A psychotherapy group for latency girls in a school

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Abstract

This paper describes the TOPS (Tavistock Outreach Project in primary schools) experience of running a psychotherapy group for latency girls. The group consisted of five girls in their final year of primary school whose teachers felt could benefit from support in their relationship difficulties. The group ran in the school for just under two terms of weekly sessions and was led by a Child Psychotherapist and an Assistant Therapist. Susan Reid's Psychodynamic group approach (1993) underpinned the therapeutic approach used in the group.

A description of TOPS - a school based therapeutic provision, opens the paper, followed by a brief description of the school setting, the rational for group work and the selection criteria. The group's development over time and the powerful processes that took place in it are demonstrated through the emerging themes discussed: Falling apart and coming together, the therapy box as a trigger for chaos as linked to the mythological story of 'Pandora's Box', the group's relationship with the group leaders, anxieties about changes and endings with the girls imminent move to secondary School and the group's move from a Basic Assumption group to a Work Group (Bion, 1959). Accordingly, over time, a slow shift in the group's' state of mind could be observed; from ganging against and excluding a member or the Group Leaders, to gradually becoming more thoughtful, integrated and better accepting of what the group and the Group Leaders had to offer – but in the context of many returns to a gang mentality along this path.

The paper concludes with some reflection upon the outcomes of the work and discussion of these. Despite the fairly short life of the group – 12 sessions, pleasing outcomes were reported by the teachers, parents and the group members who saw improvement in their relationship.

Keywords: TOPS project, psychotherapy group, school setting**,** latency age, falling apart, coming together, work group, therapy box

Introduction
This paper describes the experience of running a psychotherapy group for five latency age girls within the 'TOPS' project in a primary school based in a large British city.

The paper begins by explaining the nature of the TOPS project, with a description of the school in which the group psychotherapy took place. It

then considers the theoretical underpinning to group work, using the ideas of Bion (1961), Reid,
(1993) Woods (1993) and Canham (2002) in particular. The implications to group work being conducted in a school-setting is discussed. Next, the paper presents how the group was set up, in terms of selection, setting, preparation and a brief description of its members.

The paper discusses in detail the themes that emerged during the group work. Falling apart and coming together is first discussed, with the idea that although reparation between the girls did not always occur within the space of the sessions themselves, 'fall-outs' diminished substantially outside the session and the girls' capacity to repair their relationships themselves seemed to grow. The second theme employs the Greek myth of Pandora's Box to stimulate thinking about the way in which in many sessions the therapy box being opened seemed to bring about 'chaos' in the room, and attacks on thinking. It is noted here that the 'chaos' unleashed in the room decreased over time, as it was thought about with the girls, but then increased before and following a break when up-coming losses perhaps felt too difficult to bear. The girls' evolving relationship with the group leaders is then discussed with the girls' perception of them as parental, authoritative figures and their challenging of it. The emergence of age-appropriate curiosity about the other sex as reflected in their responses to the male group leader as well as a 'ganging' mentality (Canham 2002) in response to anxiety, whereby the therapists took on the role of 'the enemy' and had to bear uncomfortable feelings through projection are discussed. There is then a look at the girls' responses to the anxiety provoking changes and endings awaiting them. Finally, the move towards a more cohesive group is evaluated, observing how the girls came to identify as a group that was capable of thinking together – but in the context of many returns to a gang mentality along this path.

The paper concludes with some reflection upon the outcomes of the work and discussion of these.

The TOPS project:

TOPS – The Tavistock Outreach in Primary Schools project has been running since 2002. It provides therapeutic input one day a week in 5 schools in underprivileged and economically deprived areas of a large city. In each school there is a Lead, a qualified Child & Adolescent Psychotherapist, and two Assistant therapists, who are volunteers. The

TOPS team works with children referred by their school, offering a range of psychotherapeutic interventions: assessments, individual brief or long-term work with children, group work, work with a whole class, parent work and family work. Additional clinical support is brought into schools when indicated, such as psychiatric support. In addition, the Lead Psychotherapist offers consultation to school staff about children that there is concern around and in some of the schools also on-going Work Discussion groups for staff. Moreover, formal and informal liaison with Teachers, Teaching Assistants and Learning Mentors has been invaluable in managing difficult cases. In addition, there is regular liaison with Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists regarding children who are in need of these services or are undergoing a Statutory Assessment of Special Educational Needs. The TOPS team also works closely with Social Services and other local support services outside the school to build up supportive networks around referred children from particularly needy families.

The School and the TOPS project within it:

The school where the group ran serves an area of considerable poverty and disadvantage. This is reflected in several ways. The percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals is well above the national average. The percentage of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, predominantly linked to difficulties in communication or behavioural, emotional and social needs, is well above the national average. A very high proportion of pupils speak English as an additional language. There are many different ethnic groups in the school with significant minorities from refugees or asylum seeker families. The largest group is of Black African and Bangladeshi pupils while other ethnic groups are represented in smaller numbers (Somalia, Kosovo, Iraq, Ethiopia, etc.). The school has a team of committed teachers working under a long-established Head Teacher as well as a strong and well-developed learning support team led by the SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator). Besides TOPS, the school accesses other interventions and programs to support the children's learning and social needs.

The main contact for the TOPS team to discuss new referrals and on-going work with is the school SENCO with whom there are weekly meetings. Additional meetings are carried out with the Head Teacher to discuss concerning cases and share ideas regarding the school's needs and Child Protection concerns.

Group Work with children

In group work, the children play and talk with one another and with the group leaders. The group leaders seek to create an atmosphere that allows each child to feel accepted and respected. The setting needs to be safe and reliable in terms of meeting in the same space on the same day and at the same time each time (Reid, 1993).

The therapeutic aim is to enable the children to become a group (Reid, 1993): the group leaders make interpretations to the group as a whole, which is different from addressing each child specifically and this slowly helps to build a sense of a group. With time and as the children become familiar with this way of work and communication one can observe some children making interpretations or comments to one another. While therapists cannot control communication between group members they are nevertheless responsible for creating a therapeutic environment (Woods, 1993).

