

Adapting supporter groups into Residential care: Using the organizational hierarchy in service of New Authority (*by Maisam Madi)

Abstract: NA has been increasingly used as a method to help educational teams deal with behavioral problems of children in residential care. The NA model focuses on strengthening the authority of caregivers through an intervention process. Educators work as part of a team in a social hierarchical organization. To further their work on adapting the method to this unique setting there is a need to consider the organizational structure, its impact on the educators and implications for the intervention. In this paper, I focus on the authority of the educators and how they experience it as workers. I discuss my view on organizational dynamics influencing the educators. I share my ideas on how to evaluate the nature of these dynamics. I end with a suggestion on how to intervene in such a medium based on the NA tool of supporters group.

Introduction

In the past years many residential care organizations have been working to implement New Authority (NA) and non-violent resistance (NVR) as part of their educational tools. The main target of NA as a method is to strengthen the authority of caregivers working directly with children. It is assumed that by strengthening their authority they start feeling more capable as caregivers and their sense of helplessness is reduced. NA thrives to help caregivers connect with their sense of responsibility towards their educational messages and to take action that strengthens the way they experience authority over the children. When children are placed in residential care, a team of educators function as their main caregivers. The educators work as part of a large social organization that like most organizations found today is structured in a hierarchy. The hierarchy establishes a power and authority flow from top to bottom, meaning that the workers at the bottom of the hierarchy - the educators - have the least authority in the organization itself.

While working using NA with residential teams I found that structure to be important and relevant to the intervention process. The importance of this structure is even greater in complicated cases or in houses stuck in an escalation pattern. In this article I will review authority and hierarchy and how they manifest in a social organization such as residential care. I will then discuss the educator's sense of authority at the workplace and what influences it. I will share my experience working with NA in residential care and my view on how the hierarchical structure is related to it. I will end with a suggestion on how to use the organizational medium around the team as a support group.

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Residential care as a hierarchical organization

Authority and organizational structure

Authority is defined as the right to exercise power over others; as a legitimacy and justification of someone's right to exercise power (Meriam-Webster¹). As a result of giving authority a hierarchy in relations is created where the person that has the authority, or the authority figure, has power over others who are the subordinates. The use of this kind of relations between people was established long time ago in early societies; and today most social structures and relations around us are based on authority and hierarchy, like government and citizens or children and their parents (Coleman; 2013).

An *organizational structure* indicates the method that an organization employs to define lines of communication, policies and responsibilities (Subramanian, Venkateswaran, A. & Fu.; 2013). A *hierarchical organization* is an organizational structure where every entity in the organization is subordinate to another (Subramanian; 2013). A hierarchy is typically visualized as a pyramid where there are a few high-ranking people at the apex, and the base includes many people who have no subordinates. Those nearest the top have more power as authority increases as we go up the hierarchy. Hierarchical structure developed from the ancient times of hunters and today is dominant in most organizations in modern society (Fan, Wong & Zhang; 2013). The hierarchical structure creates a power and authority flow that is clear for everyone in the organization. It creates a clear set of expectation for every level and builds a functional flow that is effective when a group of people are collaborating. Today most social structures are based on the hierarchical or "pyramidal" model including even the government (Fan; 2013). These structures are well known to us and surround us from a young age and well threw adulthood.

Residential care, being a social service, is also built according to the hierarchical model. It is a service that provides housing for children and adolescents and is designed to attend to all their needs. The houses include staff that is responsible for many of the daily parental functions, from basic needs such as food and hygiene to more complex needs like emotional support and education. This functional profile for educators places them as meaningful caregivers for the children. In many cases, especially when the parents are extremely dysfunctional, they function as the main caregivers. In residential care services the structure usually includes directors responsible of managing and developing the organization as well as overseeing the work of team leaders. Team leaders are responsible of managing teams of educators creating units that take care of the children living in each house.

When working at the base of the pyramid it is natural to perceive people higher in the hierarchy as authority figures (Friesen, Kay, Eibach & Galinsky; 2014). The organizational structure that is common to organizations establishes a power flow from top to bottom and it creates a culture where the higher you are up the hierarchy the stronger you are. In today's work culture it is accepted and expected to maintain that power flow and act in accordance with it (Friesen; 2014). As a result, people at higher level exercise freedom of thought and decision, and people at lower ranks feel more restraint and hesitant. Furthermore, usually people who have better skills occupy the positions higher in the hierarchy. That establishes authority of knowledge, where base level workers, usually young in age and experience, view the team leaders and directors as more knowledgeable and skilled. This is the natural flow of the organization; however it may foster and enhance the educator's feelings of being less powerful and less capable.

Authority of educators in residential care

If we consider the profile and function of educators in residential care, it seems that they are found in two hierarchical relationships simultaneously. On the organizational hierarchy educators are positioned at the base of the pyramid, making them the least influential. In contrast, in the relationship with the children, the educators are considered as caregivers having authority over the children in many matters. Educators are more present in the house and in the children's lives - They are in contact with schools and are involved in many matters such as daily functioning, free time and more. As a result, educators find themselves playing simultaneously two different roles that are related to their educational attitude. At the one hand educators are expected to be strong authority figures for the children and to be able to guide them through many challenges. On the other hand in the organization itself they are expected to follow policies dictated by higher levels. Although these two positions are in different relationships – one with colleagues in the company and other with the children – they refer to the same daily educational work.

