, in the case of Daily Life Therapy (Quill et al. 1989) from Japan via the US. I am influenced perhaps by a cultural notion that 'everything is bigger and better across the water'. I hope that by experiencing the reality of TEACCH as opposed to its promotional face I might develop a greater understanding of what services it offers and how they are delivered. Experiencing the environment of TEACCH may aid my assessment of whether it is something that can work within the physical setting and culture of Sheffield. With the support of a travel scholarship from the Universities Councils of the UK and the US, UCET/AACTE, made possible by the Stanley Hewett Memorial Trust, I was able to make this visit in March 2002.

This paper describes the historical development of TEACCH and the services it currently offers. Consideration is given to the question of whether TEACCH is culture bound within the US or has export potential for other countries within the world. An account then follows of the visit made to TEACCH, recording the development of my perspective on TEACCH as I experience the reality of its practice. A proposal will then be put forward to suggest how The Autism Centre might incorporate the principles and practice of TEACCH into our development plan.

The creation of Division TEACCH

Division TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children) came in to being in 1967. At that time within the US the work of child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim was extremely influential. Bettelheim viewed autism as an emotional withdrawal owing to extreme stress. He believed that this was caused by emotionally distant parents and stated that the best form

of treatment was to remove the child from the mother's influence. This view was questioned by Drs. Schopler and Reichler at the University of North Carolina as it did not concur with their own observations. They described this approach as 'scapegoating' parents by regarding them as the primary agents in causing their child's autism through their style of parenting (Schopler, 1971). They noted that many of the parents were raising successfully other children and were, in fact, perfectly capable if significantly stressed parents. Instead of taking children away from parents Schopler and Reichler wanted to investigate working alongside parents as co-educators for their children with parents and professionals learning from each other. A small research grant was received and the Child Research Project began. This pilot project was conducted under the auspices of the Department of Psychiatry and the Child Development Institute of the University of North Carolina School of Medicine at Chapel Hill. The results of this pilot established that children made good progress when professionals and parents were working together, as cotherapists (Schopler and Reichler, 1971). It also gained the department at Chapel Hill a reputation for

expert knowledge in the field of diagnosing, training, educating and establishing special classes for the training and education of children with severe learning, communication and behaviour disorders (Senate Bill 383, 1971).

In response, after significant campaigning by the University department in conjunction with parents, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation in 1971 (Senate Bill 383) which mandated the creation of Division TEACCH. Within this legislation the general assembly elected to finance the development of existing services rather than to create new ones. It recognised the elements of good practice already in existence. This will be an important principle to remember when considering services in Sheffield. We too have examples of exemplary practice. The role of Sheffield Hallam University may well be to identify and promote these rather than to compete by setting up new provision.

The TEACCH philosophy

Co-operation and shared learning between parents and professionals has remained a key tenet. Equally important is the belief that autism is a lifelong condition for which the affected individual and their family will require support from 'cradle to grave'. This support takes the form of early diagnosis of the syndrome, identification of learning need, training in managing these needs for families and relevant professionals, provision of a group home for adults and help with securing and carrying out employment (Cumine et al. 2000). TEACCH does not accept the notion of a cure nor does it believe that all skills required for life can be learned to the point that autism is not apparent within the individual. It is a pragmatic approach, which states that a significant part of the learning of people with autism will need to be focused on learning how to circumvent the effects of their autism within a modified environment. TEACCH expects a compromise

between the person with autism and the creators of environments. The person with autism may be expected to sit and attend in return for the teacher adapting their style of presentation to make the content of the lesson accessible to the person with autism. Through research the staff of Division TEACCH has established that people with autism are visual rather than language based learners who require a highly structured learning environment (Sigman and Capps 1997). They promote use of visual timetables, developing through use of objects to represent events to pictures, to symbols and then to words, to enable the person with autism to understand what will happen next. Sequences of 'first...then' and 'finish' are taught as the beginnings of negotiation. The person with autism learns that once they have completed a task which would not be one of choice then they can engage with something more desirable, e.g. 'First, shapes, then computer'. These requests are supported visually by the use of left to right sequences and start/finish boxes. The person with autism can see clearly the activities which need to be completed before the reward. Each activity is taken from the pile on the left, completed and then placed in the finish box on the right. As the skills of the learner develop this sequence may evolve into a list of tasks which are crossed off as completed, very similar to the 'job lists' kept by many of us.

