

School as a Secure Base for pupils and teachers

From reaction to reflection

As John Bowlby never hesitates to mention, 'a society where children must cherish their parents' ... and perhaps their

In previous chapters, the experience of teaching and learning has been discussed using the framework of Attachment Theory to explore aspects of behaviour in school. The Attachment model suggests that the secure attachment are:

- a capacity to tolerate frustration and uncertainty
- a sense of self as worthy of affection and respect
- a capacity to relate to others with sensitivity and respect
- a sense of personal agency.

These are clearly aspects of response and behaviour which are necessary for positive engagement in learning and social inclusion.

However, as has been discussed, adverse attachment experiences can impact on these capacities, and the pupil/teacher relationship in particular, for behaviour and achievement.

Summary

- This small but significant group of children can readily be identified from infancy and present very challenging demands on teachers and to school resources. Their needs are great, both for practical and early therapeutic support. The implications for the future, if their needs are not adequately met, can be disastrous for themselves and others, as well as highly costly in financial and social terms.
- It is strongly recommended that an assessment of possible Attachment difficulties is included in early assessment of pupils causing concern.
- It is also recommended that a category of 'developmental vulnerability' is introduced, which may help to formalise planning within a professional network which is collaborative, consistent and committed to a long term programme of intervention across the age range. Without this, the crisis and reaction continue, with decisions determined by crisis intervention rather than a response which acknowledges the needs of the child and protects the teacher and others from the incessant anxiety that the child can trigger.

Behaviour as a source of teacher stress

Success in school can be undermined by:

- little capacity to tolerate frustration or uncertainty
- anger with those who are perceived as 'letting you down'
- low self esteem
- insensitivity to the feelings of others
- lack of trust in adults

At a moderate level, these behaviours can be understood and accommodated within the good practices and ongoing relationships of the school community (Rogers 2004). However, at a more extreme level, the behaviour can cause significant distress to others, and, in a cumulative way, can cause considerable and significant distress to teachers whose work is interrupted, whose skills can be disregarded, and who can feel themselves to be, and sadly sometimes are, attacked. For all pupils, understanding the experience behind the behaviour informs and strengthens the effectiveness of the planned intervention.

This chapter seeks to examine the nature of this experience more closely and to propose a practice which aims to reduce teacher stress and develop a more supportive framework for vulnerable pupils. This can be achieved by providing a professional framework in which talking, reflection, thinking and planning are the tools used to explore and resolve complex behavioural issues which challenge classroom practice – the Work Discussion Group. This practice mirrors Bion's Theory of Thinking (1967) and Bowlby's conditions for Secure Attachment, whereby anxiety is transformed into thought by understanding and reflection. Teacher and pupil benefit from the same process.

Most teachers experience satisfaction and interest in their work, but it is true that when faced with the often relentless challenge of classroom behaviour, teachers can become demoralized. Pupil behaviour is at the top of the list of stress factors identified by teachers. This is expressed as varying levels of disruption, aggression, high pupil:teacher ratio, poor attention span and withdrawal (Pratt 1978)

Caspari (1976) commented

... exhaustion felt by most teachers at the end of term is directly linked to the demands made on the skills and personality of teachers in keeping discipline over the children he teaches than in any other part of the work

Recent incidents of extremely challenging pupil behaviour have called for increased powers of exclusion (Observer 19th May 2002). Call for increased burden of accountability through bureaucracy has increased for stress, but there is no doubt that for many teachers the experience of most distressing is repeated challenging behaviour.

As discussed in previous chapters, and Chapter 7 in particular, their difficulties, frustrations and uncertainties into the learning process, particular expectations of how the teacher will respond. The relationship between teacher and pupil is fraught with meaning. It is a relationship which has attachment significance and affected by unconscious processes. Teachers' early experiences described in previous chapters. In the absence of support at appropriate times, psychological defence mechanisms develop to

excessive anxiety – defence mechanisms which prevent a breakdown in emotional function. In the absence of sufficient support on an ongoing basis, the child's behaviour can become organized around an almost constant defensive state. This excludes the possibility of being able to think. Instead, strong feelings which have not been contained by the secure base can be split off and projected – other people can begin to feel the anger, fear or humiliation which is unbearable to the child.