In the group, the presence of children that are similar and different in their personality traits allows for exploration in each other aspects of each child that perhaps he or she has previously denied. Consciously and unconsciously recognizing the qualities and challenges group members share with each other can lead to a sense of a 'cohesive' group, a sense of belonging and ownership. At the same time processes of splitting and projecting work alongside the temptation to deny and disown what is too painful and undesirable in a group member. The task of the leaders is to bring back the projections to the group to process and own. Reid (1999) adds that being in the company of children with different personalities can help group members rediscover positive qualities they have in themselves and enhance feelings of self-worth. This process can help children to develop a more realistic view of themselves.

Bion (1961) contributed to the understanding of group processes and how a group becomes cohesive. He described 'Group Culture' as a combination of the group mentality and the desires of individuals within it. Bion described the 'Work Group' as a group where cooperation and effort are dominant, and there is tolerance of frustration and control of emotions. The task, led by the group leader, is to promote growth and maturity in the group and its members. Canham (2002) makes parallels to Klein's (1935) Depressive Position where individuals are tolerant, able to explore and value differences and there is potential for creativity. A Work Group, then, is one where at least some of the time it is possible to owns one's different personality aspects without splitting off and projecting

them on others. In contrast, processes such as a 'Basic Assumption' mode of functioning (Bion 1961) lead to ganging up against other group members or the leaders with the aim to stop the thinking and consequently the 'Work Group' from progressing. Canham links this to a gang state of mind that is more akin to the Paranoid Schizoid position described by Klein (1946) where the destructive parts of the self are dominant and there is splitting off of, disowning and projecting vulnerability and neediness onto others who exhibit these features. The gang is essentially anti-thinking, anti-authority and anti-life. Groups can shift from these destructive to the more constructive modes of functioning. Canham describes the key to shifting from gang to group states of mind as integration of all aspects of personality, and being able to own vulnerability and neediness in each member and in the group as a whole.

Woods and Argent (1999) discuss the psychoanalytic approach in children's groups as different to other techniques such as psycho-educational ones that provide practical exercises for the children i.e. how to deal with social situations, or anger management. These groups have the advantage of being very structured, providing activities and exercises. The psychoanalytic approach however by contrast allows the group to interact spontaneously and seeks to interpret meaning, connecting to the child's inner world. An unstructured group allows more opportunities for the children to enact conflicts and this can become uncontained, impulsive and unproductive and invite powerful projections of primitive states of mind as described by Canham (2002). Woods (2003) discusses the need for structure and limits to contain freedom of expression – a difficult balance to achieve. In the group presented in this paper the group leaders were often challenged as to how to remain accepting and maintain boundaries in the face of gang states of mind and chaos.

In a group the children need to be contained within the physical space of the therapy room and need to be kept in mind by the group leaders. One of the challenges group leaders have is to be aware of what every group member is doing at any time. When the boundaries of the space are kept and the group leaders are able to contain the group and keep all members in mind then it is possible to allow considerable freedom of behaviour, wishes and impulses to be expressed. The group leaders aim is to create a warm, accepting friendly atmosphere that enables the development of ideas and exploration of relationships. Each child is respected as the person they are and this attitude is encouraged in the other children in the group. An atmosphere of acceptance is often followed by a sense of trust and group cohesion (Reid, 1993). Acceptance without criticism and with

understanding is crucial but it does not mean putting up with intolerable behaviour. The group leaders need to be able to work under pressure and to deal with having little time to think. The work is arguably more demanding of energy and emotional engagement.

The therapeutic approach in our group was based on the psychoanalytic principles of understanding the group dynamics within the context of the 'here and now' situation, with a focus on each girl, the relationships between the girls, and how they related to the group leaders.

In some cases when groups are run in a clinic a support group is offered to the parents. This allows parallel work to take place, enhancing change in children and parents. Although this was not possible in our school-based group some individual parent work did take place.

Group work with children in a school

Running a children's group in a school enables easier access to the children in their natural environment and does not require parents to bring them in especially. It is however rather challenging when having to adjust to far from ideal conditions and timetable constraints. Confidentiality about attending therapy is compromised – children quickly learn who is and isn't receiving support, whether individually or in a group. The conditions are further complicated in other ways. For example, often the room used for groups would normally be used for other functions during the week such as a working room to support individual children or small groups in their learning. It could potentially be used by some of the group members for other purposes, which could cause some confusion and an expectation to use it in a certain way i.e. expecting to use the educational equipment during therapeutic sessions. In addition, one has to accept possible intrusions into the therapy room by a lost child or confused teacher. There are often noises from a nearby assembly or music lesson or children in play or a P.E. lesson outside the window. Even in the most supportive and well-intentioned schools such factors cannot be totally controlled and actually represent real life.

The advantage however is that the child does not need to be brought to a clinic in order to participate in the group which can be helpful to the parents. In addition, some parents are struggle to accept that their child needs therapeutic help because they perceive this as their child being singled out. For them the offer of a group, based at school, can often feel less threatening and stigmatizing.

The Group

Selection: During a discussion with teachers about the needs of Year 6 pupils, the concerns raised were around a number of girls who struggled in their relationships with each other, often having dramatic fall-outs that impacted upon the entire class with teachers repeatedly needing to address escalating situations. Being in their final year of primary school, additional concerns were about their capacity to cope socially in the challenging environment of secondary school.

It was agreed to work with this group of five girls and focus on social engagement and interaction. It was hoped that group work would allow a space for them to reflect on their relationships and facilitate more positive interactions as well as equip them for the challenges of secondary school.

We were mindful that in this group the children had good knowledge of each other outside the group setting. In this respect the unfamiliarity was between them and the group leaders. We wondered how this would impact on the group dynamics and the challenges we set ourselves – to try to help what may be a gang-like, 'Basic Assumption' group turn into a working group. Furthermore, due to time constraints with the girls having to sit final primary school exams as well as various end of Year 6 activities this was going to be brief focused work.