TEACCH also recommends that the autistic need for clarity requires that the environment has well defined areas for specific purposes. Within the classroom this will mean that one area is always for small group activity, one for individual teaching sessions, another for individual skill practice, an area only for art etc. Between activities children would come back to a 'transition area', locate their individual visual timetable, select the next activity and then go to the relevant area. TEACCH argues that with this level of structure people with autism can become effective learners as their levels of stress and anxiety will be lessened considerably and information will be clear enough to be processed. Respect for the individual is also an integral aspect of the TEACCH philosophy. It is expected that all educational programmes and interactions will be carried out sensitively in the spirit of mutual enjoyment.

Services provided by Division TEACCH

Senate Bill 383 (1971) authorised the establishment of 3 regional centres throughout North Carolina, with Chapel Hill as the research and administrative centre. In 1977 the legislature extended this to 5 centres (House Bill 369, 1977). The function of the centres is to provide services in diagnosis, education and training for children with autism, their families and the professionals that support them. The legislature also decrees that research will be conducted in the areas of 'program evaluation, development of new treatment and educational techniques and related programs concerning problems of communications development' (Senate Bill 383, 1971). It is stated that demonstration classes will be provided, teachers trained and consultation offered to support classes for 'autistic and communication- handicapped children'. Importantly this was to be done in

cooperation with the Department of Public Instruction, the state agency which already existed for the purpose of meeting the needs of children through the public school system. Within the legislation the Department of Public Instruction was directed to 'support and assist' the Institute, as Division TEACCH was then known, in accomplishing its functions (Senate Bill 383, 1971). The creation of special classrooms was also enacted which were outside the jurisdiction of the general special education programme. This enabled these classes to admit children below the established school age. Already North Carolina was recognising the importance and value of early intervention programmes for children with autism, an issue high on the current autism agenda within the UK (NAS 2002).

These services continue to form the foundation of the work of Division TEACCH (TEACCH 2002).

The international dimension

In the United States behaviourism was the dominant psychological school between the 1920s and the 1950s. Children were viewed as 'blank slates' who could learn anything so long as it were presented in the correct highly structured manner. During the 1950s, however, there arose a challenge to this view. The Viennese School of Psychoanalysis became very influential, through the work of Freud, which claims that behaviourist principles can only modify the raw material, it can not create it. Human existence always remains a struggle between internal forces and learned experience. The higher the quality of your early learning experiences the higher the chances of controlling potentially negative impulses (Bettleheim, 1955, 1987). An exponent of these theories Bettleheim came to the conclusion that autistic withdrawal was a reaction to overwhelming and destructive experiences. Therefore, he recommended removing these children from their harmful families so that they might experience positive care elsewhere.

The work of Division TEACCH has been instrumental in refuting Bettleheim's theories with regard to autism. Its influence has certainly changed thinking in the UK. When I first began teaching in the early 1980s I experienced an accepted norm that it was alright to make autistic people do what you felt they needed to regardless of how they might react. Very few of us stopped to consider that someone with autism might have the right to have some control over their own lives and experiences. The combination of the writings of researchers such as Dr. Eric Schopler and the emergence of autistic writers such as Temple Grandin (Grandin and Scariano 1986) challenged this view, arguing that the key to effective teaching lies in understanding how autism affects the individual and altering the environment to take account of this.

However this requirement that we focus on the needs of the individual could mean that the TEACCH philosophy might be difficult to export. It may be that it can succeed within a Western culture which celebrates the individual (House, 1995) and questions the power of the professional but not within an Eastern

culture which focuses more on the collective (Cheng and Wong, 1996, Dimmock and Walker, 2000) and is reluctant to question those with academic authority. TEACCH states too that parents are a resource of equal value with professionals. This might conflict, for example, with the cultural norm in Pakistan, where it is the school which traditionally informs the home (Simkins et al., 1998). Even within the UK, TEACCH might encounter some resistance owing to it being American in origin. As a nation we appear to reject highly packaged and marketed approaches in favour of a more eclectic model. Reluctant to commit totally to one product we prefer to keep our options open by taking different aspects from several. While the staff of TEACCH would reject the Lovaas programme (Lovaas, 1987) as directly contradictory to theirs, UK writers argue that, 'A combination of intervention approaches can be effective' (Cumine et al., 2000 p.40). Perhaps the Americans have embraced more fully the power of advertising and this has invaded every aspect of their culture while in the UK 'hard sell' has not traditionally been seen to be relevant for educational approaches. We are cautious towards 'miracle cures' which have not been 'exposed to randomised, control treatment trials' (Howlin, 1998 p.101).

It is possible though that TEACCH may be able to cross boundaries, a successful product of 'globalization' (Sweeting, 1996). Worldwide networks in autism may have created a new 'autism culture'. Access to the Internet, the distribution of knowledge through papers, books, television, film, the ability to travel easily to deliver training and attend conferences may have created a set of 'Shared motives, values, beliefs, identities and interpretations of meanings of significant events...' which Koopman, Hartog and Konrad (1999) argue defines a 'culture'. The clearly defined philosophy of TEACCH might also meet Hofstede's (1991) definition of culture as 'the collective programming of the mind'. Certainly training is carefully controlled by the TEACCH team and is delivered in an intensive format.