- An example of this is the disregard and disrespect of others. Those who have been humiliated or disregarded themselves can act this out towards others and so relieve themselves briefly by witnessing the other person's – or the other child's humiliation. The pupil who laughs when another gets the answer wrong may have been anxious themselves about 'getting it wrong'. Strongly critical behaviour can be a reflection of feeling highly criticized oneself. In a primary classroom a girl who was living in Local Authority Care persistently attacked another child who had been taken into foster care, as if punishing him for being 'bad'. She was unable, perhaps, to bear her own feelings of being 'bad' and unwanted.
- Another example of this is bullying. The child who frightens others is often very frightened themselves and unable to bear being afraid. The 'victim' is then made to experience this fear and the bully is no longer persecuted by his fears. Behind bullying and aggression may lie a great deal of fear. De Zulueta describes this rapid transition between feelings of fear and rage in her book *From Pain to Violence – the Traumatic Roots of Destructiveness* (1993).
- Pupils who feel humiliated by their own apparent lack of skills can denigrate others for being successful, and paradoxically, adopt the attitude that 'being clever is stupid'. This can be a strong mutual attraction in

disaffected peer groups who then feel even stronger in attacking those who are perceived as 'clever'.

- Pupils who themselves feel unwanted, left out and 'different', can attack on others who are perceived as having slight but recognizable differences and heap insults upon them, sometimes with devastating consequences.

These projections of unwanted feelings can permeate school culture and be very destructive.

In many respects, teachers are inadequately prepared for response to these challenges. There is little training for working with pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties in initial teacher training. It tends to be the choice of mentors already involved in the 'specialism'. Support for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties tends to be located outside the school, in external services which hold the 'expertise'. INSET is usually dominated by a focus on requirements of delivering the curriculum rather than on the experience of the teacher and learning. Also the teaching profession, in which individuals work on a to-face basis with the whole range of the population, has no inbuilt mechanism for teacher support or supervision, unlike social work or medical worker colleagues.

In this respect, when teachers and other education staff are overwhelmed by the demands of anxious children, the experience of adverse attachment can be a problem. The teacher can become reactive and respond with rejection, criticism and punishment. The pupil can re-experience the overwhelming uncertainties of early inexperience. These were not adequately contained in the primary Attachment relationshipship patterns developed in response to this, such as those described in Chapter 4. This can be triggered and so the cycle of insecurity and insensitivity goes on. In primary schools in particular the pupil may turn to the peer group as a substitute for

acceptance and affirmation; this is not always a positive choice. Drugs and alcohol can provide the dulling effects desired to relieve states of high anxious arousal.

In schools where there is least collaborative thinking about challenge and distress, the most likely it is that strong feelings are being constantly projected into the school community. There can be a sense of uncontained fear running about the school, "as if anything can happen".

What can the teacher do? The Work Discussion Group as the Secure Base for teachers and pupils

Hargreaves (1978) described teachers as 'suffering from progressive exhaustion made worse by lack of supportive relationships amongst colleagues. The problem stemmed from not being able to admit you have a problem because this implies that you are incompetent. Offering to help a colleague implies that they are incompetent'.

Two very different responses are possible when teachers seek support.

In the very early days of being a teacher I walked into the staff room distressed by my continuing difficulties with Janet in Year 7 science lessons. I approached my friends in the staffroom saying, "I can't manage that girl. She drives me mad and spoils the whole class". My friends nodded sympathetically as another teacher called loudly across the room, "I don't know what you're talking about, I don't have any trouble with her in my class".

I felt humiliated and hopeless at a time when I hoped for support and help.

Hanko (1995) comments 'Failure to support their staff in responding appropriately to pupils' emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties and in coping with their

own feelings and anxieties about difficult-to-teach children is increasing such children's needs but as hindering all-round effort and schools' (p.146). When such support is available, the difference significant for the pupil and the teacher.

The example above contrasts sharply with the changes possible is forthcoming.