Setting: The group ran on the same day and time in the TOPS therapy room in the school. The room had other functions during the week as a working space to support children in their learning. The room had a large low table in the middle around which we arranged 7 chairs: 5 child size chairs for the girls and two adult chairs for the leaders who sat on different table corners to allow easy eye contact. We arranged a group box that included stationary, a Jenga game - a game consisting of wooden blocks - and a hedgehog puppet to be hand-held by whoever wanted to speak. The box was placed in the middle of the table. We aimed to begin and end each session with everyone sitting around the table as a frame to the session and a form of reflective containment that was important particularly at the end, before the girls left the room. Such rituals can become very important to group members, for example, taking a few minutes at the end of a session to reflect briefly on the session (Woods, 1993).

Preparation: An initial conversation was held between each parent with the Year 6 teachers and the SENCO to receive consent. The group leaders then had separate meetings with each parent to explain the aim of the group, take relevant background information about each girl and hear

about any concerns the parent had. In addition, each parent was asked to suggest goals they would like their child to achieve through attending the group. Once the group ended the group leaders had a follow up meeting with each parent and revisited the goals to ascertain to what extent if at all any were achieved. During the course of the group the leaders received regular feedback from the teachers. This was helpful in terms of being made aware of the girls' response in class following group sessions and of situations that had occurred during the week between them and with their peers.

Parallel to the initial engaging of the parents, the Year 6 teachers explained to the girls that they would be taking part in a group that would aim to address their relationship difficulties as well as support their transition to secondary school. Finally, group leaders had a brief meeting with all five girls in the therapy room to introduce themselves, explain the aim of the group and answer any questions.

The Group began the week after this meeting.

The members (pseudonyms are used for confidentiality)**:**
The group consisted of 5 girls, aged 10 – 11 years: Lyn, of mixed heritage, black and white British, Anna and Sara, both of Bangladesh origin, and Iman and Amira, both of Somali origin. All girls had average to high academic ability. Apart from Lyn who was a single child to a single mother the rest had both parents living together and had between 2-4 siblings each.

The TOPS Lead Psychotherapist and Assistant Therapist facilitated the group that ran for 12 weekly sessions during the spring and summer academic terms with several gaps between sessions due to school holidays, a school trip and the girls sitting exams. Each session was 45 minutes long in order to fit in with academic lesson times.

Clinical Material

Content and emerging themes

During group time, the girls were encouraged to reflect on and think about the here and now in the group and its link to their social interactions. The group leaders observed, reflected on and pointed out situations that occurred within the group in terms of communication, responses, inclusion and exclusion of group members and the leaders, mostly but not always aiming to relate to the girls as a group. Topics and interpretations naturally linked to other aspects of the girls' lives such as

family, sibling relationships, peers and teachers, secondary school and academic work.

Themes that emerged over the group's lifetime are described and discussed in order to give a sense of the processes that occurred with the use of session extracts to demonstrate the themes.

Falling apart and coming together

The group's attempts to bond as a group while projecting problem behaviour onto others was regularly evident. For example:

Session 2: *"..During their discussion about fall-outs the girls seemed to portray themselves as always doing the right thing and others as the problem. Group Leader II pointed this out, wondering whether it was always others who fell out and had fights and gossiped behind other people's backs. They all smiled and agreed that they too had fights."*

Perhaps due to knowing each other well, despite the many frictions between them, the girls seemed to develop quite quickly a strong sense of membership and loyalty to the group. This came across for example with their preoccupation with naming the group:

Session 3: *"Lyn suggested, without instigation from the group leaders, that they should put a label on their box. A very natural, fast conversation now commenced between them about how to do it. Sara had got the felt tip pens out. Lyn had her pen poised over the labels, drawing on one. All five girls contributed to the idea that they should name the box/group. Anna and Lyn suggested that they should take a letter of each of their names. They began to work out the letters. Lyn and one or two others put together what the five letter word could be – a combinations of four letters as Amira and Anna had the same first letter…Amira and Iman suggested putting a second A at the end. ….. the girls got five pieces of paper in order to draw and spell out the name they had all worked out: A L I S A."*

One might call this the 'honeymoon' period, the early sessions where the girls seemed to enjoy the opportunity to be together in a non-academic context, find common interests and form their identity as a group. It was perhaps also a fresh opportunity to put aside disputes and establish boundaries between the group and the outside world to help cope with primitive survival anxieties.

Soon however conflicts surfaced.

By the fourth session the girls had had a big fall-out at school. The group leaders had heard beforehand from the class teacher that the fall-out had been between Lyn and Sara. Maintaining communication with the teacher adds complexity and is two-fold: it helps monitor the girls' situation outside the group but also naturally impacts on the group leaders' state of mind in the room: holding outside knowledge about the girls can cause bias and expectations, perhaps contaminating the space with outside influence and halt fresh opportunities. This however enabled an „in vivo" discussion on the fallout.

Session 4: *"On their way to the room Lyn looked unhappy. The others walked behind her, quiet and tense. In the room Lyn pulled a chair away from the table and sat separating herself... The atmosphere was tense and hostile. No one spoke. The four girls around the table became giggly. Group leaders pointed out that it seemed like something serious had happened... was laughter a way to ease the atmosphere? The girls were serious again. Group Leaders wondered about a group member separating from the group…. Anna, Amira and Iman willed each to speak. Sara who looked anxious and paralyzed finally said that she didn't mind talking about it if Lyn didn't mind. Lyn said angrily that she didn't care if it was spoken about or not. Sara was taken aback by Lyn's anger. She mentioned a misunderstanding. Group Leader II reflected back on how did the group cope with misunderstandings. Lyn, very much under her breath, said that it wasn't a misunderstanding. She backed away further from the table."*

The atmosphere remained tense. Group leaders too felt quite paralyzed. A characteristic common to all 'Basic Assumption' groups is the hostility with which they oppose any stimulus for growth or development that is directly related to insight – the 'Basic Assumption' group fiercely opposes this possibility. These dynamics seemed to have taken over as also reflected later in the session:

"Lyn addressed Iman and Amira directly. She said that Sara had told her behind their backs that she didn't even like them so that's the kind of friend she was…. Both looked down and said that they hadn't known that. Lyn backed even further away from the table. Group Leader II felt quite paralyzed with how to respond to Lyn's aggression. Group leader JM reflected to Group Leader II that he didn't think it was helpful to speak like this in the group, that it would be important not to be hurtful to each other. Group Leader II repeated this. No one responded."

