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BOOK CHAPTER

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Work discussion groups at work: applying the method

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A s we know, not all children or adolescents are able to ask for psychological help—at least not directly. We are familiar with the worrying ways in which young people can be propelled into action by their difficulties, while finding the prospect of any reflection pretty terrifying. For example, adolescents are often unaware of how much help they need; even when they are, many can't make the leap of faith necessary to get themselves to an unfamiliar outpatient setting—however young-person-friendly it might be. So, if we are serious about helping and engaging with young people, we need to build therapeutic bridges into their communities and particularly schools, where a more familiar setting might reduce anxieties sufficiently to enable them to make contact.

However, within schools, this relies on the assumption that staff are able, interested, or encouraged to develop supportive relationships with pupils whose education or emotional development is at risk. In reality, this is simply not always the case. While most teachers believe that the teacher–pupil relationship lies at the heart of learning, there is a striking absence of any significant input within initial teacher training relating to personality development, the emotional factors affecting teaching and learning, or the management of teacher–pupil relationships. For example, in a needs assessment carried out by the Brent Centre for Young People in ten secondary schools, only 12 out of

145 teachers (6.9%) reported that they had "received sufficient training in adolescent development" (Salavou, Jackson, & Oddy, 2002). It is therefore no great surprise that many school counsellors and therapists find themselves approached as if they were simply providing a depository for the badly behaved—providing only temporary relief for despairing teachers.

Sometimes the situation is even more worrying: for instance, when a pupil's rather obvious difficulties go completely unnoticed within the school. To give a vivid and sobering example of this: I heard about a pupil who had to do a piece of writing with the title: "How am I feeling." The pupil wrote about how depressed he was, how unloved he felt, and how he sometimes felt he might as well be dead. When his learning mentor came across this, she was immediately concerned, and showed it to the boy's teacher. The learning mentor asked the teacher, "What do you think about this?" The teacher read it, then re-read it. Looking up at the learning mentor, with a straight face, the teacher said: "I think I would give it a level 5." While this is quite shocking, we must take care not to become too critical of schools, as while some are certainly emotionally literate organizations, this is by no means always the case. Schools are increasingly beset by a results-driven culture, endlessly reinforced by annually published league tables. Furthermore, while there is lots of talk about pupil "inclusion", it is rare for staff to feel listened to, thought about, and contained in their work with their pupils—rather than the subject. This is a serious problem and one that urgently needs to be addressed.

Reviewing the context, structure, and setting: work discussion groups in schools

In this chapter, I describe the application and development of the work discussion method to teaching staff[1] within educational settings. In order to do this, I draw on my experience of running work discussion groups in schools and colleges. This has involved groups comprising a mix of staff within a school (learning support assistants, teachers, middle managers, school receptionists, etc.), groups for specific staff (e.g. learning support assistants), and one mixed primary/secondary school group. I will also be drawing on experience gained through running groups for middle and senior managers designed to develop leadership capacity.

Although most of us are naturally more interested in the *process* of work discussion groups—how they work, what preoccupations

teachers bring, how insight gradually develops—my starting point for thinking about how work discussion groups might be established is to consider the *setting*. First, I outline some of the structural and contextual factors significant to school-based groups with teachers, as neglecting these factors is likely to jeopardize the longer-term viability of the work.

Timing and duration

One of the rather concrete—though critical—factors to consider is the timing of the group: when it will take place, how long each meeting will last, and how long the group might continue. Unlike training courses for which individual teachers may be able to negotiate occasional study leave, work discussion groups held in school need to be arranged at a time that is viable without unduly disrupting their primary teaching responsibilities.

Sometimes, when head teachers are clear about the developmental benefits, work discussion groups can be timetabled into the working week. However, this is often difficult to arrange[2] and is usually only possible for managers who have greater flexibility in their timetable.[3] Outside this, there tend to be three points in the day that are potentially viable: before or after school, or at lunch-time. In my experience, the best time for teachers is often before school, as this is the only time that they have—probably—not yet been pounced on by pupils, parents, or managers with multiple demands on their time. This before-school time can usually be extended if registration cover can be arranged for those attending. An after-school group has the advantage of offering an opportunity for teachers to process experiences that are fresh from the day, often enabling them to leave work with a somewhat clearer head. However, teachers do not always find this easy, as they are frequently caught up in work arising out of the day (e.g. meetings with pupils, parents, detentions, etc.). Groups run at lunch-time are usually limited to a half-hour.