A teacher in a special school had become very angry with teachers, he described the difficult aspects of the boy's life caused the boy to feel confused and frustrated, helpless and helped the teacher to distance himself from the projections the boy, and to think about the boy's feelings. Later, when came in from the playground in an angry state, complaining unfair had happened to him, the teacher remained calm and he understood how unfair things sometimes felt, how frustrated be and how awful that could make you feel. The teacher described as becoming calmer, walking to his seat and able to get on with the boy feel understood, even though he could not affect the distress, and that this had made a difference (Geddes

The teacher's deepened awareness of the meaning of the pupil's behaviour a better outcome for himself and the pupil. The teacher's anxiety behaviour had been thought about and 'contained' by the group teacher could then use his knowledge about the child to begin experience and so the possible meaning of the boy's behaviour.

could contain the strong feelings of despair in the child and transform them into an understanding which made a difference. Reactivity provoked by the boy's behaviour no longer interfered with the teacher's capacities to think, and thus he was able to respond more constructively.

In the teachers' Work Discussion Group, and over time, the developing understanding of the meaning of behaviour was reflected in the strategies that were evolved in response to subsequent challenging situations.

The Work Discussion Group as the Secure Base for pupils and teachers

The secure base described in the context of Attachment Theory is the emotional and physical refuge in which uncertainties are processed into thoughts and the base from which exploration can take place. Transition Group was transformed into a process to help teachers in the school setting, the joint Work Discussion Group meets these criteria.

This model of working was developed by Caplan (1970) and adapted to the educational setting by Gerda Hanko. Her pioneering work is described in her book *Special Needs in Ordinary Classrooms – from staff support to staff development* (1985, 1990, 1995). In it are described the setting up, procedures and practice of The Joint Problem Solving Workshop, upon which the work discussion group is modelled. This well-tried model of teacher consultation, supervision and support is based on creating a safe space in which teachers and others working with children in schools can present their experiences of challenging pupils or groups. With the support of colleagues, they can deepen their understanding of the issues and meaning of the experience and seek appropriate and achievable strategies of intervention to bring about a better outcome for the pupil, class and teacher. Reaction is transformed by reflection into the capacity to plan and make an appropriate response.

The process and procedure

The process of the work is important and models much of the characteristics based on trust, sensitivity and containment of anxiety.

- The regularity and predictability of the time and meeting places the teacher knows that there is support available; anxiety about situation is more easily contained until the group meets again.
- The membership is a regular and committed group who develop trust in each other's support and respect, uncontaminated by criticism. Hanko describes how the language of communication facilitates trust and mutual support.
- Confidentiality is agreed so that disclosure about work and problems is contained and respected.
- Members are invited to present a situation which they are finding or challenging concerning a pupil or a class. It is essentially problem focused. The presentation is as detailed and honest as the teacher can be so that all aspects of the experience can be considered.
- Information concerning the pupils' history is very useful, and the group to make sense of confusing behaviour.
- The sharing of challenges and successes becomes a forum for professional development whereby the whole staff group becomes informed and skilled in a wide range of situations.
- The structure of the group is important and allows time to:
 - present the problem
 - permit questions from the group to clarify the situation
 - reflect upon meaning and
 - formulate intervention founded in a deeper understanding of the situation
- Holding consistent boundaries of place and time ensures that the

process is fully experienced and maintains a sense of safety. A usual session may be one and a quarter hours.

- The presence of a facilitator from outside the school is an invaluable presence who can hold the time boundaries, maintain an overview, support the group when sensitive issues are being discussed as well as contribute a different perspective.

As a result of collaboration, thoughtfulness about pupils and shared contributions about interventions, teacher groups become more able to integrate emotional and cognitive experience for pupils causing concern. Teachers and other colleagues working with the identified pupil develop a shared understanding of the pupil's experience and a sense of the meaning and communication implicit in their behaviour. This can be transformed into a consistent and agreed intervention plan throughout the school. The thoughtful work discussion group incorporating all staff, becomes the *secure thinking base* within the school, primarily for the teacher. But ultimately it will strengthen the containing qualities of the school for the pupil. Such a thinking group is also able to bring together an understanding of the pupil's emotional and cognitive experience and help in the pupil's psychological integration. It is a highly recommended practice which is not only a form of professional development but a significant contribution to improved whole school practice. It was also noted that in an evaluation of a series of groups in primary school (Geddes 1991), fewer referrals were made to outside agencies, reflecting an increased capacity to support and include a wider range of pupils in the school. This practice reverberates with inclusion policies.

