

Student work placement in Build on Belief, a unique organization in London

(overview essay)

Tereza Houšková, Michal Růžička, Lucie Hrbáčová, Tim Sampey

Abstract: *The paper describes the functioning of an organization in London called Build on Belief (BoB), which, in a unique way, provides treatment to persons with substance addiction. This facility is special for its management, because the services are run by people who had gone through addiction and now abstain. The second distinctive feature of the organization is the attitude to clients. The person is always in the first place, only then a addiction problems come. There are no such organizations in the Czech Republic; the only equivalent in terms of services is the Kontaktní centrum (K-centrum). This paper is based on materials gathered during a two-month work placement in the BoB facility organized in cooperation with the Institute of Special Education Studies, Faculty of Education, Palacký University in Olomouc. The participants in the work placement analysed the BoB facility and made theoretical as well as practical conclusions in order to enrich the Czech practical environment.*

Keywords: *Build on Belief, BoB, work placement, workshop, training, addicts, comparison, human being, United Kingdom, Czech Republic*

1 Introduction

Build on Belief is a registered non-governmental organization based in London. Its clients are people who are addicted to alcohol or other non-alcoholic substances. A special feature of the organization is the staff consisting mainly of persons who had gone through drug addiction. The idea is based on their own experience with the target group of drug addicts and a higher degree of empathy towards these clients. The principle is also very supportive on the part of the clients, who are naturally motivated by seeing a chance of being cured and living without addiction.

The main idea of BoB is to give the users a feeling of a safe place, peace and acceptance, just as each family should provide. It is well known that usually it is the family of persons with drug addiction that does not work very well; therefore the objective of BoB is to represent a symbolic family for its users and offer them a helping hand.

This is not a therapeutic service, but rather a set of social services, through which the clients are supported to find their way to a life without drugs. The clients are welcome to come to the centre at any time during working hours and join the programme to a degree they like. The clients can use a food and beverage service and basic hygienic services; they can also join women's or men's non-coeducational groups. Additionally, the clients have an opportunity to develop their natural potential in a music and art workshop, use the PC and the Internet, join film clubs, attend yoga and reiki lessons or just have a chat. The whole idea of the organization is based on a strong community feeling, not making any differences between those who abstain and those who still use addictive substances.

2 Build of Belief

The organization was originally a small badminton club founded by two friends who felt they had to do something to avoid falling into their long-lasting problem with addiction. Over time, the club changed into a service called the Service Users Drug Reference Group (SUDRG), which in the course of a few years has grown into seven branches located across London with a new name Build on Belief.

All centres are governed by the same philosophy, but each is distinctive in its own way. This distinctiveness is a result of not only various services, but also the approaches of the leaders and volunteers. In terms of time, the facility works in two ways: The first way is a usual weekday service, the other way is a weekend service, the primary objective of which is to provide services for drug addicts, who often visit other state institutes during the week. These institutes often provide space for weekend services delivered by BoB and especially by their inter-institutional partners. The use of the space seems beneficial for those clients who visit the same familiar environment. At the same time it is easy for these organizations (this particularly involves social and emergency centres) to cooperate in this way in addressing various cases and situations.

To ensure cohesion of the community, various thematic sessions or picnics are held. Naturally, the work is not just about friendship and entertainment, but mainly about support and help – not only mental but also social and material. One client services include exchanging used syringes, which goes hand in hand with advising the client about intravenous application of addictive substances, which might reduce the risks of diseases, and promotion of BoB among the clientele, who primarily come for a different reason.

The hierarchy of employees and volunteers is also very specific. Almost everyone, including the founders of the organization, used to be active users of addictive substances and went through numerous facilities offering help to people with addictions. This was the reason for establishing BoB; the founders tried to improve the services for drug addicts, which they themselves had missed on their way from addiction. For the employees of the organization their path was often similar, starting with a service of this kind. Sometimes the clients already abstain, sometimes they try to get rid of their addiction. There are also clients who are still unaware of their addiction and they use the organization as an escape from their daily stereotype. Once any of the clients decides to abstain, they are considered by the management of the organization as persons interested in the community life of the organization and are offered the role of a volunteer and can take part in a special training. The aim of this training is to teach the participants to communicate openly, listen to other persons, pay attention to their own mental hygiene, and cover many other topics associated with the mission of the organization. Even in case of volunteering for the organization the clients are provided with funding to cover their travel expenses to the organization and all services offered by the organization on that day. They also have an opportunity to take part in initial and final day sharing, in which they can express their feelings, opinions and ideas concerning potential improvement of BoB functioning.