As demonstrated in the above extract children in a group are not always therapeutic to each other. The transference relationship of the child

towards other group members as well as to the group leaders becomes complex, fast moving and not easily understood, let alone interpreted (Woods, 1993). Apart from questions of loyalty among the girls, underlying, similar questions were perhaps aimed at the group leaders: on who's side were they and could they be trusted?

Group leaders continued to reflect on how difficult it was for the group to come together, the friction and anger.

Later in the session the girls mentioned that they had received the letters telling them what Secondary school they would be moving to next year:

"... Group Leader II wondered whether perhaps the falling out might link to the news about the schools - the reality, now, that the girls wouldn't all be going to the same school, and therefore some anxiety about separations and the upcoming change."

Although the session was mostly tense and uncontained, having the space to reflect on conflicts and not only 'act out' angrily perhaps had enabled the conflict to be resolve more quickly than before, as was reported by the girls and their teacher later on. An example of a sense of reparation came with the resurfacing of the question as to why the girls were chosen to participate in the group:

Session 8: *"Noise and joking around and talking over and excluding of therapists continued. Group Leaders pointed out that the group didn't seem to want to do any thinking now. Anna voiced a concern about why the girls were here, first asking whether and then stating in the negative, that the girls didn't have mental problems. Anna and Sara wondered why this group were even coming, why them, why not others… Anna finally recalled that it was about transition to secondary school, but Anna and Sara, and also Lyn, protested that surely it should involve everyone in the class then. Group Leader JM asked the group if there might be any other reasons. Anna and Sara finally said about friendship problems. Group Leader JM reminded the girls what they had brought up at the beginning, about taking sides, about how they feel when the fall-outs happen. Anna asked if it was a serious problem. Sara pointed out, jokingly, that they hadn't fallen out in ages."*

The importance attached to the group was apparent in Session 9 when the girls appeared pleased and relieved to come. They had been confused as to whether they would have a session, because of the tests proximity, and having not spotted Group Leader II earlier that morning.

Another example demonstrating their sense of belonging to the group occurred during Session 10 when the girls were informed of a change of date to one session due to a school activity and were reminded that only two more sessions were left. All of the girls protested about this, especially Iman and Anna – the quieter members.

The Therapy box as a trigger for chaos:

One of the therapeutic aims of a group is to allow catharsis – allow children to discharge their emotions within overall limits (Reid, 1993).

Limits in this group however were on occasion quite fluid and difficult to keep. It was noticed that often chaos prevailed following the opening of the group's box, which brought to mind the Greek myth, 'Pandora's Box':

*The **myth of Pandora's Box** is considered one of the most descriptive myths of human behaviour in Greek mythology. Ancient Greeks used this myth to instruct themselves about the weaknesses of humans and to explain several misfortunes of the human race.*

Pandora was, according to the myth, the first woman who was created by Gods as a punishment to mankind; Zeus wanted to punish people because Prometheus stole the fire to give it to them. Hephaestus created her from clay, shaping her perfectly, Aphrodite gave her femininity and Athena taught her crafts. Hermes was ordered by Zeus to teach her to be deceitful, stubborn and curious. Pandora was given a box by the Gods who told her that it contained special gifts from them but she was not allowed to open the box. Pandora tried to tame her curiosity, but at the end she could not hold herself anymore; she opened the box and all the illnesses and hardships that gods had hidden in the box started coming out. Pandora was scared and tried to close the box as fast as possible, closing Hope inside…This myth appears in many different versions; the most distinctive difference is that in some myths Hope does come out. The purpose of this myth is to address the question of why evil exists in the world (Robert Graves, 'The Greek Myths', 2005)

Applying this mythology to the internal world, one might see how Pandora's actions can represent the unconscious wish to express one's aggressive, destructive and damaging aspects. This need can become stronger in the face of feeling oppressed by rules and constraints given by the parental figures, which, in this case, were represented by the group

leaders. A battle against discipline and authority seemed to emerge which was particularly powerful within the force of the group:

Session 2: *"The girls discussed the group leaders' roles – were they like teachers who would discipline them and tell them off or like TA's who would support them? The box was then opened and chaotic play quickly developed – Amira and Iman were softening plasticine though not making anything out of it, the sponge balls were out and used by Lyn and Anna. Anna took out the Jenga game and they took turns to take out one brick at a time, trying to avoid its collapsing. Lyn and Amira began throwing bricks on the pile and making it collapse. They laughed, enjoying the chaos. The Group leaders tried to reflect on this: was it an attempt to mask the group's anxiety regarding the leaders' roles? Group Leader II felt some dread of the chaos, perhaps following their conclusion that Group Leaders were not teachers and would not tell them off."*

Following a long discussion about historic fall-outs they had had, excluding the group leaders from their conversation, the girls then made a decision about the group's name, perhaps feeling empowered and 'gelled' together. However, underlying anxiety was possibly present:

Session 3: *"The girls now became restless. The box was open and the Jenga game was used like last week. After initial ordinary play, balls started to be thrown at the game. Group Leader II reflected on how, like last week, it had become chaotic again: was the anxiety this time about how the group could become out of control in their fall-outs? There was laughter and very soon the Jenga was knocked over. Group Leader JM agreed on the similarity to last week. The girls did not pay much attention to the group leaders, Amira, Lyn, Sara, Iman all becoming over-excitable. Anna said she wanted to throw something at Iman. Anna tried to clarify whether she could throw something at Amira because she was 'cuckoo', to which a couple of the girls laughed."*

According to Woods (2003) An 'out of control' group is a case of transference being uncontained. Children who are threatening to take control are actively turning the group leaders into parents who cannot cope. Appropriate leadership by the group leaders provides containment to this transference.

"Later in the same session it was time to pack up. The girls had begun to stand up, one or two moving towards the door, still quite loud and manic. Group Leader II pointed out that there was still one minute to go and asked the girls to sit down. Group Leaders JM and II asked how the group thought the session had gone. Sara pointed out that Anna had

spoken in the group, despite having said in the first session that she wouldn't. Group leader JM added that Iman too had spoken more today. Group leaders asked Iman how she felt about it. Iman said she felt good. It was noted, perhaps, that Amira had joked around more today, and, generally, that there'd been a lot more joking around, to which the girls laughed."