An example of a group discussion demonstrates this practice, and also reflects issues which affect many schools.

Cooper & Upton (1991) encourage us to pay attention to the context in which pupil and teacher experience their various demands and stresses. Rutter (1975)

pointed out that 'behavioural difficulties and low attainment is commoner in schools with high rates of teacher and pupil turnover, lack stability of staffing and which had a high proportion of changes going were those with the most problems.' (p.202)

In just such a situation, an experienced teacher talked about her class.

The class in question was a newly constituted Year 4 class, months they had been taught by a succession of supply teachers had all left after only a few weeks. The room was described in a shabby, run-down state with tables spread around the resource cupboards and screens in the middle, breaking up unconnected areas. There was pupil work on the walls but see amidst the muddle.

The teacher complained that the pupils were constantly not listening to her. They wandered and ran about the room, unresponsive and critical of each other. They were very resistant not want to clear up. Most important, the teacher reported like a poor teacher, unwanted by her class. The teacher aimed resentment and humiliation.

After some time it seemed possible to think about how we were feeling. The group wondered about what the shabbiness might indicate about the pupils' feelings. The teacher thought their possible feelings of being 'rubbished' by repeated rejections a succession of supply teachers. She related this to her own being ignored and rejected by the class. We talked about listening to anything she said and how this made her feel

useless and unimportant. She wondered how the class must feel because they did not have a teacher of their own. She thought about the tables organized into separate islands and wondered about the lack of cohesion as a class. She realised that it was hard to recognise the pupils' good efforts because of the mess that they made.

The more these issues were thought about the more the teacher felt that she had 'taken on' the feelings of the pupils. Her sense of being useless and unwanted and disliked were perhaps how they felt and not how she had felt before beginning work with the class. An example of the power of 'projection'. This awareness enabled her to step out of the projected feelings, regain her own self esteem and professionalism and develop strategies to tackle the problems of the class.

Strategies for reorganizing the classroom, displaying work and instigating different clearing up procedures resulted in sufficient change in class behaviour to enable the teacher to assert her position with the class. The teacher subsequently reported working with colleagues on new themes and projects for the next term. The teacher and the class had begun to function again and some weeks later she reported feeling proud of her class and of their achievements. She had also decided to stay on at the school.

In these ways, unconscious inter-personal processes of reactions, projections and defences can permeate relationships and systems, affecting pupils and teachers alike. In a profession in which relationships are a core aspect of the work, such experiences are inevitable. However, projections 'felt' by the teacher can be a form of communication, which can help him or her to understand the pupil's difficulties; in the above example, these were explored by the group, and this helped to expand understanding of the pupils' feelings.

In the current political context overall educational concern are driven by measures of performance and achievement, published identify schools as achieving or failing. The teacher can experience between concerns about performance and concerns about pastoral time may be spent on reflecting about how pupils may feel. It note that often this is expressed in schools as a division of responsibility learning and welfare – between cognition and emotion – between process. Teachers can be focused on curriculum and performance needs of pupils can be the concern of mentors and support staff. the possibility of a significant split in schools' capacities to think causing concern unless there is a managed policy to bring both aspects experience together by discussion and shared thinking. These kinds divisions of thinking can be bridged in the collaborative framework Discussion Group which represents the whole staff group.

It is also my experience that as the process becomes more collaborative over time, it becomes the forum in which the most severe challenges (such as those discussed in Chapter 7) can be contained. can agree upon and develop the consistent strategies and interventions most likely to make a difference to the 'disorganised' pupil, and protect and others from the potentially deskilling and demoralizing experience of challenging behaviour. Exclusion may not be the only option.