Work discussion groups can vary in length from brief groups of 30 or 45 minutes to longer groups of up to two hours. My own preference is to run groups for an hour on a weekly or fortnightly basis, as briefer or less frequent groups can impede the development of trust and cohesion within the group. Nonetheless, work discussion groups can still be very effective when offered over a lunch break or on a less frequent basis, provided they are carefully organized. When working with senior managers or head teachers, a weekly meeting time is

often unrealistic, and staff have preferred to meet for longer on a less frequent basis (for example, 1.5 to 2 hours on a monthly basis).

Location

In principle, there is no reason why work discussion groups cannot take place in any room within a school. However, where particular attributes are felt to be located with certain departments or individuals, geographic location may hold broader significance. For example, in one secondary school, the groups were held within the "Inclusion" department, in a self-contained building separate from the main building of the school and housing most of the support staff. While subject teachers did attend periodically, it was noticeable that over a five-year period the group consisted predominantly of inclusion staff. Subject teachers tended instead to use it as a "crisis management group", dropping in when concerns were running high; then, as soon as they felt helped, they would just as quickly drop out. From discussions about this with staff, my impression was that the location might have inadvertently given the message that the group was *really* directed at helping "special needs" children via their support staff. Might this have been different if, for example, the groups were held somewhere like the "conference room", as was the case in other schools where membership happened to include a committed core of teaching staff?

Membership matters

Voluntary vs. compulsory membership, open vs. closed groups

I firmly believe that attendance at work discussion groups should, as far as possible, be voluntary and rooted in teachers' wish for developmental opportunities to extend their thinking and professional practice. From a contractual perspective, this can understandably feel a leap of faith for uncertain head teachers who might prefer this valuable resource to be directed at their "problem staff". However, when presented as an instruction or something remedial, the resistance to engagement in the group discussion increases dramatically. This works against the overall atmosphere in the group and is unlikely to be helpful to the individual concerned. Furthermore, at a more strategic level, if one is to have any real chance of genuinely interesting the more sceptical or disaffected teachers, it is likely to be via an

organic process of peer recommendation rather than a management directive.

While voluntary attendance is preferable, this can be more problematic when teachers are specifically released from other responsibilities in order to attend. For instance, one head teacher and I had several discussions about the pros and cons of directed attendance for heads of year who were timetabled to attend on a fortnightly basis; this was particularly problematic as one head of year was openly ambivalent about the idea. One helpful approach can be to have an initial pilot period, for a term or so, which can be reviewed so that the sense of ownership, agency, and involvement is greater in anything that is subsequently agreed.

Although group membership needs sufficient stability, my own experience is that, with careful negotiation, other teachers can be enabled to "drop in" to the group to discuss a pupil or situation concerning them. Providing these "drop ins" do not become too frequent, my view is that the group can and should support the tentative interest of other staff who are not yet ready or able to commit to more frequent attendance.

Representation of management structures

Linked to this, the question of *who* attends also deserves consideration. For example, it can be difficult for teachers to risk sharing "problems" in front of managers who, they fear, might judge them harshly or use information against them. Equally, it can be anxiety-provoking for managers to expose concerns to their team for fear of it adversely affecting the perception of their competence. This was certainly the case in one school where middle managers attended for only short bursts of time, in contrast to other staff, until a group was set up specifically for heads of year, at which point their commitment increased dramatically and continues six years later. On the whole, I would suggest that good working relations between group members are much easier to establish when management hierarchies are not represented within the group membership.

Group size

To function most effectively, work discussion groups in schools ideally accommodate between four and ten members. If too many attend, it becomes difficult for everyone to participate and have a voice. There

is then a greater risk that some members will fall silent and eventually withdraw. While smaller groups allow for more individualized attention, they can also increase the pressure on teachers both to attend and to bring issues for discussion. Over time, this can result in teachers feeling that they are serving the needs of the group rather than vice-versa.

Setting up the work discussion groups

The negotiation of expectations and ground rules

Given that work discussion groups in schools are almost always a new venture, it is necessary to allow for exploration and negotiation about what teachers might—or might not—want to get out of the group. While this is an evolving process, it can be helpful to offer an initial "one-off" meeting in which teachers have an opportunity to ask questions, voice concerns about their work, and hear some description of how these concerns might be addressed. This process might also require some clarification about what a work discussion group is and is not. For instance, though teachers might sometimes *choose* to share something about the more personal resonance of their work, a work discussion group needs to be clearly differentiated from a psychotherapy group. In addition to helping to orient teachers, this process also offers a brief experience of how the group and facilitator might operate and reduces ordinary anxieties about the unknown.

