

Conductive Education: sink or swim?

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Firstly, I have to thank Ildikó [Kozma], Erzsébet [Balogh] and everyone at the Peto Institute, and Scope, for inviting me here to speak at this conference. It is always good to meet old friends whom one sees only annually, or even less frequently, and to extend the dialogues that one has all the time at home, but the opportunity to be here was especially welcome at this time since we in our own institution are actively involved in discussing the future direction of Conductive Education in this country. As analogous questions are being actively addressed by centres and organisations around the world this conference has provided a Heaven-sent opportunity to share face-to-face analyses and concerns with individuals whose opinions and experience I greatly respect.

I was particularly heartened this morning to learn from Ildikó's presentation ['Tools to develop CE: today's challenges'] that the Peto Institute's thinking on future developments in many respects closely parallels the thoughts emerging from our own experiences and informal discussions over the last year or so, perhaps not surprising since we likely share in our different countries and in our different ways common structural and economic pressures. And only forty-five minutes ago I learned from my Chairman for this presentation [Dr Meir Hovav, Chairman of Tsad Kadima] that Tsad Kadima has just completed a four-month review of the future of Conductive Education in Israel and its goals, and the implications for the structure of that organisation. I know that our own formal deliberations on such matters, which began only last weekend, will benefit enormously, both morally and substantively, from the analogous heart-searchings of these two organisations and from what others have shared with me at this conference.

My title for this presentation, 'Conductive Education: sink or swim?' is posed in the form of a question. Let me affirm from the outset that there is no question of my own organisation's response to this. We fully intend and expect that we shall swim. I will not, however, be speaking here of the particular circumstances of my own work but addressing the much wider destiny of what I have dubbed elsewhere the 'conductive community'.

The initial 'explosion' of interest in Conductive Education, in 1986, led to a centrifugal process, outwards from a single source, the mother house of the Peto Institute. We are now, however, in a quite different phase. When the actual transition occurred only future historians will be able to tell but the 'shape' of the world conductive community is now very different from what was once a wheel radiating from a single hub. Instead there has developed a network of centres, associations and individuals whose work and direction are characterised by intense local adaptation and development to meet the structural and economic constraints – and opportunities – of new social contexts.

Once local processes are under way a new factor emerges: the work gains personal and institutional momentum. It takes paths that may represent the only way forward

in a particular context and to do so it becomes involved in financial, personal and public commitments which it must maintain or die. Once committed there may be no turning back.

The differences between the social and financial forces under which Conductive Education develops may be illustrated by comparison between Germany and the United Kingdom. In Germany Conductive Education presently seeks its place in the sun against a background of a well established health insurance scheme with a particular financial relationship to the medical profession, and a firm and some say unchangeable framework of official regulation of professional structures. It is hardly surprising against this background to see lobbying for funding from the *Krankenkassen* and a powerful move from existing professions to appropriate Conductive Education through add-on courses, to create 'pedagogic complex-therapeutical conductors'. How different from the UK, with its disintegrating and demoralised public services, deprofessionalised professionals and dysfunctional education, health and social services which are losing the confidence of the users and the public at large. In the United Kingdom there is widespread caution about links with the public sector ('partnerships' as they are called) under existing Government agendas and corresponding diversity of often impoverished conductive initiatives.

Initiatives in diverse and often straitened circumstances, in whatever country, may involve the practice itself, the way in which this is organised and increasingly now the means and goals of professional training. I shall give a few familiar examples. Thus the mother institute in Budapest developed within a Socialist economy and at a particular time. To no small part, therefore, it provided for children on a residential basis as part of an all-through and comprehensive strategy of education and upbringing. In 2001 Conductive Education has taken root in centres around the world where parents as a whole do not wish for residential placements – and it could not be afforded even if they did. And as very few organisations are in a position even to contemplate a comprehensive, all-age service, most offer services for only one segment of development (usually in the pre-school, where the state is less intrusive) and perhaps no experience at all of continuous, day-by-day provision.

I do not say that such changes are either good or bad in themselves, only that they occur in response to local requirements. I also say that inevitably they make a major impact upon actual practice, not least because they are invariably accompanied by very different conductor:learner ratios than those which Conductive Education enjoyed during a considerable period of its development under Socialist employment policies.

As I mentioned earlier, once adaptations are made they become institutionalised and develop momentum of their own. Others coming into the field and looking for models for their own practice in perhaps similar contexts then look to the new adaptations as their own source of inspiration. As a result, within the world-wide Conductive Education movement, there emerge new foci, new areas of influence, having their own centrifugal effects. And so the conductive community continues to expand, in ever more diverse forms.