Characteristics of 'School as a Secure Base'

Schools can 'make a difference' and do have the potential to be emotionally healthy institutions when the match between educational developmental and emotional needs can coincide. Attachment T

to construct a school as a 'secure base' in which pupils can function effectively both emotionally and cognitively. The basic requirement of the practice and ethos of the school would thus reflect the needs of staff and pupils and are common features of most good practice.

For pupils this would reflect:

- respect for all pupils no matter what their skills and difficulties
- a building which is safe and adequately supervised
- sensitivity to the meaning of communications implied by behaviour
 - empathy
- predictable, reliable routines
- a fast response to absence – noticing the absent pupil
- consistent rules and expectations framed around keeping pupils, staff and the building safe
- familiar long term relationships – pupil feels 'known'
- modeling of good relationships between adults
- informed reflection about incidents rather than reactivity
- a system of disciplinary procedures which is fair to all
 - and non-abusive.

For staff this would reflect:

- strong leadership which listens to all staff and who can be relied upon for consistent, available support – a professional container
- respect for the physical comfort of staff – the well-kept staff room as a symbolic secure base!
- a capacity to reflect on difficulties when they arise, rather than react in an unthinking way

- mutual support and collaboration across the whole staff group
- a common language and framework for understanding pupils'
- a regular forum for review of difficulties in a reliable and supported group.

Within such a framework, the school can become a surrogate which can contain the inevitable anxiety engendered by the challenge. Additionally, the school will be providing compensatory re-experiences to pupils, whose capacities to learn have been impaired emotionally and social experience.

Early intervention and prevention

However, in order to really make a difference to the behaviour issues clearly the desirable option. Many initiatives and projects exist to of underachieving children who are often identified by challenge. Some of these are long term statutory agencies with enormous familiarity with local schools. Other such as the BEST teams and needy areas. There are other initiatives such as the Youth Offending Teams, local Youth Workers and often other support working closely with local schools and communities. In my are excellent workers doing valuable work. It is however, a matter depending on the child causing someone some concern, and is also the challenging behaviour of acting-out boys. Sure Start mark of a different process, that of early identification and intervention community with vulnerable infants and carers. This intervention comes on into education within the existing framework of schools and support

A proposed prevention/intervention pathway within the primary education framework

In the small, more intimate community of primary schools, individual difficulties can be easily noticed and prioritized. There is more possibility for intervention at the inter-personal level and for integration of early intervention programmes into the policy and practices of the school.

In the Early Years, vulnerable pupils can be readily identified. The capacities to engage in play, communicate with others and relate appropriately to adults and to peers are key areas to observe and assess; they fore-shadow the relationships highlighted by the learning triangle of pupil, teacher and task presented in Chapter 4.

For pupils causing some concern and for whom there is no identifiable learning difficulty, then an emotional developmental assessment may be appropriate. Such tools are available. The Boxall Profile (Benathion & Boxall 1998) was developed for this purpose. It is a carefully structured and evaluated assessment, a Diagnostic

Developmental Programme used to:

- assess pupil need
- plan intervention
- and measure progress.

The Boxall Profile has been used in conjunction with Nurture Groups (Nurture Group Network) in primary and secondary schools. Children identified and assessed by this process are taught in small groups – the Nurture Group, where their individual needs and developmental delays are addressed. The content is not led by the curriculum but by the identified needs of the children. The Nurture Group aims to develop the skills and resilience necessary to access the curriculum, and has been evaluated and found to be extremely effective in bringing about long term change for very vulnerable pupils.

By identifying areas of developmental need both at an experiential level, and combining this with understanding the Attachment issues which can affect behaviour and learning, primary schools can highly effective intervention practices with powerful implications for development for all pupils.

It is then possible to see a continuum of identification and intervention for vulnerable children stretching:

- from Sure Start and other community based programmes which children and families,
- through Nurture Group intervention in early primary school,
- supported by individual therapeutic interventions such as those educational therapists (Caspari Foundation), whereby social and emotional blocks to learning can be addressed through individual small group work
- via transition preparation
- and into secondary schools

Focus on early identification and effective intervention is likely to support pupil emotional well-being and resilience so essential for entry into primary school, where the challenges of a big and diverse institution make great demands on the pupil's capacities to face uncertainty and engage in learning.