Another fantasy, often needing to be dispelled at an early stage, is the inevitable hope that the work discussion group—and facilitator—might somehow provide teachers with a menu of magical solutions to solve any problem. The facilitator[4] needs therefore to clarify their own role and task—for instance, that a central aspect of the task would be to help teachers develop a deeper understanding about the underlying meaning of behaviour and the emotional factors that impact on teaching and learning. In the past, I initially made an active point of emphasizing that I would not be offering "expert management solutions" or "behaviour management strategies" for dealing with difficult pupils (see Jackson, 2002). However, while teachers can sometimes feel a bit frustrated that solutions are not provided *immediately*, they do, on the whole, experience the work discussion group as providing them with extremely helpful ways of thinking about pupils or situations, out of which more effective strategies and interventions evolve organically. In view of this, I now tend to say that we could, as

a group, think about how one might *manage* a situation while emphasizing that the starting point for this is thinking about what is "really" going on under the surface.

Confidentiality

Some discussion about the parameters of confidentiality is always important. Rather than simply taking the form of a mechanistic agreement not to disclose anything, it can be more helpful to explore what this might actually mean in practice. After all, one does not wish to prevent learning and thinking from being shared with others who are not able to attend the groups. At the same time, it is not helpful—and could even be harmful—for aspects of the discussion to be regurgitated without careful consideration. One way to help teachers think about this is to encourage them to ensure that nothing said outside the groups will compromise, embarrass, or be hurtful to anyone.

Teachers may also be preoccupied by the question of what might be said by the facilitator to managers or the head teacher. This is an important question that deserves open discussion with everyone involved. It is not, for example, unreasonable for a head teacher to want some sort of periodic feedback about how the groups are progressing and who is attending. It is also important not to underestimate how helpful and containing such discussions with those "sponsoring" the groups can be.

How one might respond to these issues will naturally vary. My own approach is to suggest that it is usually helpful to meet periodically with the head teacher to review the on-going development of the work but to clarify that feedback would be at a thematic level and not individually attributable. I then try to discuss with the group what feedback to offer in advance of the review meeting.

Working method

Over the past decade I have explored several different ways of running groups in schools. Initially, I tried to export the traditional method in which there is an agreed rota of presentations written up in advance of the seminar. Though this can work well, my overriding impression is that, despite the "teaching and learning" environment, teachers are resistant to putting pen to paper or to risk "being marked". I therefore tend not to ask for written material—though I encourage it when possible. Instead, I see it as an important task to help "presenters" unpack

their concern in sufficient detail so that it can be thought about productively. This process of "unpacking" is a vital part of developing reflective capacities.

Another structural adjustment sometimes needed is the shift from an agreed order of presentations to a decision about what to focus on, which is taken in the group at the time. The group might therefore start with something akin to a "check in", during which everyone has the opportunity to mention any worrying pupils or other preoccupations so that a decision can be made about where to start.

Potential advantages and disadvantages of school-based work discussion groups

Teachers know each other and their pupils

One of the central differences within a school-based work discussion group is that teachers are usually familiar with each other's work and role. By extension, pupils are frequently known to others, regardless of attempts to preserve confidentiality. This difference presents a number of important advantages as well as some sensitive issues. For example, when one teacher shares particular concerns, others will be able to feed in their own experiences and knowledge, such as a pupil's family history and circumstances, the context of a class group (e.g. whether there has been a series of supply teachers), or other information relating to the student's academic ability, learning difficulties, or peer relationships.

In addition to sharing relevant *objective* circumstances or influences, group members are also able to share their *subjective* experiences of the student or class. For instance, a teacher might describe having a dreadful time with a student, feeling demoralized and isolated and believing that no one else feels the same. They might then learn, to their surprise, that others understand only too well what they have described. The discovery that one is not alone is usually a huge relief. Equally, teachers might discover that others have quite different experiences. When thought of as being part of the total picture, these differences can prove extremely illuminating and lead to a range of possible approaches. For example, a student who had suffered traumatic experiences evoked in one teacher a sense of tremendous sadness. Another was filled with rage about what the student had experienced, while a third teacher felt detached and unaffected by the student or the latter's experiences. Rather than there being one *"cor-*

rect" version of the truth, teachers could soon see how they might be getting in touch with different aspects of the student's overall experience, from loss, to rage, to the sense of something being too raw to be thought about. Thinking about different perceptions in this way can contribute to a rich and informative picture for all concerned.