Division TEACCH referred to by its Director, Gary Mesibov, as an International Centre (Mesibov 2002). It claims involvement with 20 foreign countries, including The UK, Kuwait, Argentina and Singapore. Schopler and Mesibov (2000) state that 'Major aspects of this program have been implemented on every continent around the globe' (p.3). The reason they give for it being aspects rather than the whole is because 'Some program components had more appeal and relevance in one country compared with another' (p.4). This suggests that the TEACCH philosophy has some flexibility which allows it to respond to the particular needs and culture of individual countries. While some aspects seem to have been universally applied such as parent collaboration the aspect of early intervention in Sweden, for example, has been superseded by the focus on developing adult services (Schopler and Mesibov 2000). This may be explained by the fact that it is often parents who, uninterested in national boundaries, cost and nationalist pride which may prevent governments from acknowledging weakness in service provision, have sought for their children the best services worldwide. Perhaps the parents in Sweden who have researched and reported on the TEACCH

programme have older children and are, therefore, more focused on adult services.

Schopler and Mesibov (2000) recognise that their influence has been felt more in the economically developed countries in Europe and Asia. They understand this as being the result of difficulty with communication rather than other cultural barriers. Interestingly though it is the developing countries which have embraced more fully the concept of 'holistic orientation'. This means that professionals consider the effects of their therapy on every aspect of the life of the person with autism and their family. In the developed countries, where universities have very specialised departments, professionals work within their own area often in isolation from those in different departments with little joint planning (Schopler and Mesibov, 2000).

The range and unpredictability of the potential influences which might dictate whether a country adopts a particular way of working with people with autism is illustrated by Schopler and Mesibov (2000). They compare why England has been less inclined towards adopting the Freudian view of working than France. They cite England's 'traditional commitment to rationality and empiricism' (p.13) as the reason for our reticence to embrace a philosophy which had not been carefully tested and evidenced. In France, however, the psychoanalytical view of the nature and origins of autism became entrenched in French consciousness by an extraordinary chain of events. A television strike in 1974 left only one programme continuously running to an audience of 50 million people. This happened to be a documentary about the work of Bruno Bettelheim. This celebratory view of Bettelheim's work with no challenge to the ideas put forward came to dominate psychiatric thinking. Schopler and Mesibov (2000) claim that much of the contrary evidence to the effectiveness of Bettelheim's approach is still resisted today as French psychiatry takes pride in its historical independence from international trends. TEACCH does have its supporters within France however. For example, Paul Trehin (cited, Randall and Parker 1999) a French parent and a member of Autisme France states that Autisme - France recommends TEACCH because it produces 'warm professionals'. Trehin attributes this warmth to TEACCH giving professionals an,

In-depth knowledge of autism from all points of view (medical, psychological, educational, social mainstreaming, affective) but with the professionals remaining open and approachable (p.188)

While English supporters of TEACCH may refer to its research base as a reason for its adoption the French response seems more emotionally based, corresponding perhaps to oft quoted perceptions of the difference in character between the two nations.

Sigman and Capps (1997) identify that services such as TEACCH emerge, 'because of an individual or group who have committed themselves to developing a comprehensive intervention' (p.177). Theo. Peeters is one such individual who

in 1980 established in Antwerp the Opleidingscentrum Autisme, a nonprofit facility specialising in the training of professionals working with people with autism. This centre is closely modelled on the principles of TEACCH

.....experience at the TEACCH Division of the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) has shown us that the dream of having a nationwide program offering lifelong continuity of services specialized in autism does not belong to the world of Utopia alone: it can be realized – it has been realized. If this is possible in North Carolina, why not in Flanders and other parts of Europe? (Peeters 2000, p. 45)