NA in residential care

NA has been increasingly used as a method to help educational teams deal with behavioral problems of children. The NA model focuses on strengthening the authority of caregivers through an intervention process helping them experience themselves as stronger individuals. In residential care the main mode of implementation has been trainings held for the teams. Those trainings are designed to give theoretical knowledge and tools. Although knowledge can be beneficial, it seems that for caregivers embedded in the relationship and in escalating interactions sometimes that is not enough (see 'Implementing New Authority in residential care' in previous newsletter²). In my experience there seems to be a need to guide the teams through a systemic intervention designed to help them experience themselves as strong authority figures. That means helping them experience themselves as strong and confident educators and workers.

Using classic NA interventions focuses on the relationship between the educators and the children giving them tools for non-violent resistance. Those may be effective in a low to moderate escalatory environment. However in high escalation houses I believe there is a need to broaden the intervention to include a supportive structure. In these cases I suggest working with the organization itself as a support group for the team. Much like close family members and friends that interact with the parents and affect how they feel and behave. When we work in a family setting we first try to get to know the context. We ask questions like: how are the relationships? How do supporters react if they see the child hitting? How do they respond when they hear about it?. We then hold a supporters meeting aimed at gathering everyone around the intervention program while trying to eliminate interactions that weaken the parents. Building a support network in such a way is meaningful, especially in the hard cases, since it amplifies experiences of strength we strive for in the program. In tough persistent cases this network can be crucial to achieving results.

While working on implementing NA in residential care my first attempt to increase support of the educators was through the use of the context around the child – the family. In accordance with the classic method, I tried to gather supporters in the community that can assist with the educator's efforts. That is a powerful source of support; unfortunately in many cases the context is scarce and dysfunctional making it difficult to rely on. So I started looking to the organizational structure surrounding the team and its involvement in the educational work. I compared the professional-organizational surrounding to the friends and family that surround parents and started to ask the same question. That line of thought led me to work with this medium using the tool of 'support group' while

adapting it to the organizational setting. I found this medium to be very influential and beneficial for the strengthening process we strive for in NA with teams.

Non-Supportive organizational structure

Unlike in families where we discuss personal and casual relationships, when intervening in any organization we are trying to influence professional relationships. Although in social care we form meaningful relationships with the clients, we are doing so from a professional place as part of doing our jobs. That does not hinder the quality of relationships however it does introduce a different terminology and motivational world to NA interventions. Educators are as mentioned at the base of the organizational pyramid, outranked both by ability to influence and by skill and knowledge. In addition their position with the children places them in a complicated place where they need to maintain a meaningful relationship while trying to implement educational values and company policies. Challenging behavior from the children is directed mostly towards them impacting their sense of competence. The sum of those influences creates the daily feeling they carry with them at work.

The organizational structure is by default placing educators at the base of the pyramid. That structure dictates expectations as to behavior and creates a culture among the workers (Gregory, Harris, Armenakis & Shook; 2009). One approach to change would be implementing a different organizational structure that empowers the workers at the lowest levels. While working using NA interventions with teams I tried to target the nature of the interactions between the organizational units. My purpose was to create a change in culture and atmosphere on a local level in the existing structure. The first step was to examine the existing dynamics between each team and its organizational surrounding. Although it is the educator's duty to deal with what happens in the house, during intense and violent incidents it is common for other workers in the organization to get involved. Sometimes it is merely the team leader; however in other cases it might be a director or a supervisor. If this involvement happens rarely its effect on the team is minor. However when it happens often it might have much impact on how the educators experience themselves as a team and as workers. This usually happens in houses that have frequent incidents of intense violent behaviors. When a team is stuck in an escalation pattern with the children, the high distress level usually 'leaks' to other units and leads to their involvement. Needing help may send the message that the team is not functioning well to the children, the organization and the team itself. This can deepen the feelings of weakness and incompetence that already exist due to working in an environment with high escalation level, an effect that is familiar in the NA model.

The involvement of external units is tempting for everyone involved in the escalation. For the educators it's a source of relief in the short term. For the children it is an involvement of a third party, meaning a fresh chance to convince the system to give them what they want. For the helper, although it is more work, it's still a chance to feel meaningful by helping others in distress. Due to that it is easy to get into a pattern of interactions that maintains the escalations happening in the house. To help evaluate the effect of these interactions, I recommend examining these key points that are based on my experience and observations while working in residential care:

- **How is the involvement happening?** Is it organized by the team or is the other unit 'jumping in' to help at tough moments. Although it is positive when different organizational units help each other, if it happens too often and in severe circumstances such as violence it creates a negative effect on both sides. The helping unit is taking on other unit's work which may foster

feelings of frustration and even anger. For the team being helped it mirrors their incompetence.