Adaptation becomes development when particular forces at work within a given context generate qualitative change in the very nature of Conductive Education, its practice, structure and training. Again, such a process is not necessarily bad in

itself, it is a fact, one which necessarily occurs in the life of all professions and disciplines. Without qualitative change, there can be no development to meet major changes in the environment and ultimately professions or disciplines will wither or die. The particular issue before Conductive Education at its present level of development is whether it is yet secure enough to survive such change with its integrity, its identity intact.

The common force acting upon all Conductive Education is financial, rarely the problem of too much money, far more often the problem of too little. And the flip side, the reverse of this problem, is the Siren call of what one might be tempted to do to obtain the money to survive and develop, from whatever source. Particularly, I would suggest, from Government. I take my hat off to the New Zealanders who presented yesterday afternoon [Focus 2000: 'Celebrating the achievements of the New Zealand model of Conductive Education'] who stated the cardinal principle, when they founded their service ten years ago, that they would remain independent from the control of both the health and education authorities. They have maintained this principles and yesterday reported some of their striking achievements over this time. They did not allude to the scrimping and sacrifice necessary to achieve this.

If one does, however, change the goals, the way that one delivers the service, then inevitably the practice will change, and inevitably too the theory that describes and justifies this practice. Again, nothing *a priori* wrong in this, unless along the way one loses the plot, the very point of Conductive Education, persisting with outward forms but losing the defining essence.

This is a period of considerable economic change and, for those able and willing to embrace the new opportunities inherent in this, these are potentially very exciting times. For those who wish above all to live their lives in exactly the ways that they did before then these times may prove frustrating, disappointing and defeating. How might we ensure that Conductive Education, the heritage of András Peto, not only survives these testing times but indeed emerges stronger then before? How do we ensure that it is not simply overwhelmed?

First of all, of course, everyone in Conductive Education has to learn to be very, very pragmatic about how the system is actually provided. Everyone, conductors and providers alike, must adapt existing practices and, generalising from existing understandings, avoid the pitfalls and strictures of their real-life situations. Conductors can no longer provide Conductive Education in just the way they were trained to or even in the ways in which they worked only a few years ago, for to do so may be to die. Everybody has to be pragmatic about what a given state will permit, what a society is willing to pay for, and this is of course as true in Hungary today as it is in the rest of the world.

But how to ensure that in so doing we remain true to the essence of Conductive Education, what some people refer to as 'pure'? In trying to answer this, what I consider the control conundrum for the future well-being of Conductive Education, I inevitably do so in a way that reflects my own personal concerns and emphases. Others may advance different analyses and solutions. I hope that they do.

Central to my own hopes for a secure future is the position that 'pragmatic' and 'pure' are *not* opposed one to the other and to act as though they were is to erect a false dichotomy. Yes, you can be pragmatic, adapting to changing situations and new

opportunities, and yet at the same time pure, if by 'pure' you mean true to a core and coherent set of beliefs that represent the essence of your approach. If one looks back into history András Peto was certainly pragmatic, so has been Mária Hári. We should respect their example.

In the circumstances in which these two founders lived, worked and struggled perhaps it was sufficient, even at times necessary, to maintain the essence of Conductive Education as implicit. In the modern world, ever increasing demands for transparency and accountability mean that this can no longer be so, and the geographical diversification of Conductive Education magnifies the need for concrete, explicit statement.

The time has come to explicate the essence of Conductive Education. Truth to tell, lack of such explication has dogged the successful spread of Conductive Education for fifteen years. We have all been the poorer for this lack but so far we have got by, concentrating our already stretched attention upon immediately more pressing, day-to-day issues. Now, I suggest, emphasised by the sudden plethorisation of new training courses, the need to define what distinguishes us is now urgent and, if not met soon may mean that the international 'explosion' of Conductive Education could result in its ultimate destruction. How then do we move towards concretising and explicating the essence of Conductive Education? I will suggest four immediate lines of action which, though solving nothing in themselves, might serve to catalyse the movement in preparation for what has to happen next.

Firstly we need to articulate what we do and what this achieves. Everyone involved can do this, describing, illuminating conductive practice, and more of us have to develop our skills so as to communicate this in formal settings, in lectures, presentations and most crucially in writing. And those who do, bearing in mind the vital need for plausibility, should do so at the level of normal professional/academic discourse in the countries where they work.