This centre has established for itself an international reputation. However, Peeters notes that in spite of efforts to introduce TEACCH as a comprehensive programme based around a well researched understanding of how people with autism operate within the world, many Europeans still hold a very narrow view of it. Rather than realising that it is 'a philosophy from which practical guidelines are derived' they view it 'strictly as a set of prescriptions' (p.57). Professionals may then apply techniques which are not appropriate to the individual. Certainly I have witnessed teachers using picture timetables with pupils who cannot interpret picture material. The professionals have associated picture timetables with TEACCH without thinking through what use these really serve. Peeters (2000) emphasises two aspects of the TEACCH programme, parents as cotherapists and training. He argues that the providers of training cannot be the same bodies that campaign for an increase in training as they may be seen to have a vested interest. Rather parent groups should be supported in identifying clearly the services they require for their children. It is they who need to call for training. During my visit to Division TEACCH I met with Betty Thompson, a parent advocate at the Autism society of North Carolina. I learned from her that the parent group has a very strong relationship with Division TEACCH. As with the Antwerp Experience they have campaigned together for improved services and access to training. TEACCH professionals speak at meetings arranged by the parent group and parents participate in research. However, the two bodies remain distinct from each other, serving different needs and with their own agendas. It is a collaborative relationship with both groups coming together over key issues. I realised from this that a potential development for The Autism Centre within Sheffield would be to work more closely with local parent support groups, to define with them a common set of goals. Together we can form a strong lobbying force which can offer practical, researched solutions to service rather than only identifying the problems.

Peeters (2000) also recognises the role the public can play here. With his colleagues Peeters mounted a comprehensive publicity campaign involving all aspects of the media. The aim of this was to convince the public that autism was a 'natural catastrophe' and that those affected by it and their families should be viewed accordingly as 'victims'. Therefore, the argument claimed, these like any other victim should be helped by the taxpayer. While many might object to the

negativity of the concept of 'victim of autism' (Billington, 2000), Peeters was counting on an 'aroused and mobilized public to get governments to turn their interest toward and act on a particular problem' (p.46). This may indicate, however, a cultural difference between the Belgians and the English. In a post Thatcher society, still influenced by a philosophy of only needing to be responsible for one's own interests, it is difficult to imagine arousing a degree of national fervour sufficient to compel the government to act on behalf of people with autism.

A UK example of TEACCH adoption

In 1989 in Northamptonshire The Society for the Autistically Handicapped (SFTAH), a group set up and run by parents, called together the three statutory organisations –Education, Social Services and Health. Concerned at the lack of facilities in the county for people with autism and their families the four parties agreed to import the TEACCH philosophy. They selected this option because of its high reputation for the quality of the research upon which it is founded and for the comprehensiveness of its services for people with autism (Preece et al., 2000). While significant progress has been made in terms of autism provision, gaining the county a nationwide reputation as a model of good practice, a number of challenges have been identified by Preece et al., (2000) to importing the approach.

One of these is fragmentation of services. In spite of a commitment by all agencies to work towards comprehensive service provision, differences in use of language between the services and the need to respond to different legislation has resulted in the need for SFTAH to revisit the same issues repeatedly in order to convince different factions of the validity of the approach. This is not even just a cross service issue as some departments within the same service also demonstrated more resistance to the TEACCH approach than others.

A natural inclination towards scepticism has been another obstacle to development. Services have started from a point of wanting to find reasons for not adopting the TEACCH model rather than identifying the reasons why they should. Preece et al. (2000) attribute this to three factors; dislike of change, dislike of language and concerns about the adoption of external approaches. The very 'national characteristics' which helped to resist the influence of Freudian views now proved a resistant force to the introduction of this American approach. Some rejected the approach because of a dislike of the terminology used. Terms which are culturally neutral in the US such as, mental retardation, are viewed as offensive in the UK. Similarly TEACCH uses the descriptors of high and low functioning to describe the skill level of people with autism. In our culture, which values political correctness in use of language, these terms are viewed negatively. Preece et al (2000) also note a clear antipathy within the UK to adoption of ideas from other countries. TEACCH was viewed as the latest 'American gimmick'. In addition TEACCH's recognition of the unique 'specialness' of autism conflicted with a national drive towards normalisation and

inclusion. SFTAH has attempted to counteract these arguments by stressing that the needs of the culture of autism override national culture. The social expectations of people with autism may change within cultures but the methods needed to enable these to be learned do not.

In spite of these challenges through persistence and example the past ten years has seen a great deal of development within Northamptonshire. It does now provide a countywide model of services to children with autistic spectrum disorders. Hundreds of parents and professionals from across the UK have attended TEACCH training sessions there and other local authorities have used this as a model for developing their own practice. In this respect TEACCH has been more influential here than in its own neighbouring states. The state of South Carolina, for example, neighbour to North Carolina has not adopted the TEACCH model. In spite of people travelling across the world to learn from this practice this neighbouring state has remained dismissive in its attitude. Perhaps rivalry between neighbours can be an even stronger barrier to the sharing of ideas than cultural differences between nations.