- **Who is involved in the talks/meetings with the children?** In the heat of the moment everyone is focused on calming down the situation as quickly as possible. The unit getting involved may try to calm the child down by talking to them separately. That makes sense because at that moment the child is angry at the educators in his house. However it again sends the message to the educators that they cannot manage the situation.
- **Are things being co-ordinated with the team?** Sometimes the involved unit might make an agreement with the child in the purpose of calming things down. The unit, being external to the house, takes into account only part of the educational picture, usually lacking the long term plan for the child and the overall program of the house. This may lead to deals that the team cannot hold up or the team needing to change their program to adapt to the new agreement.

If these patterns occur, they may hinder the educator's sense of authority in the house resulting in more feelings of weakness and frustrations.

Towards a Supportive organizational structure

Like with other tools in NA the intent and meaning behind actions make a big difference in how the authority figure experiences itself. Involvement of the organization in a teams work is important and powerful, however like support groups, it should be organized in a way that supports and amplifies the educator's actions and words. The suggestion here is for a change in attitude that creates an experience of support and 'back-up' for the educators, which can reflect on their attitude in the house. After deciding that the involvement of other units is essential it is important to give the team back control over the house. A crucial step towards achieving that is maintaining the team's ability to decide when and how to involve other units. This step empowers the team as the leader of the process, and encourages them to ask for external help earlier; before things get out of hand. Following, it is important to establish how an 'emergency intervention' would look like. This way everyone involved would know their part and the educators will feel supported instead of intimidated. Such involvement might be increased presence of other organizational units in NA reactions and tools, such as announcement or SMS, or at the house itself. Another way is by supportive presence at meetings with a child where the educators lead the meeting, or Delaying a reaction to co-ordinate with the team if the child initiates contact with other units.

By taking these steps we foster an atmosphere of supportive structure for the educators in their work. This structure is designed to help the authority figures by creating a stronger sense of 'we' in the organization itself. The target is for the professional network around the educators to support them through respective and co-ordinated actions. This support medium as part of a NA intervention can lead to a meaningful and lasting strengthening process for the authority figures working daily on the floor. These simple changes affect the system in three main ways: first, they change the subjective experience of the educators to feel more supported by the organization, which increases the chance they will feel as strong authority figures for the children. Second, they change the way other organizational units interact with the team minimizing influence that weaken the educator's authority. Last, they change the way children view the educators from individuals or a team of workers to see them as an integral part of a broader and stronger network of adults, in the form of the organization.

In this change the pyramidal hierarchal structure is preserved but the subjective experience of it changes. In the classic images we portray a pyramid that rises up with consecutive levels of workers from top to the base (see figure 1). The changes I suggested are aimed at creating a new experience where the relational structure is preserved, however it is flat with the leadership in the back and the educators stand in the front line knowing that the organization ‘has their backs’ (see figure 2).

Figure 1³

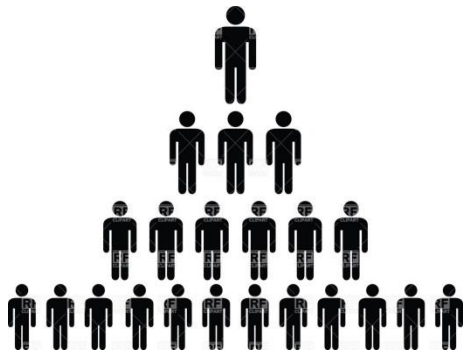


Figure 2⁴



Summary

The NA theory was developed in a social and cultural context that affected parents worldwide and was weakening their sense of authority. The model refers to those changes and uses them to build an intervention process that helps parents strengthen their authority using non-violent tools. Based on that line of thinking, the use of the local context in the form of a support group is essential and inherent. When using NA and translating it to the organizational setting the medium that makes up the immediate context is expanded to include the residential house, team and organization. While using NA it is part of the core thinking to examine this medium and to recognize patterns that affect and weaken the authority figures working with the children. This medium is important especially in residential care for children with a complex socioeconomic background. It is highly needed and sometimes crucial in tough cases of persistent and severe behavioral problems.

During my work in Residential care I tried to broaden my view to include not only the child and the family but also the team and the medium around them. Although the hierarchical structure is strongly embedded in our culture and in our minds, I have found that striving for local changes in attitude and climate can be effective. It can maintain the existing structure while making an impact on the educator’s experience. This impact is meaningful since it can lead to them feeling more supported, reflecting on their strength and competence as workers.

When applying NA interventions in residential care it is important to treat the organizational units in contact with the team as a support network for the educators. It is recommended to examine the type of explicit and implicit interactions and dynamics. It is important to look for dynamics that are related directly to behavioral problems and how the organization deals with them. It is also important to understand the organizational culture that creates the general atmosphere at the workplace. I have found those to strongly effect how the educators feel as workers in the company, which can determine how they experience themselves as authority figures for the children.

Links

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authority>

2. http://www.newauthority.net/data/cntfiles/252_.pdf
3. (Figure 1) <https://rfclipart.com/human-hierarchy-pyramid-multilevel-marketing-mlm-34593-vector-clipart.html>
4. (Figure 2) <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/multiple-colorful-crowd-people-pyramid-made-162356714>

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