Like other types of "*group*" work, teachers attending not only receive consultation and support from the facilitator but also act as supportive consultants to one another. Through this process, group members develop their thinking and understanding not only in relation to their own work, but in relation to a much wider range of issues. Over time, this can lead to a culture of peer consultation developing among teachers, thereby ensuring that the work of the work discussion group takes place increasingly in the wider context of the school. As one head teacher put it: "As the project has progressed . . . I have seen my staff growing in perception, tolerance, patience and confidence in containing and motivating challenging children. Of course, such is the collegiate nature of schools that the participants' practice in turn influences that of other staff, triggering a cascade effect, even if unconsciously" (quoted in Jackson, 2002).

Protective and preventative aspects

A work-based work discussion group has a protective and preventative function for both students and staff. In one school, for example, teachers in the group were able to identify a student who was at risk of self-harm and to ensure the latter received the help needed. Without the forum of the group, this simply might not have happened.[5] Equally, work discussion groups can protect staff members from getting drawn into potentially unhelpful or inappropriate relationships with students. For example, one teacher voiced concerns that a student was becoming overly reliant on him. With help from the group discussion, the teacher was able to think about the importance both for himself *and the student* of maintaining appropriate personal and professional boundaries.

Perhaps the most compelling benefit and outcome of work discussion is the sense of validation, being understood and accepted, that is frequently reported by group members after having shared their concerns. Indeed, a key aim of work discussion groups is *to create a forum in which workers feel able to share issues, concerns, and preoccupations that they would previously not have wanted others to know about*—for instance due to shame, fear of exposure, or possible criticism. This is

especially important since it is often what we *do not* want others to know about our professional practice that leaves us feeling isolated and burdened.

Anxieties of management and group members

From the head teacher's point of view it is also important for facilitators to be aware of what a leap of faith it is for them to trust someone to work with their staff "behind closed doors". One central anxiety often generated is that the group might be used as a forum to "sound off" and complain about "bad management", seducing the facilitator into establishing some sort of subversive alternative leadership. Such concerns are understandable and important to acknowledge (and contain) from the outset.

As exciting an experience as learning can be, it can also generate anxieties as we depart from what is known and enter the realm of the unknown. It is not uncommon, therefore, for teachers to be cautious at first about what they share for fear of feeling exposed, ashamed, and open to criticism. Anxieties such as these can quite easily drive a group to be dominated by basic-assumption (Bion, 1961) and other off-task functioning and therefore deserve attention from the facilitator, especially in the early phase of the group.

Schools in crisis

The only other time when, in my experience, work discussion groups seem paradoxically impossible is when the school feels itself to be in such a state of crisis or survival mode that stopping to think cannot be countenanced. One example of this was a school in "special measures" where pupil behaviour and teacher anxiety were spiralling out of control. Despite the provision of external funding to support staff, the newly appointed head teacher was adamant that work discussion groups were to be stopped with immediate effect. Although the teachers involved were extremely upset about this, the head teacher's directive was for them to be in lessons, the playground, or policing the corridors.[6] A similar situation can arise with newly qualified teachers who are so frenetically busy and vulnerable to feeling totally overwhelmed that they dare not stop and think for fear of collapsing altogether. It is often only once the end of their first year of teaching is within sight that they dare to reflect on how close they felt to breaking down, giving up and even leaving the profession altogether.

Case examples

One of the most striking anomalies of school life is the way in which intense feelings from or towards pupils—whether positive or negative—tend to be treated as if they were taboo rather than one of the most ordinary, inevitable, and potentially creative factors at the heart of learning. This avoidance is exacerbated by the general lack of understanding about some fundamental psychoanalytic ideas concerning inter and intra-personal relationships—concepts such as projection, splitting, transference, countertransference. While largely avoiding the use of psychoanalytic terminology, an understanding of these and other concepts has gradually been introduced through case discussion. For instance, instead of ignoring our internal reactions to a pupil, I have suggested that it is often these that give us the most important information about what might be going on. Teachers have found it something of a revelation to learn about the ways in which pupils who are unable to put their thoughts or feelings into words might instead act them out and, in the process, get others to experience them for them—both to get rid of their own unwanted feelings and to communicate the way they are feeling, albeit unconsciously.

In the following section I describe some examples of how issues can be tackled and illustrate the myriad ways these groups can be used by teachers.

Managing pupil–staff attachments and separations

Issues arising from pupil–teacher relationships are frequently brought into group discussion around natural junctions in the school year, in particular around holiday breaks. The following group session, just before the Christmas break, was one such example.

Within this work discussion group for learning support assistants (LSAs), one teacher, Sasha,[7] spoke of her concerns about a 12-year-old boy called Tony. Sasha described Tony as suffering from "extremely low self-confidence and self-esteem". He lived with his mother, who had long-standing mental health problems and had to work long hours to make ends meet, leaving her with little time or energy for her son. At school, Tony had few friends and came across as lonely and forlorn. Academically, Sasha reported that he struggled terribly and that his reading and writing were more

appropriate to the level of an 8-year-old. As a result of his learning and social difficulties he had been assigned individualized LSA support involving several hours a day with Sasha.