We can hardly blame others if they do not understand the point of Conductive Education and its outcomes if we do not at least offer them the chance to find out about it. If we are really to nail the essence of Conductive Education then we have to express what we do, openly, undefensively and clearly, both the 'classical' practices that were the foundation of the past and the innovations out of which the future will be forged.

Secondly and as a direct corollary to my first point, we have to listen, enquire and read. A movement that does not study its own past record will be inevitably rootless and without base. If on top of that it does not report and investigate its own present then each new venture runs the risk of yet again reinventing the wheel and, without access to the hard-won experiences of those who have tried to do the same, find it turning out disappointingly rectangular.

When I entered this field some twenty-odd years ago it was virtually impossible to find anything written down to describe or define Conductive Education. When at the National Institute of Conductive Education we came to construct our degree-level training, five to six years ago, it was just possible to assemble a body of academic sources to justify an academic subject to first-degree level. The situation is a little better now, just, enough for us to feel secure in validating our first academic module at level 4 (Masterate) level.

This does not contradict my first point, the need for much, much more material to enter the public domain, most especially on the actual *practice* of Conductive Education. But all of this will be of no avail if people do not draw upon it. Read most articles, books even, on Conductive Education and look to see what the authors have referred to from earlier work. You will more often than not find a disappointingly small selection of background texts, many out of date and already thoroughly overthrown by subsequent writers. No wonder myth, misinformation and grossly erroneous understandings of Conductive Education are still perpetrated with confident authority even in the twenty-first century.

So, **thirdly** it is time to compare, to contrast and to analyse. Then argue, dispute, polemicise, refute. Draw upon evidence, use logic. Everyone can do this, some better than others, and everyone should. Opinions and assertions about Conductive Education have to be put to the public test, and they have to defend and justify themselves if they are to persist.

Of course there may legitimately be more than one single slant on important issues in certain circumstances. But if we do not winnow down the descriptions, the analyses of Conductive Education in this manner, using the normal conventions of civilised and professional discourse, how can we even expect to refine and develop our explanatory base?

Which brings me to my **fourth** and final point. The conductive movement has grown so fast, so wildly, over the last fifteen years: the time has come for the conductive movement to take a hand in controlling this growth. In the first part of my presentation I stressed the power of external forces over us. The first three points in this second half of my presentation have suggested a means which we within the movement can uniquely exercise and which we must then use to shape and focus the movement itself. Whatever else we might do, *only in this way*, I suggest, will we create a discipline strong enough to stand up to outside forces and maintain its integrity.

‘How many CE centres are there in the UK, in the world?’ I am constantly asked. For ten years I have bought myself peace by ducking the question. I respond by stating how many places employ conductors, thirty or so in the UK, a hundred and fifty - maybe two hundred - around the world. ‘Conductors’ are my only firm index but of course I know that there are places where conductors do not work as conductors and of course I know that, within a very few years, new training courses will render problematical the very notion of a conductor – that already in 2001 this is hardly an unambiguous term.

Then I am asked, ‘What about all those dozens and dozens of centres in the UK and world-wide, with wooden furniture, which ardently believe that they implement the principles of Conductive Education and follow the inspiration of a place that they have never seen and know precious little?’ ‘What about pedagogic complex-therapeutic conductors, existing professionals with add-on training?’ Again I have bought external peace – though not peace of mind – by staying silent.

Short-term peace of mind, easy coexistence, make for short-term comfort but, as the years pass and the church becomes broader and broader, we are in danger of losing our identity, of dissolving our essence into a widening pool of activities which, however well-meaning in themselves and whatever their benefits in their own right,

hardly advance the central cause of Conductive Education.

What should we say to people who sincerely believe that they provide Conductive Education when they have little or no pedagogy and, worse still, no conduction. I shall misquote the *Bible* [I Corinthians, xiii, 1]

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not conduction, I am become as a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

To be truly ourselves we have to define conduction, in clear, material terms, and when we have done so we shall have no choice, indeed we shall have the duty, to say what is not.

From the floor

I was challenged with the question 'Have you ever thought of learning to sail?' I responded 'I'd be mad to try it.' I should have qualified this with '...until I learn to swim'. I was also challenged that it was all very well my saying 'Write' but it is impossible to get publishers to accept things. I responded by extolling the Internet, which is free, instantly available and does away with any problems of publishers or editors.