Visiting Division TEACCH

In March 2002 I spent four days in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, observing the work of Division TEACCH. Previously I had flown into Atlanta, Georgia and driven from there to North Carolina. Making this journey it immediately became apparent the enormous difference in land mass between the region of Sheffield, 150 square miles and North Carolina, 48,843 square miles (Marsden 1990). The geography of North Carolina is diverse and can be divided approximately into three regions: the rolling heartland of the Piedmont, the Mountains and the Coast. Driving for four hours between the cities of Asheville (NC) and Chapel Hill (NC) I understood the need for the multiple centres. The distances are too far for families to travel to a single state centre for support. Also the areas are quite different from each other in terms of culture and lifestyle. Asheville, for example, is a relatively small mountain town with a relaxed pace while Chapel Hill and its sister cities of Durham and Raleigh form a busy triangle of prosperous new technology industries. Previously when considering importing TEACCH to Sheffield I thought we would need to replicate the same number of centres, in order to remain true to the TEACCH model. I had not understood fully the role of the centres. In North Carolina I realised at once how nonsensical this was. Sheffield would only need one centre to serve the city and surrounding region. Immediately this made TEACCH seem much more accessible as a model.

Since my visit to TEACCH I have realised how misplaced so many of my expectations were. Over the years I had formed images of what TEACCH was and what it could provide which I had then come to view as facts. Perhaps this attests to the power of the way in which the philosophy has been packaged and promoted. Or maybe it is more like a game of Chinese whispers. One person

suggests that there are possibilities for employment for people with autism but the listener hears this as employment for all with autism. I imagined Chapel Hill to be a small American town of white clapboard homes, the typical image of small town America that I had seen in many Hollywood films. I even believed that the population would consist of a particularly large proportion of people with autism although now I cannot understand why I ever imagined the numbers would be higher than in the rest of the population. I thought everyone with autism would have a job, families would be supported in every aspect of life and everyone in the town would have a good understanding of the needs of people with autism. At the very least, even if they did not have direct experience of people with autism I imagined that the general population of North Carolina would know the name and role of TEACCH in the same way that any Sheffield resident would know of the steel industry.

It was a surprise, therefore, to arrive in a large, busy university town with heavy traffic where I could not immediately spot people with autism. I stopped at a local supermarket to buy supplies and looked carefully for the employees who had autism but none were apparent. Nor did there appear to be any working at my hotel. The images in my head began to be replaced by the realisation that life was as real here as in the UK. Perhaps some of the local population might be as unfamiliar with TEACCH as some people in Sheffield would be about The Autism Centre. I began to understand that I needed to learn about TEACCH again from the beginning, to put aside my false assumptions and observe the reality.

Division TEACCH has recently been resited to a purpose built building five minutes drive from the centre of Chapel Hill. Although the staff expressed some concerns over aspects of the design, such as less available space, to the visitor it is a smart, clean, welcoming building (Appendix 1). You can park easily outside in the visitor's car park and you are greeted immediately upon entering the building. For parents who are anxious about taking their child for diagnosis these issues are important. There is a comfortable waiting area just inside the entrance with some play toys for children. Useful information about autism and services offered by TEACCH is readily available. This is a definite contrast to the facilities at our campus in Sheffield. The Autism Centre has no definable space. Training sessions are often held in rooms which clearly belong to other disciplines and there is no sense of being in an environment which can provide useful information on Autism. I could feel the effects of the TEACCH environment in focusing my own attention on autism and would like to achieve this for my own students and visitors within Sheffield.

Descending in the lift to the lower floor I met Jill Cagle, the visitor co-ordinator who made me comfortable and enabled me to view the introductory video which described the services TEACCH can offer. These consist of a diagnostic clinic which more importantly than labelling provides an assessment of learning need, strategies for support and guidance on appropriate educational placement. Follow up support is offered to the family by one of a team of therapists who will also advise the relevant school if it is one which has affiliated to the TEACCH

programme. The role of the therapist reminded me of what we would term specialist outreach teachers with the main difference being that they supported the family more significantly than might happen in the UK, where the focus would be more on school support. TEACCH also offers a small, model classroom attended by four children four mornings a week, with the children being visited at home every other week on the fifth day. The classroom is staffed by a teacher and an assistant with support from students on placement. Two afternoons a week the classroom hosts a pre-school group for four children with a similar group held on the other two afternoons in Raleigh, about an hour's drive away. TEACCH runs a supported employment programme and operates one group home. It offers a comprehensive training programme and organises a number of events to bring practitioners together to share good practice. TEACCH no longer operates specialist classrooms based within schools. Fundamental to its philosophy is that the role of TEACCH is to demonstrate exemplary practice and to train others in how to achieve it. It is then up to the relevant service provider to take up the challenge. Bok (1982) notes that critics of the American principle of universities supporting the local community argue that it can take academics away from their real job, that of pushing the frontiers of learning. Time might be better spent on reading and research than providing services that other organisations can manage perfectly well. With the budget constraints imposed on Division TEACCH by a state which is struggling financially these issues are being carefully considered as the department redefines its priorities.