Sasha's description of the situation vividly conveyed her sense of pain and guilt about Tony. It was as if she felt she wasn't doing enough and that his neediness was hard to bear. Other members immediately reassured her that she was helping him enormously. Sasha was grateful for this support and spoke more specifically about how difficult it was to know *how involved* to be. "I feel so bad for him", she said passionately, "he never gets to go out and just laps up any attention I offer." There was a sense of tremendous sadness.

When I invited group members to respond, several teachers spoke about what needy children they work with and what impoverished lives they often lead. One teacher added that it can be really hard for pupils "when they realize we are teachers and not friends". Another teacher chimed in with a comment about how often they get called "Mum" by mistake. Sasha added that Tony has even asked her to take him to the movies, imitating his voice assuring her that "My Mum won't mind!"

I commented on how the discussion seemed to highlight the importance for children like Tony of having LSA input and how intensely attached pupils could become to their LSA. One teacher commented on how they had to be everything—a friend, an older sibling, a parent *and* a teacher! The atmosphere in the group seemed serious as staff reflected on their importance to their pupils.

When I asked what had prompted Sasha to share her concerns at this point, she went on to describe her work with Tony and how much his learning and social skills had been progressing. However, lately he had been awful to her, though she didn't understand why or what had changed. When asked to elaborate, Sasha said that she had recently been ill and that while she was away, Tony got into a fight and was excluded. On her return, Tony was unusually rude to her, which resulted in Sasha telling him that she felt disappointed in him for fighting and that he had let her down. Since then, he had been rejecting her efforts, refusing to work with her, and once even shouting at her to "go away" when she approached him in class. Sasha admitted she felt really hurt

by this—though added that she shouldn't be affected, as she was the adult.

It was important here to acknowledge Sasha's feelings, and the ordinariness of them, as well as to open up the discussion and ask the group to reflect on why Tony's attitude might have changed. One teacher thought it was simply because he didn't like to be challenged. Another wondered whether he felt betrayed that Sasha didn't "take his side" in relation to the fight. I picked up on this sense of "betrayal" and "disappointment" and wondered about the timing of Tony's fight (while Sasha was away). The teachers got interested in this. One thought it highlighted how much support was needed and how quickly things deteriorated without it. Another picked up on how Sasha had experienced what had happened, almost as if his fight felt like a personal attack. Sasha agreed, though she couldn't understand how Tony could have felt rejected by her for being away when she had been ill!

Some disgruntled comments followed this, mostly about how pupils forget that teachers are human and also need some appreciation. "They behave as if we have no feelings." I picked up on the importance of this and acknowledged how much of themselves they put into their work. I also commented on how we can all become rejecting towards others, not because we don't like them but, rather, because they might actually mean a lot. One teacher said that this was one of the difficult things about their job: when they offer themselves as a support, their pupils miss them all the more when they are away. Another teacher chuckled as she told us how horrible she is to her husband on his return from work trips. Teachers then began to speculate about whether Tony was angry with Sasha for being away and how, unconsciously, through the fight, he might have been proving that he couldn't cope without her. I reminded group members that though Sasha knew she had been ill, Tony might simply have experienced her as having been preoccupied with something or someone else, leaving him feeling rather forgotten. "I wonder if that is how he feels at home", wondered a teacher.

All of this made sense to Sasha, who then remembered that Tony had said a strange thing to her: "He warned me that he was going to be friends with me right until the last day of school, when he will do something to make me hate him." At the time, Sasha was

preoccupied with what he might do and felt this was a horrible thing to say. It now occurred to her that he might have said it because he was worried about what would happen when he left school.

This whole theme of attachments and separations was then linked to the approaching Christmas holidays and the range of feelings it stirs up—from anticipation to dread—especially for those who do not feel part of a happy family unit. We talked about how this can be a blind spot in schools, where staff expect everyone to be looking forward to the break without reminding themselves that for some pupils, particularly those from troubled backgrounds, school is the break from their life outside. One teacher thought this was sometimes the case for staff too, adding that "pupils usually think we come from perfect families".

This discussion enabled teachers to think about the need to give more attention to the management of separations and endings in school. It also enabled them to consider how they might prepare pupils for the forthcoming Christmas break and be aware of the range of responses they might encounter. One teacher said that after coming back from the summer holiday, one pupil she knew well behaved as if he had forgotten her altogether! She was now wondering whether it was *he* who had really felt forgotten. This resonated for others who shared comments about how easy it is for them to forget that pupils might actually appreciate them even though they don't always show it.

