Empathy Versus Discipline: Critical Analysis

Discipline, attention and love is crucial when trying to encourage a juvenile delinquent's decision on making a life change. In the book, Last Chance in Texas (Hubner, 2005), a "high-security institution" for juvenile delinquents is the main area where life changes are vital for these youth's lives. Giddings State School prides itself on supervision, obedience and most of all, affection. "You can change these kids with love and discipline. You can change them with just love, but it takes longer. But you can't just change them with just discipline.' I've always, always remembered that." (Last Chance in Texas, pg. 101), which was said to Sandy Brown a few months after being hired as the football coach at Giddings State School. The juveniles sent to this school have pasts that they are also not proud of, many things they had no control over and many things they have done in response to the deep hurt that they feel. Although children are affected by their guardians' actions, youths at Giddings are held accountable for the decisions they made that got them into this situation.

The institution, Giddings State School, uses a four-stage approach to help at-risk youth back into society in a group known as Capital Offenders Group (COG). This group is used to overcome help overcome the "thinking errors" given by the youth who are in attendance. These "thinking errors" created by the staff, come in 9 different ways; deceiving, downplaying, avoiding, blaming, making excuses, jumping to conclusions, acting helpless, overreacting and feeling special." During these four stages, students of Giddings work on rehabilitation skills and social efforts with the support of the staff members. Psychologists, caseworkers, doctors, therapists and coordinators are a lot employees of the Capital Offenders Group. The three most important steps that a juvenile can learn to avoid "thinking errors" are communication with words, accepting criticism without feeling angry, and developing introspection. A child must understand what is going on in the world and why things happen the way they do, before rehabilitating themselves.

To reach a rehabilitative state, the students must be able to open up about their life. Relating to one another can be very beneficial for youth, making it so they do not feel alone. Accepting criticism and learning to speak can be new ways these children develop themselves. Most people, create a stronger outer shell when bad things happen to them and they bottle their emotions up to not show weakness which could actually harm them in the future. According to the book, the youth in this school begin to show empathy during these meetings. Dr. Linda Reyes, who is the Texas Youth Commission deputy, states that 95% of the students at Giddings are capable of change through these rehabilitative strategies because they can show "empathy."

The next step in the sharing sessions is the re-enactment of the childhood stories the youth tells. This creates a space where the child is able to reflect on themselves and their family members around them. The students often found themselves believing if something happened to them, it was okay to do it to others. Reverse role-playing was very useful to the COG because it gave the juveniles a chance to play the victim of their crime rather than only seeing it in their perspective. Empathy is also shown using this tactic because they develop feelings as the victim rather than the perpetrator. It also encourages them to stop using the thinking errors because they realize accepting responsibility for their actions is better than shutting them out.

Being able to confront their situations helps these youths to release what they have buried inside. The students get to reflect on what has been done and also can learn other ways to react to things differently the next time they encounter a similar situation. After they share and re-enact their story they now reflect on the fourth and final stage of the approach to help at-risk youth, their “crime stories.” The COG believes that if they focus on the acts that need to be changed, they will be more successful with the students. If the children were not forced to go through these phases, actions to change behaviors may not be obtained. Bad habits turn into lifestyles which is what the COG are trying to avoid with practice of new behaviors.

Beneficial programs such as sports is also implemented within the system of Giddings State School. Students that are doing well in school and treatment are the ones that get involved in these activities. The “goal” of the football team and other sports teams is to succeed in their overall “success plan” in life, not to win the game. A young boy named, Tommy, involved in the Giddings Indians football team, showed a negative behavior while playing a game and receiving the ball. The referee was not happy with the reaction of Tommy. Both coaches, Brown and Wards said they understood he was excited, but wanted to mention to the rest of the team to be aware of your actions because some people will not take it the same way as you mean it.