So within the chaos and space for wilder kinds of feelings the quieter members were able to find a voice, perhaps empowered by the group liberating these aspects of their personality where they could test boundaries and challenge authority.

In the next session similar themes were further explored:

Session 4: *"Perhaps trying to divert the tension of the fall-out (see above) Anna, Amira, Iman and Sara, were interested in opening the box. Group Leader II said that she and JM had been noticing that when the box was opened, in sessions, things got a bit chaotic, and it often became impossible to listen to each other. The girls hesitated, smiling, holding their hands on the lid as the comment was made. Now the four of them (Lyn was absent) looked in the box. Group Leader II wondered aloud what it was in the open box that turned the session chaotic. The girls giggled then proceeded to open the box but their play was much calmer than in previous sessions."*

Perhaps being able to think rather than act had helped a sense of containment of the transference?

In the next week the theme continued to develop:

Session 5: *"The box was opened quicker today with less hesitation. Group leaders reflected on this being discussed last week and whether opening the box meant chaos. This amused the girls. They said that here wasn't like a lesson. Anna said that they didn't usually get to play in school so they liked playing together here. They all seemed to agree. "*

Later, the group was working on putting a name label on their box:

"Without discussing it the group was working with felt tip pens, each decorating a sticker with an initial on it to put on the box (The group name). Group Leaders commented on them working as a group while last week it had been impossible when one member had removed herself from the group. Iman was playing with the Jenga and there was a discussion as to whether this would become chaotic. There was a sense however that today the group wanted to keep things 'nice' and even the Jenga game

remained calm. Group Leader II noted that this week it seemed possible to open the lid of the box without things becoming chaotic. The girls giggled in recognition. Group leaders reflected that maybe the girls were keeping a lid on messy feelings, including the fall-out from last week."

'Chaos' returned, however, following the Easter Break with no school or sessions for several weeks, perhaps putting the group in touch with approaching losses: their last term together; their last term in primary school; and their anxieties about the future. Perhaps this had stirred up resistance to thinking and being in touch with what might feel too painful.

Session 8: "*The group was becoming increasingly jockey and loud. Anything group leaders said was talked over or ignored. Group leaders, struggling to hear each other, tried to point out that today, after the long break, there seemed to be little desire to do any thinking. It was necessary to remind the group not to bang the Jenga pieces or throw things. Throughout this, Lyn, Iman and Amira threw things at each other. Iman threw the teddy over her head, perhaps in desire to get rid of soft, baby feelings. Group leaders reflections were not heard.*"

It seemed that the girls coped with their anxieties by acting out in the room, communicating their sense of inner chaos in the face of the upcoming losses as well as an attack on the links that the group leaders were trying to make. Interestingly, the girls' class teacher reported that they were better contained with a significant reduction in the relationship difficulties between themselves.

Relationship with the group leaders:

The group seemed to make use of the group leaders in various ways. On occasion, the group leaders were excluded from the group's conversations and activities. Perhaps, like a parental couple, representatives of adult discipline, there was negotiating of boundaries as well as demonstration of their curiosity about the adults.

Session 1: "*Group Leader JM noted how the girls had said quite a bit about nice and helpful teachers: perhaps they were wondering about what the group leaders would be like, whether they would be helpful. Group Leader II added that the group might notice that they were a bit different to teachers.* "

The group seemed to try and figure out at this early stage, who the group leaders were and whether the space would be helpful. Soon there appeared curiosity coupled with intrusiveness towards the group leaders.

Lyn, whose father was not involved in her life, particularly targeted JM, the male group leader. This, however, resonated with the rest whose fathers were working long hours and were sometimes felt to be missing from their day-to-day life. This could also be linked to ordinary, pre adolescent age girls' emerging interest in the other sex and Oedipal preoccupations.

Session 2: *"They discussed a teacher who told them off. Group Leader II suggested they were perhaps wondering about how would it be in the group, would they be told off? Lyn agreed then turned to male group leader JM asking him directly, almost defiantly, if he would tell her off here. Group Leader JM asked the group what they thought. Lyn said that maybe the group leaders were more like TAs they could approach if they wanted to talk about their feelings. The group mentioned a TA they felt they could talk to. Group Leader II suggested that perhaps the group was wondering whether we were like TAs they could talk to about feelings or like teachers that would tell them off. They nodded. Amira said, facing Group Leader II that she liked to talk to Iman about personal things. She said her friends asked her why she always spoke to Iman but Iman made her feel better and also kept it to herself. Group leaders suggested that the group was also wondering how safe it would be to bring their thoughts and feelings here. Would group leaders discuss the group elsewhere? The girls were attentive."*

With valid questions emerging at this early stage, soon more active perhaps Oedipus-led attempts were made at splitting up the group leaders as a couple, often led by Lyn who demanded to know more about JM, the male group leader. Lyn appeared intrusive and demanding towards him while making II, the female group leader, feel redundant, ignored.

Session 5: *"Lyn turned to male group leader JM and said: 'Can we play a game?' JM noted that he was being asked to decide. Lyn said, 'I want to play a game!' The other girls got out plasticine. Sara noted that it had gone hard. Anna said that that's what happened to it when it was all mixed up. They all took some. Lyn and Sara began to roll theirs. Lyn said, 'like a sausage!' Lyn asked Group Leader JM again: 'Can we play a game?' Group Leader II said that Lyn seemed to think that JM should make the decisions. Iman turned to Group Leader II and said, 'Are you in charge?'"*

There seemed to be questions about who leads and who is in charge, with the group exploring whether it was the male group leader, perhaps representing a father figure, or the female, maternal group leader. At the

same time age appropriate preoccupation and curiosity about masculinity and male potency were apparent in the abrupt turning to the male group leader demanding his attention and closeness. This attempt at splitting the group leaders as a couple and seductively turning to the male group leader appears to link to age appropriate negotiations of Oedipal anxieties (Freud 1905).