If a volunteer is confident and reliable, he/she can take the role of a team leader. This position requires a sense of responsibility and knowledge of the way of functioning of the facility in terms of its philosophy, clients and technical aspects. The main job is to have an overview of the current situation in the centre and overall as well as individual tuning of the clients. The task of the leader is to develop and maintain a safe and secure place where all members feel accepted. In this way, beginning leaders have an opportunity to encounter many challenging situations, in which they test their own ability to respond, which in turn strengthens their values and qualities to be used in their future personal and occupational life.

The final step in the professional growth in BoB is to become the manager of one of the branches. This position is offered to individuals who have a desire to remain in the organization as an employee. This model of promotion clearly motivates the volunteers for professional growth.

3 Course of the work placement

The first cooperation between Czech Republic and BoB started at 2009 in P-centrum which is a non-profit organization working in the field of drug dependency (counselling, CBT, follow up programs, primary prevention). During 3 years of sharing therapeutic activities the Brief intervention program for methamphetamine users was built up (Růžicka, 2012).

The international work placement was organized by the Institute of Special Education Studies, Faculty of Education, Palacký University for the students of the Master's and Doctoral degree as an opportunity to develop their professional and language abilities and skills. A prerequisite for participation in the placement was knowledge of English and interest in the field, i.e. working with clients with addictive behaviour. Previous experience with similar clientele was greatly appreciated. The main opportunity was to learn about an organization led by former users of addictive substances. During the two-month work placement the students were supervised by the director Tim Sampey, who made it possible for the students to learn thoroughly about the whole facility including the positives and negatives it brings.

During the first month of the placement, apart from learning about the facility, the objective was to try out the position of a volunteer and a team leader. An integral part of the placement was participation in training seminars for beginning volunteers in BoB and learning about the organization's know-how and mission. The principle of the organization is an approach to people as human beings. Only then the clients are seen as persons with addiction. This attitude makes BoB a unique organization in the field. Even this paper could be a source of contradiction concerning the word client, which is frequently used for better understanding. However, the organization itself never speaks about clients but rather persons visiting BoB or BoB service users.

During the second month of the placement the students focused on their own contribution to the organization and developed several workshops primarily for the service users. The workshops were designed to encourage the clients to do common work, creative activities, to gain knowledge about the surrounding world and about themselves. The first series of workshops was designed as a knowledge test; the second series was a drama therapy intervention, which was called a drama workshop for better understanding. All workshops were organized as open groups, during which the clients were free to come or leave. The activities were designed so that the students had a natural opportunity to approach each person and support them in their knowledge and skills, develop their awareness in various personality and cultural aspects and strengthen or build their healthy self-esteem. The main component of the seminars was group dynamics and cohesion, which gradually formed into a stable core of the group.

Each workshop (i.e. the knowledge test and drama workshop) was held once a week. The topics of the knowledge test were tailored to the clients' interests; the drama workshops focused on social areas, which the placement participants believed to be appropriate. These areas included the following: Non-verbal communication, prejudices, establishing informal relationships and awareness of one's own problems. The preparation and delivery of the activities was often very demanding due to ethnic differences, a large number of subcultures in a single facility and various intellectual levels. However, as more seminars were organized, it became easier to tailor the

activities to the clients in the centre. Initially, the clients responded suspiciously to the title of the workshop. They were afraid of the drama part, of the fact that they would have to perform in front of other people. However, they understood very quickly that drama was not just about acting out and that this activity was not assessed or accompanied by ridicule or failure. The reward for the students' effort was positive feedback from both the clients and the staff of the centre. Even more valuable feedback was intensive discussion on the topic, which always started spontaneously after the workshops.

