

Group Psychotherapists and Schools

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The working milieu of the vast majority of teachers, whether nursery, primary, secondary, further, higher or adult education, is the group. Teaching is group work, if it is anything. Yet the theory and practice of group psychodynamics seem to play little part in informing the work of teachers and teacher trainers. I think there are undoubted and excellent opportunities for an organisation such as BAGP to begin to establish links within the teaching profession, to market groups and group work training and, in so doing, play a considerable role in 'the great education debate'. In my view there are services we can offer in two key areas.

The first is the more straightforward and I think well within our means. Each school is required to provide five training days per year for its staff and, in my experience, often struggles to fill these days with meaningful task relevant experiences. I see no reason why we should not be seeking to put the weight of BAGP behind a range of one or two day packages specifically tailored to developing the group skills of teachers and promoting group psychological thinking within schools and colleges.

The second is more challenging, as it is essentially groundbreaking and would promote a shift in the culture of our schools towards psychoanalysis. It is about finding a place for the group-analytic group in education, forming spaces in which teachers might be allowed the luxury of talking openly about their work at 'the chalk face' and in the wider institution. This may not sound too revolutionary and exciting, but in terms of the current narrow frame in which education is debated and fought over, it would entail a complete change of emphasis.

Teacher Groups

In 1995, with the backing of the Westminster Pastoral Foundation, along with some limited time, money and guidance, I launched a pilot project called 'Teacher Groups'. The modest aim was initially to set up one 'Professional Development Group' (PDG) drawn from the secondary schools of two west London boroughs. The aims of a PDG are to

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The ideas underpinning 'Teacher Groups' slowly evolved out of a wish to apply my newly acquired skills as a group psychotherapist to my first profession, teaching, in order to establish some sort of bridge between two compatible professions, which in (my) reality have little to do with each other. From my work as a mainstream and offsite teacher I know that teachers are generally poorly supported and rarely supervised, that space is not provided for teachers to reflect upon and process their practice, and, for whatever reason, that teachers tend to avoid talking openly about their work. There is no money or space in the timetable for regular support and supervision for any space in which one is paid to reflect upon what one does. To suggest to teachers that such a place should exist is often to invite incredulity. As a 'professional' you 'should be able to cope' and if you cannot 'then you should not be a teacher'.

Failing Schools and Bad Teachers

According to the dominant ideology of the day, there are failing schools and bad teachers, albeit occurring in small numbers but nonetheless with high public profiles. With the preferred solutions arising from school inspection and teacher assessment being the closure of bad schools and the driving out of bad teachers, little mention is made of possible alternatives. It is all too easily forgotten that the workload of a teacher involves more direct contact with people than any other profession. And yet, how many teachers are supervised or receive any degree of formal support? Many teachers feel close to breakdown. In an environment so hostile to their difficulties, increasing numbers are dropping out of the profession, taking flight being the only way of avoiding the more severe consequences of the job. Very few teachers are paid to talk with their peers about their work on a regular basis. On the whole, teachers are not expected to talk about what they do. If they were then a regular and intimate space, which allows for an ongoing dialogue between colleagues about the fine detail of their work, would be provided for them to do so.

The demands of delivering a 'broad and balanced curriculum' and, increasingly so, of achieving academic success, dominate the culture of most schools. Resources are not made available and the opportunity to talk, intrinsic to psychotherapy and relatively common in social work, is portrayed as a luxury, thought of as superfluous or even irrelevant to the essential tasks involved in simply getting the job done, which for many is keeping one's head above water and surviving. Those that are unable to cope, and these are the bad teachers, are overstressed, all too often sick, constantly talking about leaving the profession, taking early retirement or actually leaving the profession. The costs are great for the teacher, for the

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school and for the child. In the politicized culture of education, the needs of pupils and parents, the customers, are seen as separate from and hierarchically more important than those of the teacher. So, for example, the threat of exclusion hanging over teachers in difficulty is dissociated from the threat of exclusion hanging over pupils in difficulty. The needs of teachers and pupils have become dangerously polarized to the degree that teacher's behaviour suggests that they now experience their pupils as the enemy and are counterattacking by refusing to work with disruptive pupils, sadly resorting to the same strategy used on them as the sole means of dealing with the difficulties of their work. "If we could just get rid of the bad teachers and the bad pupils....."

Before training as an analytic group psychotherapist, I worked as a fulltime teacher in two secondary schools. Both were vast communities. Each day was an immeasurably long chain of individual interactions, verbal and otherwise, with hundreds of young people, often in a swirling and rapidly moving maelstrom of bodies, actions, noises and smells. I would be filled with foreboding and apprehension from Sunday evening. Walking through the school gates was like voluntarily sacrificing myself to an awesome and terrifying monster. Washed up at the end of the week I would miraculously find myself still alive, ecstatic and exhausted. Later, while training I worked in offsite education, where class sizes were much smaller but the behaviour of the 'pupil' was much more challenging. Only in the latter was there any inbuilt possibility of regularly reflecting on relationships with colleagues and pupils. However, this was only if the space was argued and fought for, as it was never thought of as part and parcel of the work.

PCSR Education Group

In 1995, Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR) was formed and, along with it, the PCSR Education Group. I have been working with this group since its inception and our current project is the collection of data, evidence and testimony regarding 'Education, a System in Distress'. The group hopes to document the material gathered and widely disseminate it. We are hoping to provide a public platform for psychotherapists and counsellors in order to contribute to the current education debate. I think that, as Group Psychotherapists, we can make a particularly valuable contribution to this process.

A Role for the BAGP

There are many areas of debate to which we could and should contribute as group specialists. For example, arguments rage over whether size matters and what style of teaching is most effective. One view suggests that bad teachers are unable to

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control any group, no matter what size. We know that dynamics vary according to the size of the group. However, how exactly might we apply small, median and large group understandings to the debate over classroom size surely something we should be concerned to do. Another view is that bad teachers are bad because of their trendy permissive 'pupil-centered' teaching methods and that what is needed is a return to traditional didactic 'teacher centered' approaches in which the teacher is a strong authority figure. An application of Bion's 'basic assumptions' might elucidate much in this polarized debate.

How do we as group analysts view what happens in schools and why is our view so poorly represented within the mainstream of education?

'Teacher Groups' is currently on hold and as yet there are no Professional Development Groups. There has been certainly a good deal of interest and a degree of support from local teaching institutions. However, I have felt very isolated and up against it. I realised that 'Teacher Groups ' is a project requiring many heads, much work, more publicity, money... It is a project requiring commercial, lobbying and diplomatic skills, a good deal of confidence and courage ... and colleagues.

I am therefore proposing that BAGP set up a Committee to explore and take further the above ideas. If you are interested in participating contact me. I look forward to hearing from you.

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