During Session 6, the following week, demands were made towards the group leaders in a denigrating tone: the group wanted paints, a games console, food, and water and asked if the session could be outside the room. At the same time group leaders were excluded from conversations.

According to Bion (1959) in the therapeutic group the 'enemy' can be a member of the group, or the therapist, or his words from which it is necessary to defend or escape. The group will then ignore interventions or show its contempt through words or action. Hostility may assume different forms.

This reached a peak during Session 7, the last session before a long Easter break:

Session 7: *"After looking at the calendar and reflecting on the coming break Group Leader JM – who had been repeatedly asked by Lyn where he came from – tried to acknowledge her curiosity. Lyn now joined by Sara became insistent in finding out where JM was from. All girls except Iman then wanted to know where Group Leader II came from. The questions were increasingly demanding. Lyn persistently questioned JM, facing him closely, asking where he came from, and what primary school he had gone to. The others had similar questions to Group Leader II, in lesser intensity. They referred to last week's similar situation, asking why group leaders did not answer them, and why group leaders asked questions and they couldn't ask any back. Group leaders reflected on the group's curiosity, on anxiety about the break, and on what Group leaders were doing during it, without the girls. Lyn and Sara repeated that it wasn't fair."*

Ganging up against the group leaders seemed related to anxieties and frustration about the leaders' position as separate, private, representing a parental couple as well as authority. Moreover, as soon became clear, group leaders being the only white participants in the group evoked further strong feelings:

Cont. Session 7: *uncomfortable strong feelings to digest. "The group was loud and excitable following another series of abrupt questioning of*

the group leaders. The group leaders reflected as they had been, about it being difficult not to know about the adults while the adults knew about them and about them wanting to be like adults. Lyn said that the group leaders must be racist. Group Leader JM tried to reflect on that. Lyn took it up more strongly, trying to encourage the other girls, especially Sara. She said the group leaders were white and the girls were all black. One girl said they weren't black. Lyn said that she was black and they were half black. Sara seemed to want not to disagree with Lyn. She said Asians were a mix. The girls then said they would not speak to the group leaders until they answered questions. Their voices were bossy and loud but they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Anna and Iman, who were initially shy, slowly joined in. There was a sense of a gang in action. In the counter-transference group leaders carried different feelings: II felt troubled, JM felt at first amused. The girls began to write notes where they demanded answers from the group leaders. Lyn asked if the group leaders were Jews with funny hats or Nazis. They were all amused. Next, they covered their mouths and noses and made fake coughs while lying under the table pretending to be gassed by the Nazi group leaders. It felt powerful and unpleasant but they were having fun. They wrote notes of protest that they wanted answers or they would not stop. Group Leader II reflected on them perhaps discovering a way to feel like a group. Was this their way to become a group? Perhaps someone had to be excluded: did there have to be an enemy for them to group up against? They were giggling under the table. The group leaders wondered if there wasn't a more helpful way to be a group. The atmosphere was chaotic and mindless. Group leaders felt powerless.

At the end the girls packed up well when requested, and left the session calmly for a 3 week break while group leaders were left with

This extreme response, an aggressive attack on thinking, leaving the group leaders feeling powerless and wondering whether a firm boundary should have been introduced, perhaps reflected the girls own powerlessness, under the control of the adult world. In the face of upcoming changes in their lives and the anxieties these provoked, related also to it being the last session before the Easter break and the sense of being abandoned by the white couple that could not parent them, was poisoning and dispensing of them as the non-white babies - perhaps the girls were splitting off, projecting, and killing off their vulnerability,

According to Bion, the 'basic assumption' of *fight-flight* consists in the group's conviction that there is an enemy who must be attacked or avoided. The bad object is external and the only defensive activity is its destruction or avoidance.

It was somewhat comforting to read Woods (1993) reflections about group situations when, suddenly, "*...there is no time or space for thinking! At times like these there seems nothing therapeutic about the group..... I have to admit there are no foolproof techniques to prevent such dreaded scenes of child group therapy... Feelings engendered in the therapist by an unstable group can be quite extreme: anxiety, anger, hopelessness and also the temptation to retaliate*"(Woods, 1993).

Indeed, the group leaders had to sit with and contain strong feelings during this challenging session.

Rebellious sessions continued after the break:

Session 10: *"...They began to sing loudly. Group leaders' reflections were lost by all but Amira and Iman. Amira said she WAS listening to the group leaders. Lyn and Sara's dominance was overwhelming, however, and all but Iman continued to sing and rap loudly. Whenever the group leaders spoke Lyn sang louder. The group leaders were silenced. Mindful that nearby learning was taking place group leaders asked the group to lower their voices. The girls did for a bit but their volume increased again. Lyn's contempt of any attempts to regain some order and thinking was striking, as was Sara's behaviour of wanting to 'act the clown'. The other three girls seemed a bit less comfortable, although Anna and Amira, typically, but to a lesser degree, joined in the singing. Iman just seemed to enjoy the chaos, often banging things in rhythm. Group Leader JM asked whether there was space within the group for different group members to feel differently and behave differently – or was it that when one or two wanted to be loud and jockey everyone had to? The Group leaders tried to make this point battling against the volume. The girls put the blinds down and got under the table. Group leaders made the point that it seemed that Amira was listening, that Anna wanted to say something but had been prevented, that Lyn wanted to be loud and Sara to joke around – and that this stopped others from contributing. They remained under the table for some time, singing."*

The group leaders were mindful that when the group appeared omnipotent and undermining of authority, attacking the working together couple, it was potentially anxiety provoking, leaving them feeling uncontained and out of control. Indeed, during a later session the group acknowledged that they preferred the non-chaotic sessions.

In contrast to the extreme and primitive states of mind described above there were more ordinary transition-related anxieties apparent.

Anxieties about change and endings:

The group allowed the girls a space to express anxieties about secondary school – worries about being bullied, being lonely in the new school, and about academic pressure.

