

I'm OK – You're OK – An update on TA in Schools

I'm OK - You're OK is arguably the most enduring touchstone of Transactional Analysis (TA). Founded by Eric Berne in the 1960s, popularised during the 1970s, many readers may recall a distant reference to TA in their professional training or a personal awareness course. Some readers might have come across references to TA more recently, and most readers may be surprised to discover that children and young people around the country are discovering about TA in classrooms. This article provides an account of how TA is experiencing a renaissance in the UK and that the central arena for this resurgence is in education.

For those readers unfamiliar with TA, it is a humanistic psychological framework that, like many such perspectives, offers ways of understanding;

- how people grow up
- how people communicate
- how people see the world

The distinctive features of TA are the core beliefs underpinning the theoretical concepts. To summarise these are:

- **that people are essentially OK**, hence the 'I'm OK - You're OK' catch-phrase
- **that everyone can think**; make sense of information, consider options and make choices
- **that anyone can change**, learn and grow

For the most part TA has been practised in the context of psychotherapy and counselling. Most practitioners in the UK work in a clinical/talking therapy context. However, there have always been practitioners utilising TA in organisational and educational contexts. Over the past five years there has been a noticeable increase in the rate and range of education professionals using TA concepts in their work.

Over the past couple of years I have been involved in sharing TA ideas with hundreds of educators around the country. As a qualified Transactional Analyst in the field of education I am often invited to contribute to professional development both in terms of formal training events, as well as on-going mentoring and team teaching arrangements. Importantly this work has been in both mainstream and specialist contexts. Some examples of TA being used in special schools and units include the following:

A KS3/4 PRU team in a southern county LEA explored the Cycle of Development model - a distinctive and optimistic approach to promoting emotional development, rooted in TA. Having considered its implications for students the staff used developmental affirmations to form displays around the study areas. Within days students were raising questions about the material, wanting to know more about them, how they worked and whether they could have them for themselves. Staff were struck by how readily this led into extended discussion about individual's emotional needs.

In addition to impacting on students already attending the centre, the staff began to use the model to inform arrangements for induction and reintegration of students to and from mainstream placements. The developmental stages provided a useful framework for tracking the process in establishing a secure placement.

A KS3/4 PRU in south London has been gradually incorporating TA in to its work at a number of levels. Staff supervision is shaped around the TA process and other operational aspects - for example, contracting work with mainstream schools is carried out using three-cornered contracting, a fundamental TA idea. Also, planning programmes for individual students is informed by TA ideas including the Cycle of Development, basic hungers, games and ego-states. Finally, the centre has also trialled ideas for teaching TA directly to students as part of the PSHE curriculum.

A primary special school with an integrated PRU in an inner London LEA began to use the Drama Triangle concept for making greater sense of the psychological games that students (and staff) play in order to get recognition. Not only did staff use ideas about Persecutor, Victim and Rescuer roles, they also found significant value in introducing game theory direct to students.

A number of behaviour support services, learning mentor teams and learning support unit staff have also been using TA, both to make sense of their own experience of working with students but also to share directly with them. Feedback on the impact of TA on practice tends to highlight the following:

1. TA ideas can be applied at a range of levels;
 - Educators can utilise concepts to understand and respond to individual or group needs, to plan and contract intervention.
 - Schools/units can draw on TA ideas to develop strategic and operational aspects, for example, clarifying roles and responsibilities with mainstream and LEA partners, shaping supervision arrangements, structuring staff and student induction
 - Students can benefit directly from learning about TA concepts - it can provide skills and insights to prepare them for life beyond the classroom and generate insights into their experience and relationships
2. TA provides a universal model for understanding and responding to behaviour. In other words it is an approach that does not separate out student/childrens' behaviour from adult/staff behaviour. It provides a framework that takes account of the relational aspects of teaching and learning, thereby recognising the internal process of both student and teacher. It offers a far more extensive agenda than 'behaviour management'
3. As is clear from its underpinning beliefs, TA offers an essentially optimistic perspective for educators. When applied in the learning context greater emphasis is made on promoting growth - as opposed to extending pathology and diagnosis.
4. Whilst TA offers a psychological framework it is also informed by, and complements, systemic theory, and specifically, solution focussed brief therapy techniques. This is an important development for colleagues working in the specialist sector. I sense a growing weariness and wariness amongst educators about purely cognitive/behavioural techniques. TA and related approaches appear to be offering a potent antidote for those who are sceptical about potentially coercive strategies.
5. Finally, a common response has been that TA approaches give colleagues and students a way of making sophisticated human phenomenon highly accessible. It tends to be a very visual approach, emphasising dialogue and experimentation.

The revival of TA in education is supported by a number of recent developments. Firstly, there are a growing number of resources available for educators to promote TA to children, in addition to professional development. Secondly, educators can now become members of a new professional association for TA practitioners. The Institute for Developmental TA (IDTA) has been established for those practitioners working in the fields of education and organisations. Its aim is to provide support, networking and training to promote the application of TA. Thirdly, a scheme of work for introducing TA to students at KS2, 3 & 4 has been rolled out in a range of schools and units. Finally, a scheme to accredit students' learning in TA is being trialled by the IDTA.

For more information about TA in schools, please contact:
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