4 Discussion

In some aspects, BoB could be compared to the Czech Kontaktní centrum, which provides services in the field of prevention and treatment of addictive behaviour, and focuses on the area of counselling, professional support, social service, i.e. mediation of contacts, assistance in settling official matters with authorities, general assistance, information service, exchange programme (syringes), testing for infectious diseases, hygienic service and food service. All of these services are also provided by BoB. Therefore, the difference is not the scope of the services provided, but the way they are provided; professional qualification of the staff is not strictly required. Build on Belief has the following staff hierarchy:

- Volunteers – former clients, public
- Shadowing team leader – volunteer
- Team leader – promoted
- Branch managers

People who work in BoB usually do not have professional qualification, a fraction of the staff completed a social work course or are completing one. Most of their work experience comes from their drug user history. In the Czech environment it is unusual for abstainers to work in this field without appropriate qualification. Even if ex-users (former users of addictive substances) worked as therapists for example in a therapeutic community or after treatment programmes, they would have to be clear about their past and increase their qualification as well as work experience (Kalina, 2003). In available literature it is difficult to find a mention of an ex-user working in a K-centrum. The staff who work in these centres in the Czech Republic are divided into three groups:

- Social workers, special educators – employees with a university degree in the field
- Health professionals – nurses, employees with a medical degree
- Volunteers – students and public

According to a research study by Macková (2004), the reason for the non-employment of former drug users in services for addicts might be the large number of negative aspects emerging in the work of an ex-user without professional qualification dealing with the target clientele. Macková emphasises the blurred boundaries between the therapist and the client, insufficient detachment of an ex-user therapist and excessive empathy towards the client with the same problem. Another serious risk is the projection of own experiences into the client and a large number of the ex-user's own unresolved problems. On the other hand, an ex-user employee also brings positive aspects. Macková highlights the advantage of a positive model provided to the client represented by the ex-user; own experiences and knowledge of the issue of habit breaking might bring a great deal of sensitivity and tolerance with respect to the client. Despite these advantages, the work of a 'lay' ex-user is a rare concept in the Czech Republic, where emphasis is laid rather on adequate qualification and looking at the addiction from a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual perspective (Radimecký, 2006).

The overall location of care providing organisations in the Czech Republic and in London also differs. While in London the centres are located in places that need not necessarily be associated with the target clientele (usual busy parts of the city), in the Czech Republic these facilities are in remote streets where they do not attract too much attention.

An important difference between the British and Czech organisations is the way of funding. Although BoB is a non-profit organization, it has much better funding than any Czech non-profit organization working with drug addicts. BoB is funded by the state budget and other private contributions. According to the manager, each year there is a struggle for money in the state sphere, which is the same in the Czech Republic. In this struggle however, British centres seem to be more successful. In the Czech Republic, the Kontaktní centrum is governed by Act No. 108/2006 Coll. On social services. Therefore, it is included in the area of social prevention, which according to the law must provide basic social counselling. Still, without additional funding by private subjects, these centres in the Czech Republic would not be able to work as they do.

According to the director of BoB, most of the clients are addicted to cocaine, heroin, crack and alcohol, most of them are 30 to 40 years of age. In the Czech Republic, most users are addicted to methamphetamine, alcohol and medicines; the average age is 30 years.

5 Conclusion

During the work placement in Build of Belief, all participants had sufficient time to learn about the functioning of the organization. The whole centre is a developing subject open to new ideas, innovations and stimuli for further work. During

the placement the students had an opportunity of professional as well as language development. Working in a different language and with culturally different mentality moved the boundaries of perception of each participant. This development was also due to the challenging life situations of the clients, who were influenced by their substance addiction.

According to the head of the organization and the placement supervisor the work placement was beneficial not only for the students but also for the organization. According to Tim Sampey, the director of BoB, the organization appreciated the novel format of the workshops, which helped to reveal new ideas and perspectives of the clients' life situations. The participants – students of special education and future professionals – showed a professional attitude to the clients, quick adaptation in interaction with a wide range of clients and volunteers.

The most important thing the Czech students learned was the attitude to drug addicts, who are in the first place regarded as human beings. The problems that these human beings have and whether they are addicted or not should be considered in the second place. In this respect, BoB is a unique organization, not only in the field of theory but primarily by means of the personal approach of the staff, who had gone through similar life stories and know what exactly helped them.

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Mgr. Tereza Houšková
Institute of Special Education Studies
Faculty of Education
Palacký University in Olomouc
Žižkovo nám. 5
771 40 Olomouc
Czech Republic
E-mail: HouskovaT@seznam.cz

Mgr. Lucie Hrbáčová
Institute of Special Education Studies
Faculty of Education
Palacký University in Olomouc
Žižkovo nám. 5
771 40 Olomouc
Czech Republic
E-mail: lucik.hrbacova@gmail.com

Tim Sampey
Build on Belief
69 Warwick Road
Earls Court
London SW5 9HB
E-mail: timsampey@buildonbelief.org.uk