Session 1: *"Group Leader II reflected on the group saying how important their friendship had been and perhaps wondering how it will survive next year. Two girls replied simultaneously, Sara saying something about 'moving on', and making new friends, and Anna about 'staying friends'."*

Each girl seemed to focus on something else in order to cope with their anxiety about the coming change and the unknown and also to deny their anxieties:

Session 5: *"Group Leader JM said that last week the group had wanted to tidy the mess in the box, to tidy up the messy feelings so they weren't there anymore. Last week the group had painted a rosy picture of the future, about next year. Sara and several others smiled with acknowledgment."*

In another session, thoughts about moving on brought about some regressive behaviour:

Session 8 *(first one back after break): "A discussion began about secondary school – again, there was a defensive quality to it, the group saying they would be 'fine'. The joking around became quite immature, to the girl's awareness too. Lyn was sitting on the floor, Sara was particularly making jokes as if a much younger girl. The two of them started to make toddler-like noises and sing nursery songs, with Amira and Anna contributing a little bit, and Iman, the only one sat normally, extremely amused but also a little embarrassed, by the behaviour. Group Leaders pointed out the group wanting to be younger, and possible worry about growing up and moving on."*

The week after, following a discussion about the approaching ending, a discussion of a 'party', rather, took place:

Session 9: *"The group was planning an end of group 'party': Lyn stimulated the group to think of a list of things they would bring to the party. Different foods were divided up between them to bring in. The girls pleaded with the group leaders to agree to it. Both group leaders held*

back at first from responding. The interpretation that they were trying to 'sweeten' the ending and deny difficult feelings was offered. Group Leader JM then reminded the group that one rule of the group was to not bring things into the room. They didn't directly respond to this."

Interestingly, during the same session, alongside the getting together to plan the ending 'party' there was also a sense of separation when soon each girl was busy doing something alone:

Later in session 9: *"Group Leader II pointed out that the group was busy in non-group activities, playing alone using plasticine or Jenga or a small ball. Group Leader JM noted that the activities were quite precarious – the stacks of Jenga bricks looked like they could crash down at any moment. Some of the stacks did. And the balls kept rolling away.*

As the work drew to a close, the girls seemed to be expressing a mixture of anger, a sense of feeling lost, and even anxiety about disintegration:

Session 12, *last session: "Lyn wandered over to the window sill behind Iman. Iman fell over in her chair, to the amusement of her and others and needed help getting up. The pens were got from the box and the group started to throw them at the wall behind Amira and Group Leader JM. Group leaders were increasingly exasperated, reflecting on how difficult it is to think about the ending and wondering whether there might be more helpful ways to end the last session in the last minutes left. Amira was recycling the pens that fell on the floor back to Sara and Lyn who then threw them at the wall again. Anna and Iman seemed amused.*
Group leaders began to confiscate the pens but the remaining ones were thrown again until none were left.
Finally, with the pens gone, the atmosphere calmed a little. Group leaders insisted that for the last few minutes the girls should sit and the group could try and finish in a calm way. Lyn, smiling, then led the girls in a chorus of 'thank-you' to the group leaders. The girls filed out in a quite chaotic manner, some of their 'byes' quite aggressive or undermining, some trying to be humorous."

The Group Leaders had resorted to attempt physical containment by confiscation of the pens in order to rescue the ending, and had to be quite insistent to get a handful of minutes of calm at the end. Perhaps it was too much to expect the girls to have a thoughtful ending, given that the ending of the group was to be the first of a series of anxiety-provoking endings, leaving them perhaps feeling abandoned and insignificant,

'thrown out' like the pens, a bit like the feelings they left the group leaders with as they left the room for the last time.

A move towards a 'Work Group':

It was evident throughout the course of the group that the girls often returned to functioning on a 'Basic Assumption', 'ganging' mode. In the sessions themselves, there wasn't a linear, gradual positive change, rather, there were lots of gang typical presentations along the way, even at the very end. Nevertheless, as paradoxical as it sounds, by the end it felt that the group demonstrated an overall positive change.

A 'Work Group' (Bion, 1959), requires from its members co-operation and effort that results from certain maturity, contact with reality, tolerance to frustration, and control of emotions. The coexistence of the 'Basic Assumption', Paranoid Schizoid position mind set, and the 'Work Group' Depressive Position presentation, brings about a permanent conflict that recurs within the group. In our group these two states were clearly apparent from the beginning. Despite the gang mentality that dominated during the week before, it felt hopeful when 'Work Group' Depressive Position mentality could be noticed:

Session 5: *"Group leaders reflected on the change of mood in comparison to last week (The fallout week). The girls all nodded. Group leaders wondered about it. Sara was less keen to talk about it and said it was all over. The rest also seemed happy to let it go. Group leaders spoke about the wish to behave like nothing had happened, and how last week had been extremely difficult and tense in the group. Group leaders wondered if things always moved back to normal so quickly. Lyn said that sometimes they fell out so badly that it went on for days. All nodded. Group leaders reflected on that and on how one group member who isolated herself last week was now back to being part of the group. Group leaders wondered what helped difficulties resolve quicker this time. Was the group helpful? Lyn said it was."*

Within the group it is hoped that the child is enabled to see the consequences of their own behaviour as well as the impact of the behaviour of others upon themselves. This is because the group experience is shared (Reid, 1993).

With time and encouragement the girls were more able to express themselves openly and showed an improved ability to listen to each other:

Session 6: *"Noticing Anna, Group Leader JM said that it seemed difficult for the group to notice when a member didn't want to play and seemed*

sad. Iman turned to Anna and asked what the matter was. Anna didn't reply. Sara turned to her, but rather than noting her feelings, tried to cheer her up by making jokes. Sara then turned back to Lyn and Amira and gave up. Amira appealed earnestly, 'What's up, Anna?'"

The girls were clearly trying to be sensitive to a group member's sadness and were responsive to the group leaders' comments.

Session 9: *"Sara now insisted, with Amira joining, that they liked the group, they got to talk about stuff. Group Leader JM pointed out, questioning, that surely they have other times to talk. Lyn said that their teacher didn't let them. JM asked about the playground. Lyn laughed this off, saying there was no time on the playground. Sara said that the group also helped them to talk about and sort stuff out – like they had talked about and resolved the falling out between her and Lyn."*

It spite of a growing appreciation of the group and what it gave space for, it seemed that getting together would invariably require excluding others. This is evident, for example, in the below extract, where the group leaders, symbolising authority and the adult world, are first responded to, before being excluded.