I observed a 'mom's support group' facilitated by a parent employee of TEACCH and also attended by Dr. Lee Marcus, a senior member of the TEACCH programme. Three mums attended and the agenda for this session was to discuss home schooling. The group also raised the issue of falling numbers within the support group and suggested possible reasons for it. This was a very similar discussion to those I have heard in the UK. Difficulty with timing as some mothers would be working, problems with childcare or transport or perhaps a positive sign that more people were feeling better supported generally and less in need of this group. Previous to my visit to NC I would have imagined that TEACCH parent support groups would have been over subscribed and attended by many. To see how few actually attended the session helped me to realise the value of the current work carried out by The Autism Centre where attendance for events is often high. Having asked ourselves the same questions though of how to bring people together for support I felt an affinity with the team at TEACCH. I could see that we were working towards similar goals and facing familiar problems.

With regard to education I was surprised too that many of the concerns heard in the UK were also being raised within this group; lack of understanding about autism as children moved through to secondary age schooling, pupils being supported by staff untrained in autism, lack of social opportunities outside of school, the restrictions of a rigid curriculum and bullying by peers. This was not in keeping with my image of 'TEACCH Town' at all. I could not understand how these problems could be happening in the place I thought had solved all the

problems. Moreover I had a sense that the parents were keen to ask me questions about practice in the UK as though they suspected the answers to the problems might be found there. In a sense this made TEACCH feel more manageable to me. I could recognise the issues and engage with the processes of working round them. An organisation struggling to meet the demands of a variety of commitments while faced with severe budget cuts could describe The Autism Centre as equally as Division TEACCH. If both centres are operating within similar contexts then there would appear to be no reason why the positive aspects of TEACCH might not transfer to Sheffield. TEACCH was becoming a much more manageable model to me and one I could envisage helping to establish.

During my visit I met with Dr. Roger Cox, Director of Training. Roger advised me on the programme of training offered. The emphasis is on evidencing that attendees become better practitioners. Therefore, during a five day training programme participants are given the opportunity to work with children from the pre-school classroom. The training programme is staged also so that participants can progress onto higher levels. For example, first one might attend a one day introduction to the philosophy, then a three or five day course involving practical experience of *operating within* a TEACCH environment. Next participants would attend a five day programme where they *create* a TEACCH environment. Finally they attend another programme to learn how to teach the setting up of a TEACCH environment. From a business perspective what this does is that it creates a repeat market as participants move through the levels. However, this raises the ethical issue of whether the main focus for the training is to improve service provision or to raise income. In the face of a tremendous cut in the budget TEACCH needs to raise significant funds to maintain its services. Therefore, the money raised by training does support the other services. However it remains a delicate balance. As UK universities are urged to become entrepreneurial (Barnett 2000) similar issues arise within my own department. I recognise the need that the services we offer need to be paid for but am uncomfortable with the notion of making disability into a profit making venture. Barnett (2000) argues that in this age of 'supercomplexity' the new universities must play a role in helping people to comprehend and live within it. Altruism and recognising social responsibility toward vulnerable members of society is one way in which a university could perform its 'Enlightenment function'. The role of the university in influencing service provision by bridging the gap between academic theory and professional practice has long been recognised (Schon 1983, cited Johnston 1995). The defence of any Autism Centre at Sheffield Hallam should lie not in its ability to make a profit but as a means of enabling the University to contribute to its local community. The adoption of TEACCH would then occur in a spirit of internationalisation, learning from and contributing to best practice within the world with the aim of improving quality of life, rather than through the more economic driven concept of globalisation (Jones 1998). I sensed some element of this conflict within Division TEACCH itself. While Dr. Cox emphasised the value of short, concentrated training packages Eric

Schopler, in conversation with me, admired aspects of our own educational programme at Sheffield Hallam. He recognised the value in building relationships with practitioners over time and having the opportunity to explore ideas and share experiences. This supports my personal view of what we do and made me wonder about how economic pressures to reduce student contact time would affect the notion of the evolving practitioner. I am aware that my own teaching style is moving more towards lecture and content coverage rather than exploration of issues as contact time with students is reduced. Dr. Cox recognises another dilemma, however, the restriction on flexibility of response if staff are committed to regular ongoing teaching sessions. Dr. Cox reported that the maintenance of such programmes would be highly problematic for a staff who often find themselves all over the world with training and consultancy. In the same way I have found my opportunities to contribute to events outside of the university limited as I need remain on campus for teaching sessions.

