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Support Groups

Dr Joan Mowat, University of Strathclyde



How pupils responded

Initially the group felt strange – it was new to me – but it encouraged me to talk about things I wouldn't normally talk about. It boosted my confidence. It improved my behaviour.
Jack, S2.

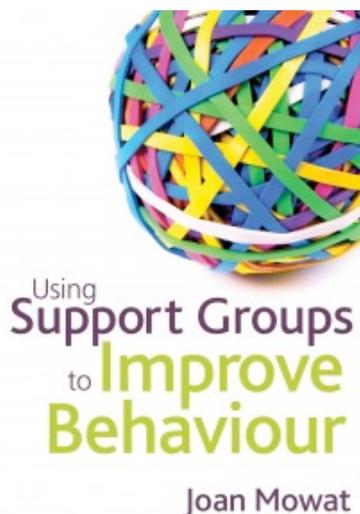
Most pupils enjoyed participating in support groups and took part actively in the discussions and activities. Pupils were invited to join a support group because their teachers felt that they needed additional support in order to achieve their best at school and some pupils were selected because there were concerns about their behaviour. At the beginning, pupils were anxious about being asked to join a support group, thinking that they were in trouble, and parents were also concerned. However, most pupils settled in quickly to the group. In most groups, pupils co-operated well with

each other and the Support Group Leader who was leading the group but in a few groups the behaviour of a few pupils disrupted the group. Most pupils felt quite comfortable about attending the group but a few pupils felt uncomfortable about it. A few pupils felt that, at times, they were missing out on things that were happening in the class but most pupils found the support group worthwhile and were glad that they had participated in it. Pupils expressed a desire to continue with the support group when it reached an end.

How pupils responded to target setting

Many pupils found target-setting helpful in giving them a focus for improvement and there were reports from pupils, teachers, Support Group Leaders and parents about how beneficial it had been for some pupils. However, there were some pupils who

found it difficult to cope with the organisational aspects of it – forgetting to get the target card/booklet signed or to take it home to their parents. A few pupils felt that target-setting made them stand out from other pupils and they felt uncomfortable about this.



About the Approach

The aims of the approach are to develop in children understanding of themselves and understanding of others such that they can understand their interpersonal relationships better and can make informed judgements about their behaviour. It is hoped through this that pupils will improve upon their behaviour, get on better with other people, be more caring towards others, have more confidence in themselves and have more positive attitudes towards learning.

In the support group, pupils take part in discussions and activities which are

designed to make them think more deeply about themselves and to develop understanding. The focus is not just about behaviour but is also about learning. Pupils also set weekly targets for improvement and complete a support group diary which helps them to learn from their experiences. Pupils set a Support Group Pledge, a promise which they make about how they will behave towards each other in the group.

Pupils attended for around sixteen sessions of 1hr but this varied from group to group depending upon circumstances.

What we learned about support group pupils

Support Group pupils were nominated for support for a wide range of reasons, ranging from pupils who needed just an extra boost to ensure they reached their potential to those who were already causing concern. When looking at support group pupils as a whole, there were wide differences between support group pupils and comparator pupils [pupils who were considered to be achieving well in school] in relation to attendance and in relation to how pupils rated themselves on a self-assessment

questionnaire which measured things such as their perceptions of their relationships, and these were statistically significant. The widest differences were in relation to how pupils saw their behaviour and their relationships with their teachers. Not unexpectedly, there were also differences in relation to pupil behaviour with support group pupils generally receiving fewer positive indicators for behaviour (eg. praise stamps) and more negative indicators (eg. detentions).

As a PT in the Primary School with responsibility for transitions, I am extremely pleased to be involved in a project which will help children and families.
Support Group Leader

Support for Staff

Support Group Leaders were all volunteers drawn from the participating schools. Many were Learning Support or Behaviour Support teachers but others were class teachers. Staff were supported through a four day staff training programme which was rated very favourably by staff.



What people said about Support Groups

The two most important things about Support Groups were that they were seen as providing a supportive, caring environment in which pupils could talk in confidence about things which were important to them, and the trusting relationships which formed between the Support Group Leader and the pupils and between the pupils themselves. It was seen as a non-judgemental approach. Pupils were not 'getting into trouble' but could talk through their behaviour and come to an understanding of it with the support of the others in the group. It was seen as a progressive and comprehensive approach, bringing together under one umbrella many different strategies which could be adopted to supporting pupils.

The approach was seen to promote deeper learning and thinking skills as pupils were encouraged to probe beneath their attitudes, values and beliefs.