Group 10: *"Group leaders pointed out to the group that despite their efforts to make Lyn laugh Lyn was still upset. Was the group going to ignore this? They all looked at her. There was a sympathetic exchange, asking her kindly what was wrong, why was she upset, particularly by Amira and Anna, and then, finally, more quietly and caringly by Sara, who tried to make Lyn laugh, but in a more sympathetic way to before. Group leaders reflected on how this felt like a group joining together in support of a member. Lyn responded to this. They began a conversation that soon the group leaders were excluded from and their comments ignored with the group absorbed in their own chatting."*

Challenging of and excluding authority continued in the next session while the girls were bonding as a group. During this penultimate session the girls smuggled in rubber bands to make bracelets.

Session 11: *"The girls were busy working together, contained, connecting, apart from the group leaders. There was perhaps somberness about one or two of them, Iman certainly, Anna somewhat. Amira seemed quite calm. Sara was joking around less than usual, although still occasionally. Lyn, busy discussing the bands, seemed calm. Group leaders brought up the 'connecting together' rubber bands in view of the final session approaching. The word 'party' rippled around. The group*

said they were going to bring in food as previously discussed. Group Leader JM pointed out that the smuggling in of the rubber bands this week was perhaps the group testing whether they could bring anything in. Group leader II mentioned the talk of food and the 'party' to sweeten up the difficulty of thinking about the ending. Sara stopped her conversation with the others about the bands and, struggling to say it seriously but achieving this more than in previous weeks, said: 'We just don't want to think about it because it's sad'. Iman agreed.

With the growing ability to begin to acknowledge the sadness of the approaching ending, interestingly by the group member who often chose to joke around in response to serious matters, a real sense of a shift was felt, as exhibited later in the session:

Later in Session 11: *"Group Leader JM wondered aloud whether some of the girls perhaps seemed a little sad. He noted that Iman had quite a serious face. Group leaders reflected on sad feelings. The girls continued their conversation. Group Leader II noted that it seemed difficult for the group to notice that a member might be upset. Sara said something to Iman who didn't reply. Iman finally mumbled an explanation that how she felt related to what Sara had said earlier (about sad feelings). Group leaders reflected on the many endings coming up – group, school, separation from each other – and that there might be sad feelings about this."*

Outcome and discussion:

Although this was a fairly short piece of work – 12 sessions only – group conscious and unconscious processes were clearly and powerfully mobilized and significant themes emerged. The group talked about their 'fall-outs', before actually bringing a large 'fall-out' to the sessions. In that session, the girls were not able to find resolution but perhaps were able to utilize the thinking space provided in the group work to come to their own resolution shortly afterwards. Later, the girls themselves were able to express that they felt it was the work in the sessions that had made this possible, and staff reported a dramatic decrease in 'fall-outs' between the girls.

It was seen that the opening of the group therapy box used by the girls came, as early as second and third sessions, to constitute a moment in the session when 'chaotic' feelings would spill out. This was linked in the paper to the Greek myth of Pandora's Box. The group was encouraged to think about what might underlie these chaotic feelings: Anxieties,

frustration, anger about endings, separation, transition, struggle with and attack of the adult world, their helplessness masked by omnipotent chaotic play.

Over the course of the twelve sessions the girls explored their relationship with the therapists. Early on, there was interest as to how to understand the role of the therapists, sometimes seen more as parental figures representing authority to challenge boundaries with, fight and undermine. Later, age appropriate curiosity emerged in relation to the male group leader with a seductive element to it and attempts at splitting the therapeutic parental couple. In the seventh session, just before a three-week break, curiosity spilled over into suspicion and distrust and a 'Basic Assumption', Paranoid Schizoid ganging mentality prevailed, with powerful, uncomfortable projections left with the group leaders. This was seen as the splitting off and projecting of unbearable feelings of helplessness and anxiety in the face of a break and upcoming losses.

The anxiety-provoking nature of changes and endings became marked in the group as the work went on, with the upcoming move to Secondary school, and the inevitable impact on the girls' friendships, sometimes seen to be too much to bear in the sessions. The girls' desire to 'sweeten' the ending of the work, with food and a party, felt very clear, and the anxiety was such that the ability to have a though

tful, containing ending to the group work proved very challenging.

Finally, the girls' willingness and ability to identify as a 'work group' was considered, and instances of progress were identified, albeit in the face of many instances of reverting to a 'basic assumption' mentality. Nevertheless it is hoped that while the anxiety provoked by the ending to the work may have initiated a temporary 'one step back', in the longer term the girls may have internalized an ability to carry forward within and between themselves an ability to think and face up to difficulty and, although this group disbanded at the end of the twelfth session, to form helpful and meaningful future relationships.

Towards the end of the group some positive changes were noticed in all group members. Lyn had improved her relationships in the group but continued to struggle with children outside of the group. She had however suffered some complex personal circumstances. The fact that she did not deteriorate further was perhaps an indication that she was helped. Indeed often a group can function as an assessment phase for some children to help decide whether they need further help, perhaps through individual psychotherapy that is offered once the group is over.

Apart from Lyn, teachers reported positive changes in all the girls' social behaviour, amongst themselves and with their peers. Anna showed signs of being able to express herself more and stand up for herself, Sara reverted to defensive humour less, Iman became able to acknowledge difficult feelings in herself a little bit more, and Amira had an experience of being noticed and appreciated as an individual.

Positive feedback was received from the girls themselves regarding the usefulness of the group in terms of their relationships. Parents also reported positive change and progress in their daughters towards achieving the goals they had set before the group started. The goals were mainly around social integration and behaviour. All but one parent reported improvement. The exception was Iman, who's mother felt she still struggled socially.

We were able to conclude that the group intervention was felt to be productive and supportive for the girls. Woods and Argent (1999) discuss that for children who are well selected the group experience is a powerful and effective method of producing observable and internal change.

There is some empirical evidence that group therapy in school gives rise to improvement in behaviour in both classroom and home (Reid, 1993). It is hoped therefore that for the girls the positive group experience will carry into settings outside the group, such as the family and later on to their secondary school.

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