

Esmee Fairbairn Foundation Research and Development Project



The Findings

It is very clear that the approach has largely been successful in achieving its objectives. There was tremendous commitment and enthusiasm displayed by the staff within both local authorities throughout the project. What emerged was that Support Group Leaders, parents and teachers were beginning to see change in pupils – ‘chinks of light’ were emerging. However, it was felt that the intervention period had not been long enough for some pupils. Pupils and parents had initially been anxious about participation but these fears soon dissipated and the majority of pupils enjoyed the groups and participated actively within them. A few pupils, however, felt uncomfortable about being singled out. Positive outcomes for case study pupils were still in evidence a year after intervention had ceased. The groups were considered to promote inclusive practice within the schools concerned and the approach was considered to be fully in line with the approaches to teaching and learning advocated in CfE, particularly in taking forward Health and Wellbeing.

What emerged as crucial for success was the support of the Senior Management Team of the schools concerned and the adoption of a whole-school approach – where there was a will, there was a way! There was a strong desire amongst Cluster and Support Group leaders to see the approach continued and extended beyond the schools participating within the study and to develop it into the mid-Primary or lower-Primary stages: *I hope you get the funding, to take it to lower primary. If I can support in any way ask. Excellent as always.* [Support Group Leader, Aberdeenshire]. Parents were very appreciative of the support for their children and had observed positive changes in them, such as more considerate behaviour around the home.

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Background to Project

The project was funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and was instigated in Session 2010-2011 involving four Clusters of schools in Aberdeenshire and two in Falkirk. The Clusters comprised a Secondary school and one or two of its Associated Primary schools. Thirty-six school-based staff and five Educational Psychologists have participated within the project, as have seventy-three pupils who have been matched with comparator pupils of the same age and gender. The project was managed via a Steering Group with representatives from the Local Authorities, schools and research team. The project was supported by regular Newsletters, a website and four days of INSET which were evaluated very favourably indeed.



Focus of the Approach

Support groups are intended to support pupils who are regarded as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties or who might be at risk of such. It is a preventative measure designed to enable pupils to come to a deeper understanding of themselves and their interpersonal relationships such that they develop their capacity to regulate their behaviour, their interpersonal relationships, their capacity for empathy, their confidence and self-esteem and their dispositions towards learning. It was first developed by myself, as former Depute Head at Vale of Leven Academy in West Dunbartonshire. The approach draws from a wide range of theories of learning and motivation and has been

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endorsed by Professor David Perkins at Harvard University. It has a strong evidence base, derived from a PhD study undertaken at the University of Glasgow, focusing upon the first four cohorts of Support Group pupils (N = 69). The approach is fully in line with CfE, GIRFEC and approaches such as Restorative Practice. It is a natural extension of Nurture groups, providing support to pupils in the upper Primary and lower Secondary stages.

The Approach

The approach is activity-based and is designed to foster discussion, reflection and thinking skills. It has a range of themes:

- ✚ A focus upon relationships
- ✚ A focus upon learning, upon the factors which dispose pupils towards learning or act as impediments to it
- ✚ A focus upon self-esteem, the motivations which underlie behaviour, self-control and self responsibility
- ✚ Reflecting upon what has been learned about self and about one's relationships with others.

Pupils also complete a reflective diary and set their own targets for improvement which are monitored daily.

Pupils attended Support Groups for around 16 weeks for 1 period/1 hour per week. They were led by a member of staff within the school who had volunteered his/her services. Pupils and their parents were fully consulted about

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participation, gave informed consent and information events were held with parents to ensure that they were fully informed of what participation entailed.

The Study

The study sought to ascertain whether an approach which had developed within the context of a single Secondary school could be rolled out successfully to both Secondary and Primary schools and to ascertain what the facilitators and barriers to success were in order to guide future implementation. It extended the approach into the Primary sector in two ways – through a Primary 6 project and through a Transition project which spanned the summer term of Pr7 and the autumn term of S1.

One Case study was selected from each of the Clusters (6 in total) and in-depth interviews were held with each pupil, their Support Group Leader, parent(s) and either the class teacher (Primary) or Guidance teacher (Secondary) immediately after intervention ceased. Questionnaire responses were gathered in relation to half of the pupils participating within support groups, once again issued to a range of stakeholders. Attitudinal questionnaires were completed by all pupils within the study both pre- and post-intervention and data were gathered on attendance, attainment and behaviour. Focus group discussions were held within each Cluster with participating staff and staff also completed a questionnaire benchmarking the approach against HGIOS 3 – ‘Journey to Excellence’. Case study pupils have been followed up one year beyond intervention and interviews held with the pupil and their Support Group Leader.