“Empathy” plays a huge role in helping a child to the feelings of others and their own feelings. The way children are treated in their home life shows when they are unable to feel empathy to others as they get older. Knutson, DeGarmo, and Reid (2004) shows the correlation between neglectful parenting and criminal behaviors. “Deficient or neglectful parenting has also been linked to adolescent antisocial behavior in longitudinal studies of childhood temperament, parenting, and adolescent crime, and to the development of violent, or criminal behavior in adolescence and adulthood (Knutson, DeGarmo & Reid 2004). They state that many of these behaviors are more likely to show in adolescent years. Giddings State School is a place where empathy is shown to and from these young individuals, because they are apart of something bigger and they are important inside this institution. A sense of belonging and positive role models make a difference to youths when they are used to growing up in a place where they are not cared for.

A child’s brain is also not fully developed until their early twenties. Before the world understood this, we treated delinquent children as criminal adults, which made it very hard to rehabilitate. Now since we have more research shown that makes this statement true, institutions can implement skills that deter future crime behaviors from these children. The Texas Youth Commission (TYC) gave Giddings State School a chance, instead of only punishing them. Stated by Krisberg (2005), a study done by Pasawerat (1991) is an example of the connection between juvenile delinquents and neglect on youth. “66% of boys and 39% of girls” reported they have been abused or neglected.

In the book, they not only talk about the boys in the school, they also talk about girls. “North Texas chapter of the Parents of Murdered Children”(Hubner, 2005) is a group where parents participate in helping certain children get a second chance at life who victimized their child. It seems like it would be hard for some parents to feel that justice is served by letting these children live their life when their children’s life has gotten taken away. Society should focus on rehabilitation, even if the victimization is towards your own child.

The lives of the students in Giddings State School were hard to read at some points in the book, because it really shows you what a hard life can do to a youth and if they are not lucky enough

to land themselves in a rehabilitation program and instead get stuck in rotation in the criminal justice system, their life can be ruined. Safety issues of both the staff and the students could be scary sometimes, because issues involving racism and stereotypes. Stereotypes are engraved in our minds about different races and its formed from society. The stereotypical ideas are hard to control sometimes. Giddings State School some how found ways that the youth would feel a sense of safety and ignore their previous thoughts on police officers, teachers, coaches, psychologists, etc.

Giddings State School is proven to work in the rural areas of Texas, the challenges in taking this program to scale, would be that there is a different population in other areas of the United States. It might be harder to have all of these resources and people helping bring something this big together. Living in Morgan Hill we have the James F. James Ranch, which is near my home. Within the 14 years that I have lived there, there has been a few escapees that always end up getting caught. After touring this juvenile ranch, I realized that this rehabilitative ranch does much more good, then a jail would ever do for a child. This program reminds me of Giddings State School, because they also have a school in there with classes and also believe it is beneficial for the youth to join sports. Recently, we are starting to shift the way the United States thinks about criminal juveniles. We are starting to use rehabilitative tactics to help these children return back to society and not re-commit. Our recividism rates would be much lower for juveniles if we added more programs like the ranch and the Giddings State School. I believe that these types of programs also encourage family connections. Therapy sessions included families within the book and this can be a way to keep these children close to their families and feel important. If these programs were implemented in each country, families could participate in classes and better themselves in their child’s life. This would help the families relationships to rekindle and rehabilitate where needed.

Some questions that I had while reading the book was what are the punishments surrounding escapes. How do the children graduate and how long does it take for a child to graduate. I would also want to know how they go about hiring staff, does everybody get a chance to work in these facilities or do they have to be advanced in certain subjects? Have there been any mistreatment of children within the facility of Giddings State School?

Overall, this book was eye-opening, depressing and encouraging all at the same time. It helped me to understand that we are moving forward in the criminal justice system, and more importantly with out juveniles because that it where our adult criminals stem from. I definitely would recommend this book to anyone interested in working with juveniles. The book opens up different tactics that can be used within our criminal justice system with our juveniles that are positive. Giddings State School is a great program that helped many juveniles to return back to society and not re-offend. The idea that children are children and all they need is supervision, discipline and attention to grow up to be good moral humans is shown a lot within reading this book.

References

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