As the meeting came to an end, Sasha thanked group members for their support and said that she felt much better. She added that she now understood more about why Tony had been horrible to her and how difficult it must be for him at home if he feels his mother is preoccupied and unavailable, even though it may not be her fault.

Understanding adolescence

Given the age range of secondary-school pupils, it is not surprising that many issues raised relate to difficulties experienced during this transitional period. Sufficient space to discuss these is especially important because the very nature of adolescent concerns often evokes feelings of embarrassment or shame in those around them.

One such example took place when teachers asked for help with Charlie. Charlie had just turned 13 and was described as being disruptive and disturbing to those around him. His art teacher, a young woman who was new to the profession, started off by cautiously admitting that she dreaded having to teach him. She described how, in one lesson, Charlie had made a clay penis and then paraded it around the class, using it to prod some girls and get laughs out of the boys. When the teacher wasn't looking, he then placed it on her desk, causing the class to roar with laughter at her shock. Although the incident had happened a few weeks earlier, the teacher said she still felt upset and embarrassed about it.

Group members listened and nodded. One of the older and experienced female teachers then said that this pupil also made unpleasant sexualized comments in her lessons, some of which were of a pornographic nature. She hadn't felt able to tell anyone before. Both teachers felt isolated in their respective experiences and believed they *should* have known how to deal with it. Both also confessed to wishing that Charlie would be excluded.

When asked about his home life, neither teacher knew much. Another teacher said that Charlie was an only child and that she knew his mother had recently started a new relationship. Someone else said that there had previously been concerns about whether his mother could maintain appropriate boundaries with Charlie or whether he was over-exposed to her sexual life, particularly as they lived in a one bedroom flat. Charlie apparently had no contact with his father.

It was then possible for me to raise some questions such as: why might someone behave in this way? What might Charlie be saying through his behaviour? What might we understand from the way Charlie makes others feel? How might it feel to be Charlie? The group quickly engaged with these questions and could contemplate how unsettled Charlie might feel by his mother's new relationship and sexual life, especially at a time when so much was changing for him. Perhaps he, like his teachers, felt rather isolated and afraid of sharing his worries for fear of what others might say.

Both teachers felt relieved at having aired their concerns and of having these met with a receptive and non-judgemental response.

Having a space to think in this way seemed to serve a number of different functions. It provided an opportunity for teachers to notice and put into words how they were feeling, something they had not felt able to do before. Making sense of his impact on them also led to thoughts about how Charlie might be feeling. This different perspective transformed some of the teachers' upset, anger and disturbance into a renewed wish to help him along with a determination not to give up or "solve it" through exclusion. While I cautioned teachers against any unprocessed regurgitation of our discussion, teachers did begin to formulate a number of possible approaches including: ignoring his behaviour (which now felt possible); calling a meeting with his mother; or having a quiet word with him, at an appropriate moment, to acknowledge what a lot seems to be going on and whether he might find it helpful to talk with someone. By the end of this meeting the art teacher admitted how much she had wanted to make a scathing remark to cut Charlie down to size. She was glad she hadn't as she thought he was probably only too vulnerable to humiliation.

A couple of years later I bumped into the art teacher who, at the end of a brief conversation, reiterated her gratitude. "Thanks again for helping me . . . you really saved my life last year when I was dealing with Charlie!"

Managing anxieties and hostilities

Many discussions highlight the intense anxieties and, at times, hostility that pupils can evoke in their teachers as well as each other.

In one group, a teacher who had recently taken over a class spoke of the difficult time she was having with two 15-year-old girls in her tutor group, Sarah and Emma. The teacher described how nasty and cruel these girls could be, laughing about her when she was within earshot and telling her she isn't their real teacher . . . she is "just a visitor". The teacher said it was like when she was bullied at school and admitted feeling intimidated. They even made her feel paranoid about what they might do to embarrass her in class. She found it "soul-destroying", and she felt "demoralized".

As the teacher described the situation, her colleague interjected energetically: "I know those girls . . . that is exactly what they

are like. They are awful . . . a bunch of hormonal, bitchy, nasty, vicious girls." The chuckles around the room indicated he wasn't alone in his view. "I've had awful thoughts about them", another teacher agreed. "Once I saw Sarah crying, and I thought: good, I'm glad you're crying. Now you know what it's like!" Someone else added, "I'm so glad you said that. . . . I always feel bad about some of the things that I think." He then mimicked a stroppy adolescent's persona, while saying, "Emma, no wonder you are so miserable . . . your younger sister *so* got the looks in your family!" The group laughed.