This need to balance demands and responsibilities has also impacted upon the TEACCH research programme. Responsible for over 50 books, chapters and articles (Mesibov 2002) TEACCH has made one of the most significant research contributions to autism over the past 40 years. However, my impression was that training has now taken priority over research. The research programme is focused at present on revising past tools for assessment and revisiting previously published materials. Dr. Schopler recognises that with the current budget constraints it is not possible for Division TEACCH to be focused on too many activities. The realisation that even TEACCH is having to prioritise in this way causes me concern that The Autism Centre is attempting, with a staff of only two, to develop our service on too many fronts. Currently our two staff members are responsible for the; organisation of the regular taught programmes, development of all teaching and marketing materials, recruitment of students, evaluation of a pilot project, development of e-learning materials, establishment of a visiting speaker programme, contribution to local, regional and national developments, contribution to the operation of the School of Education and other bodies within the University, the conducting of research projects, consultancy, development of a new training course, development work with schools in the region, publications, support for individual families and the seeking of new funding sources for future research and development work.

I recognise from the TEACCH experience that such a broad spectrum of activity is unrealistic and a clear action plan to identify priorities needs to be established. The parameters of our work may then be made clear to all parties interested in autism within the region so that there are no unrealistic expectations of what The Autism Centre can achieve.

Based within the School of Medicine the staff of Division TEACCH have little input into educational programmes within the University of North Carolina. This surprised me although cross school teaching in autism between Health and Education does not happen within my own university either. Current governmental initiatives in disability, such as the National Service Framework for

Children, insist upon joint working between education, health and social services (DES 2002). The role of The Autism Centre should be to initiate such collaborative practice across schools within the University so that students may gain an understanding of the perspective of a variety of professionals. There is some opportunity for this within the TEACCH programme through the annual conferences. One of these has a more local focus where practitioners affiliated to TEACCH come together to share practice. The other has a more international dimension. These happen at the same time each year which enables people to plan their attendance and helps them to become a part of people's routine. This would seem to be an excellent model for us to adopt in Sheffield. We could begin with the local focus and then look toward sharing good practice nationally.

As part of our programme of creating a more cohesive policy within Sheffield Hallam University, The Autism Centre also needs to focus on the experience of students with Asperger syndrome who are studying at the University. This is another area where we might be able to offer something in return to TEACCH as I was not aware of any such initiative in place at Chapel Hill. Perhaps we can lead the way in establishing guidelines for exemplary practice in meeting the needs of these students, enabling them to experience all aspects of student life such as maintaining a social life and living away from home.

Division TEACCH employs people with autism within its offices in a variety of positions. This made a powerful impression on me as a visitor. It is a personification of the whole TEACCH philosophy. These employees must be a symbol of hope to so many of the parents who use the TEACCH services. When faced with many bleak reports of how difficult life can be raising someone with autism, to be aware of, while visiting TEACCH, people with autism, enjoying life and operating successfully within the world enables parents to foresee a potentially positive outcome. This commitment to people with autism is demonstrated too by the fact that the majority of the clients for the mobile cleaning crew, operated by TEACCH and which employs people with autism, come from TEACCH employees and their contacts. Perhaps at Sheffield Hallam we can move forward in this direction by facilitating work experience opportunities as well as work placements for people with autism within the School of Education. We are fortunate in Sheffield to have the Resource at King Egbert's School which is leading the way in enabling teenagers with autistic spectrum disorders to experience work (Hesmondhalgh and Breakey 2001). Sheffield Hallam is also the base for Prospects, the National Autistic Society's service for enabling able people with Autism to find employment. The Autism Centre, if it is to represent the best of practice, needs to ensure that it is leading the way in supporting such local based initiatives. TEACCH also employs parents of people with autism in a variety of roles. Although it is not immediately apparent to visitors who is a parent and who is not the ability of these employees to understand the parental perspective must be supportive in making sure TEACCH remains parent focused. These employees also reflect the desire many parents have to 'give back' to TEACCH for the support they have received in the past.

This gives a real sense of TEACCH as an evolving entity, an embodiment of principle and practice.