Things which were crucial to the success of support groups were:

- The support of the senior management of the school
- A whole-school approach – all staff in the school being aware of the approach and what it sets out to achieve
- The support of parents and parents working in partnership with the school
- High quality professional development for staff
- The commitment and skills of Support Group and Cluster Leaders.

The approach was seen to be fully in line with current developments in Scottish Education and to promote them.

I think the Support Group was an excellent idea. ... It is a different way to deal with behaviour in that the idea of the child being in trouble or coming to get a row is just sort of eradicated. You can have detentions - they do reflective journals there - but it is a completely different environment. They have red cards, they have yellow cards, but, you know, difficulties are explored in the heat of the moment where a child is getting into trouble, and there is not the opportunity to sit down, round the table, and discuss things in a quieter, controlled way where the child feels they are listened to and their opinion is valued and they are valued as an individual.

Support Group Leader

Support Groups made a difference

After pupils had participated in the support group, the differences in attendance between support and comparator pupils were no longer significant. The most reasonable explanation for this is that pupils had developed more positive attitudes towards school and had more of a sense of belonging and being cared about.

In looking at how pupils measured themselves on the self-assessment scale after participation, the wide differentials between support group and comparator pupils had reduced which meant that support group pupils were beginning to see themselves in the same ways as pupils who were achieving well at school. Their perceptions of themselves were more positive although wide differences still remained.

Although it wasn't possible to carry out statistical tests for behaviour, when we looked at how each group had performed, the majority of groups had made good progress. Although some S2 pupils were temporarily excluded from school during the course of the intervention, this reduced over time.

It is evident that many pupils had developed understanding of themselves and others and this showed itself in a wide range of ways. Many pupils were behaving better at school and were able to regulate their behaviour more effectively. There were improvements in relationships between pupils, between teachers and pupils and in family relationships. Mothers talked about their children being more co-operative and arguing less with brothers and sisters.

I have always been caring if I want to be but I guess I have been thinking more about other people's feelings and how they react to things. That led me to be more caring and sympathetic towards them.

Jennifer, S2

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There were indications that pupils were behaving in more thoughtful and caring ways towards others. Achieving successful outcomes had boosted the self-esteem and confidence of many pupils and it was also evident that more positive attitudes towards learning were developing and this was shown through pupils spending more time on and taking great care with homework and listening more carefully in class.

Not all pupils responded positively and sometimes this arose because the pupil did not recognise (or would not recognise) that there were issues to address. Some pupils also were concerned about being seen to be different from other pupils and this had

affected their attitude towards the group. In a few groups, the group did not gel and jarring personalities made it difficult for the Support Group Leader to make progress.

However, it is evident that for many pupils successful outcomes were achieved and these were still in evidence up to one year later for the six case study pupils with whom in-depth interviews were held. None of these pupils had felt any sense of stigmatisation and all were able to identify something which had remained with them which had been beneficial to their progress. The vast majority of pupils who participated in the Pr 6 and transition projects made smooth transitions to Secondary school.

About the Study

The study was sponsored by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and took place in Aberdeenshire and Falkirk, involving six Secondary schools and seven Primary schools. Sixty-three pupils took part in the study, 46 of whom were boys, and these were matched with comparator pupils, pupils who were considered to be performing well at school. The pupils participated in a Pr 6, a S2 or a transition project, the latter of which started in Pr 7 and finished in S1 and was led by two Support Group Leaders. All pupils completed self-assessment questionnaires with measures relating to understanding of self and others, behaviour, interpersonal relationships, empathy, self-esteem and dispositions towards learning. Statistics about

attendance and behaviour were gathered. Questionnaires and interviews were held with a sample of pupils and their Support Group Leaders, parents, Pastoral Care and class teachers and these were followed up a year later to see if any improvements had been sustained. Focus Group discussions were held with all Support Group Leaders and the approach was evaluated against 'Journey to Excellence' (HMIE, 2007).

The work has now been presented at four Conferences, including the delivery of a Keynote Address at the Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties Conference in Kent, 2013 and the European Conference for Educational Research in Cadiz, Spain, Sept 2012.

Dr Joan Mowat

Dr Joan Mowat is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Strathclyde. She is an experienced teacher and former Depute Head Teacher in a Secondary school. Her principal interest lies in supporting children experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and in taking forward preventative approaches such

that pupils do not develop difficulties in the first instance. Joan was a former National Development Officer for the Scottish Executive, taking forward 'Better Behaviour – Better Learning'. Further information about the approach and the study can be found in the [book](#) and on the [website](#).