It is important for the facilitator to appreciate and allow for some open expression of the ordinary anxieties, hostility, and persecution evoked by the intensive and challenging nature of the teaching role, especially when working with large classes of adolescent pupils. In this respect, it is vital to differentiate between teachers simply "venting their frustrations" or "slagging off pupils" in the staff room and the work discussion context in which teachers might, at times, let off steam *in the spirit of thinking*.

Within this group discussion, it was therefore first necessary to acknowledge and normalize the level of feeling these girls generated. Only then, after teachers felt that *they* had been taken seriously, was it possible to draw the group back to the pupils' situation.

The discussion then opened up and questions were asked about what was going on in the class as a whole. We learnt that the girls had been in the same class for four years and that they always had an air of superiority whenever they were together. One teacher commented on how they behaved a bit like gang leaders. Another wondered, light-heartedly, whether we were behaving a bit like that too, ganging up on the adolescents! This comment enabled me to ask the group what they thought might make pupils—or any of us, for that matter—gang up in this way. Group members responded readily with comments about how this happens when people feel insecure and then seek power in numbers. They were also interested when I commented on how in gangs, or gang states of mind, there is little tolerance for differences between individuals. Teachers agreed that, especially in adolescent groups, differences are frequently felt to be dangerous and to put one at risk of exclusion.[7] At this point, the teacher who had initially raised

the issue suddenly remembered that the girls were furious that they might be moved into different classes to separate them and give the class a break. "Then *they* might feel like *visitors*", another teacher added.

Gradually, teachers grew more interested in what was driving the girls' behaviour and seemed less dominated by their fear or hostility. The atmosphere shifted significantly when I asked what people thought it might feel like to be one of them. "Awful" someone immediately said. "Miserable and depressing" added another. "It must be hard work being that nasty all the time." A third teacher thought "They are really the insecure ones. . . . Imagine if they got moved into other classes and didn't have each other . . . they'd be terrified . . . especially when they know everyone hates them."

At this point, the teacher who had raised the issue said something different: "Actually, the girls are not nasty all the time. When they are on their own and not with each other, they are like different people, they can be really nice. They aren't bad kids . . . it's just when they are together."

The teacher who had presented the issue now seemed to be in quite a different state of mind. She was less at the mercy of how they made her feel and with a restored sense of herself as a competent professional, more robust and confident about the prospect of facing them later in the day. The group as a whole also seemed to be in a different state of mind, more interested in the difficulties and insecurities experienced *by the girls* and less preoccupied by the way these difficulties were impacting on them. As the meeting came to an end, an important discussion got going about how, if the change of class were suggested in the right way, as a support and not simply a punishment, both girls might secretly be quite relieved, even though they would never admit it.

Re-enactments and parallel process

The task of the work discussion group is not to examine its own dynamics and process as one might within an experiential group. However, there are occasions when complex issues can become re-enacted and the atmosphere starts to feel toxic. At these times, it is important to consider whether, in order to contain anxieties and

re-anchor a group to its primary task, some comment about what is happening in the "here and now" may be necessary.

> This seemed to be the case in one group in which a teacher launched angrily into complaints about something that had happened the previous week. She had been teaching a class of 14-year-olds when a fight had broken out. One boy had become threatening, lifting a chair as if to throw it at another boy, and then barged past the teacher, hurting her arm. As group members sympathized, what became clear was that the teacher's upset was not primarily about the boy or incident, but, rather, the lack of subsequent support from the school. What made her furious was that when she spoke to her manager, he seemed dismissive. "He basically told me I was over-reacting!" she said incredulously.

> Several group members shared her outrage. Another teacher then spoke in a different tone, saying that this boy had a difficult home life—his parents' relationship was volatile, and the pupil had witnessed his mother being beaten by his father at least once. Social Services were informed at the time but did not think there was cause for further intervention. Rather than getting interested in what their colleague was saying, another teacher retorted angrily, almost shouting: "That is all very well, but this shouldn't be allowed to happen! The boy should not be allowed to become violent, and managers need to listen to what is being said." She turned to the teacher who had raised the issue and asserted, "You should refuse to put up with it. . . . I would refuse to go back to the class until he has been seen. It isn't safe for you to be there, it's abusive!"

> The atmosphere in the group was, by now, tense, with several members anxious at the strength of feeling being expressed. I was also struck with how quickly the relevance of the pupil's home circumstances had been disregarded. This left the teacher who had voiced them temporarily silenced.