During my visit to TEACCH I observed the preschool classroom and the group for two year olds. The classroom is designed to be a model of exemplary practice. It caters for four preschool children who attend for four mornings a week with classroom staff making home visits on a rota basis on the fifth day. Two afternoons a week a group of four even younger children (from two years old) attend a classroom session with their parent. The classroom was highly staffed on the occasion I observed. Susan Boswell, the Director of the TEACCH preschool programme was able to explain to me the philosophy behind the teaching sessions which were conducted by the classroom teacher, a learning support assistant and two student interns. I was impressed with the work taking place within the classroom. It was a real life working experience. Perhaps better staffed than most classrooms but it was not unrealistically tidy or resourced to a degree that would be impossible to replicate. As a teacher experienced in early years provision I was very impressed with the degree of involvement in the teaching sessions from the pupils. They were keen to cooperate with activities and reaching out for new ones with excitement. The atmosphere was calm, parents were involved and the children were clearly making progress. However, many children who were on the waiting list would not be able to secure a place within the classroom owing to the small numbers. It is hoped that they will be helped by the other role of the classroom as a 'hands on' training facility for professionals. On first seeing the classroom I hoped that we might replicate something similar within The Autism Centre. The daily contact with children with autism, opportunities for research, the model of good practice, all of these would have numerous benefits. However, on reflection, like many of the services offered by TEACCH we already have examples of excellent practice occurring across the Sheffield region with all ages of pupils with autism. We could work with partnership schools, identify model classrooms and offer student placements within these. This would raise the profile of our schools, help to establish a consistency of practice as schools become more aware of how others are operating and establish potential partners in research for the University. In turn the University will be able to keep schools informed of new developments.

Future developments

I came away from my visit to Division TEACCH enthused and excited to develop the role of The Autism Centre within Sheffield. In a sense I understood that Division TEACCH already exists in Sheffield. Over the years services have followed the example of the TEACCH philosophy and adopted practices such as the provision of structure. We have a diagnostic centre based within the Health service and therapists in the form of support teachers based within Education. Training is available from the University as well as several other sources. We support people with autism in finding and maintaining employment through The Resource and Prospects. What we lack is cohesion, a clear identification of how

all these services compliment each other and the opportunity for professionals to meet and share practice. It would be regressive for The Autism Centre to attempt to set up these services as TEACCH did originally. Rather we need to adopt a facilitatory role in bringing together service providers and users to formulate a clear plan for the development of services. A designated site would be helpful where information is available on all services, comfortable rooms for training and for people to meet together. Resources could be available such as videos demonstrating good practice. People with autism would work within the building. Autism support teachers would operate from the building. Ideally this building would also house the diagnostic and assessment centre where health professionals and educationalists could work together to assess the learning and life needs of individuals with autism. A research centre within the building would work with all agencies to develop more effective materials so that people with autism might have their needs more effectively met.

In order to move forward with achieving this ideal The Autism Centre will need to do the following:

- Establish a clear set of aims and principles so that both within and outside the University it is evident what we are trying to achieve
- Work closely with the Parent support groups to identify joint aims and lobby for these
- Identify good practice within local services for people with autism
- Help the promotion and sharing of this practice through workshops, conferences and publications
- Enable visitors from outside the region to experience good practice within services in partnership with The Autism Centre
- Monitor and disseminate information on new developments in autism throughout the world
- Enable the University to become an exemplary model of provision for students with Asperger syndrome
- Secure funding for research projects focused on improving practice
- Facilitate employment opportunities for people with autism within the University
- Identify a suitable site for The Autism Centre and raise the funds to develop it

While this may seem an enormous undertaking the example of Division TEACCH has clearly demonstrated that it is possible. The commitment to Autism of families and professionals within Sheffield is tremendous. If the plan is constructed carefully enough and all relevant parties feel some ownership of it then success will be guaranteed. I no longer see TEACCH as the model impossible to achieve but rather the inspiration for what is possible.

Conclusion

The opportunity to travel to North Carolina to experience the work of Division TEACCH has enabled me to envisage how The Autism Centre within my own

university might develop. I now have a greater understanding of the principles behind the philosophy and can see how to build on the TEACCH experience rather than try to replicate it. TEACCH belongs in some respects to its own time and context. It evolved to meet the needs of people with autism within North Carolina. The principles and philosophy can travel across culture but the way in which these are put into practice will and should reflect the values and experiences of each organisation adopting them. Some warn of 'therapist drift', where the trainee over time, often unconsciously, moves away from strict adherence to the practice originally demonstrated by the trainer (Powell and Jordan, 1996). Division TEACCH is certainly keen to maintain close links and ongoing training with those who adopt the philosophy in order to avoid this. For this reason I expect that TEACCH would favour the Northampton model over the Antwerp one, where Peeters and his team have become more independent of Division TEACCH. However, perhaps therapist drift is nothing more than people adapting philosophies to meet the particular needs of people within their own communities. I am sure that in spite of evolving to meet the needs of our own community, The Autism Centre will maintain links with Division TEACCH through the sharing of information and by contributing to each other's training programmes. I am certain that it is the opportunity to have visited the actual TEACCH premises, to meet with the staff there and share experiences that will ensure future collaboration between our two centres.

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Appendix One: Photographs of the Division TEACCH building, Carrboro, North Carolina

1. Reception staff
2. Exterior of the building
3. Diagnostic play room
4. Waiting area