At a time like this, when tensions are running high, it is easy for anxieties to dominate and to drive a group off-task and into some form of basic-assumption functioning (Bion, 1961). In this session, members were drawn to take flight from the central discussion—in particular from anxiety-provoking differences between members—and to join instead in complaints against "bad management" in the school

and implicitly against social services too, perhaps in an unconscious attempt to preserve the cohesion within the group. In this way, all conflict and "badness" could be located outside the group, relieving the fear that an explosion might erupt within the group.

In such moments, a carefully formulated, non-critical comment about what is happening in the "here and now" is not only containing but sometimes necessary to retrieve a group from a more "reactive" state of mind, into a more "reflective" one.

> The group seemed relieved when I acknowledged what a distressing incident this must have been and warned how, when such strong feelings are around, it would be easy for us to get into a fight, either with management or each other, rather than to think together about what is happening. It was also important to alert the group to how the experience of being over-exposed to something violent and then of feeling dismissed seemed to be repeated all over the place: with the pupil who felt his parents didn't care what it was like for him to be exposed to their violent relationship; with the teacher who felt her manager didn't care; and also with the teacher within the group who felt rather abruptly silenced after she told us about the boy's home life.

By the end of this meeting, although the teacher was still concerned about her manager's response and the need to negotiate a "reconciliation" meeting with the pupil, she had felt heard and seemed more conciliatory. Others, too, spoke about how important it is to let people know when we don't feel safe and not to carry on as if we can manage anything because we are frightened of causing a fuss.

Work discussion groups for managers

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to expand on the ways in which the work discussion method has been effectively applied to those in management positions, but over the past six years I have been increasingly involved in co-facilitating work discussion groups with head teachers and other managers. The task of these groups is to provide a forum in which managers have opportunities, together with peers, to explore issues and dilemmas facing them within their management and leadership role. Discussions are, as one might expect, wide-ranging, stimulating, and challenging in style and content. Rather than focusing primarily on pupil-related issues, they tend to address pre-

occupations such as line management relationships, difficulties in taking up—or being allowed to take up—authority, anxieties about delegation, relationships with other key stakeholders (e.g. governing body, local partners, etc.). Given that almost all managers report a paucity of prior training in the management of people, rather than tasks or procedures, these groups have almost invariably been welcomed as a most innovative and effective resource.

The impact of work discussion groups: evaluation

As a direct result of the work described in this chapter, work discussion groups in schools are now identified as a "model of good practice" (DfES/DoH, 2006).[8]

In feedback about the groups, teachers comment on what a relief it is to discover that they "are not alone" in struggling with a particular difficulty or dilemma. Many comment on how "good it is to get things off their chest" and how "differently they feel afterwards". Teachers report that they now "feel more confident" about their work, having felt "completely out of their depth before". For some, this has meant that "instead of hating or resenting a student, they want to try to help them again".

Overall, teachers report that work discussion groups enable them to become "much more aware" of the needs of their pupils, remain "calmer with provocative students" and "much more positive about their work". These sentiments were echoed by one head teacher who reported on the "big impact on pupil achievement as well as staff morale. . . . It has made people more tolerant, not of bad behaviour, but of the pupils themselves" (*TES*, 2002). In some cases, where workers have been faced with especially upsetting or disturbing situations—for instance, in cases where young people are suicidal or when allegations have been made against staff members—teachers have reported that the groups have "literally saved them" and "kept them sane" when they felt like "giving up" and leaving the profession. Many report that the groups have offered them some of the "most useful training they have received in their careers".

Notes

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like to thank the head teachers, principals, link coordinators, and staff who have attended the groups. Without their input, trust, and support, none of this work would be possible.

1. For simplicity I will be referring to all staff attending work discussion groups as teachers. This does not, in any way, intend to diminish the important differences between roles such as learning support assistant and class teacher.

2. As teachers' "non-contact" times are naturally spread across the week.

3. It is especially difficult to arrange in primary schools, since teachers tend to remain with their class groups for most, if not all, of the day.

4. Within this chapter I refer to the person leading the work discussion group in terms of a range of roles, including facilitator, psychotherapist, or consultant. Though important, an in-depth discussion of these different functions is beyond the scope of this chapter. Within a training course, this role would probably be called "seminar leader".

5. For other examples of this, see Jackson (2005).

6. Interestingly, several years later, once its future was more secure, this school contacted me to re-start discussions about what could be offered to staff.

7. For further discussion about group and gang states of mind see Canham, 2002.

8. For more quantitative evaluation of this work, see Jackson, 2008, and Warman & Jackson, 2007.