"Not what I expected. Not rubbish. Turned out all right.": Re-engaging young people

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Abstract

This case study sets out to understand and address the problems of social exclusion, pupil disaffection and school indiscipline focussing upon the evaluation of a new intervention – the Support Group Initiative (Sgi) – designed, by the author, to support pupils experiencing, or at risk of developing, Social and Emotional Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD).

The aims of the study are to:

- evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention and to identify the variables which impact significantly upon pupil outcome

- ascertain whether cognitive theories of learning can be applied to the Affective Field such that they impact upon a range of pupil outcomes

- ascertain the significance of the study and its contribution to knowledge transformation.

The context of the study is a Secondary school situated in an area of multiple deprivation (SENSP, 2003) in the West of Scotland.

Within this specific article, the experience of participation within Support Groups is explored through the eyes of two of the pupils who participated within the intervention (two of the six in-depth case studies drawn from the wider population of 69 pupils who participated within the study) and their related stakeholders. Findings, which relate to the wider study, are extrapolated from these case studies, generalising to theory.

Amongst the principal findings of the study are the advocation of Support Groups as one of range of interventions which can:

- impact positively upon social exclusion, pupil disaffection and pupil indiscipline
- address the negative perceptions held by some young people of school, their teachers and learning
- make a positive contribution towards the realisation of UK and Scottish Government policies to promote inclusion, equality, social justice and excellence.

Introduction

Stewart[1] is a thirteen year old boy living in the West of Scotland in a single parent home. In trouble with the police and having lost the sight of an eye in a fight at school, his mother felt that he was out of control and his Aunt and Uncle had stepped in to look after him. In his 1st year (S1) of Secondary school, he was excluded from school (suspended) on three occasions for a total of six days (a 1:10 ratio of days of suspension: days in attendance) for persistent disruption, fighting and bullying (respectively) and had an attendance rate of only 66%.

Alastair has had a very disrupted home life, having been in care since a young age. Referred to Psychological Services in Primary 1, he was described as exhibiting disruptive behaviour, aggression towards other children and extreme mood swings. The Psychologist attributed some of Alastair's difficulties to attachment problems, with his mother and stepfather not meeting his emotional needs. Prior to attending the school, Alastair had been placed within a residential school for children with SEBD, returning to mainstream education two weeks before the end of Primary schooling. He had been referred to the Children's Reporter and had attended several Intermediate Treatment Groups but to no avail – a marked deterioration was noted.

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[1] Please note that all names (of individuals and institutions) are pseudonyms

Alastair, in S1, was not nominated to participate within the Outward Bound activities provided by a local charity (the X Trust) on the basis that he might pose a danger to other pupils.

In the first half of S2 alone (prior to intervention), he had amassed 24 referrals to senior management for indiscipline and had been suspended on four occasions for a total of 16 days (a 1:4 ratio of days of suspension: days in attendance) for a range of incidents including theft, bringing an air gun and pellets to school and vandalism. Alastair had been referred to the Joint Assessment Team (JAT) - a multi-disciplinary team which met weekly within the school - in S1 and following a review of his case mid-way through S2 at which the Child Psychologist noted, 'This boy does not function well in normal sized peer groups …', Alastair was placed in Belvedere Children's Home. An Individualised Educational Plan (IEP) was produced for Alastair, outlining a range of support for him, such as referral to Psychiatric Services.

What do these children have in common? They both attended a Secondary school situated in an area of multiple deprivation (SENSP, 2003) in the West of Scotland and participated within a new initiative – the Support Group Initiative (Sgi) - to provide support to young people perceived either to have, or to be at risk of developing, Social and Emotional Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD). These young people, along with 144 other S2 pupils, over a seven year period, met in groups of three – six pupils for one hour a week with a staff volunteer who took on the role of Support Group Leader (SgL). The intervention took place over (around) 20 sessions, commencing in the 2nd or 3rd term of the school year. The SgL led the pupils through a series of activities which were designed to 'teach for understanding', to develop thinking skills and to foster the transfer of knowledge and skills such that the pupils would gain insight into their values, beliefs, emotions, attitudes and motivations and those of others, helping them to gain an understanding of their interpersonal relationships. Over this period of time, sixteen members of

staff volunteered their services to support young people – Behaviour Support staff, Pastoral Care Teachers and those who just felt that they had something to offer.

The approach, devised by myself as Depute Head Teacher and leader of the project, draws from and synthesises the work of David Perkins (Teaching for Understanding), Howard Gardner (Multiple Intelligence Theory) and their colleagues at Project Zero based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education; Carol McGuinness (the Activating Children's Thinking Skills Framework) derived from the work of Swartz and Parks; Daniel Goleman (Emotional Intelligence); and theories of achievement motivation (Carol Dweck and Alan McLean).

The Study

This work formed the basis of a study, carried out over a five year period (1998 – 2003), following the progress of four cohorts of Support Group pupils, establishing benchmark measures relating to attendance, attainment, discipline measures and pupil attitudes (the latter ascertained by means of a self-assessment questionnaire based upon a semantic differential scale), comparing the performance of the Sgi population to that of their peers nationally, within the Local Authority and the school and following their progress one to two years after intervention, at which point a sample of pupils, constituting one third of the cohort (selected by means of a stratified random sample), was interviewed.

The study was comprehensive, drawing upon the accounts of sixty-nine pupils and their stakeholders - parents, teachers, senior management, Pastoral Care Teachers and Support Group Leaders - and drawing from both quantitative and qualitative methods. All pupils were interviewed by their SgL at the end of intervention (using a semi-structured interview schedule), a post-self-assessment questionnaire was completed and questionnaires were issued to their teachers, parents and SgLs ascertaining their progress on a range of measures (for example, the impact of the intervention upon their interpersonal relationships). In addition, six pupils were

selected for in-depth study and interviews held with their related stakeholders; a group interview was held with SgLs; and members of the Senior Management Team were interviewed. Thus, through a process of triangulation, a range of data could be brought to bear upon the initiative.

In order to ensure that the sample was representative of the Sgi population as a whole, a stratified multi-phase sampling method was adopted taking account of benchmark measures established prior to intervention; mid-intervention response; the Support Group to which the pupil belonged; the gender of the pupil; and wider criteria (such as access to Learning Support). Thus, it was a very thorough process of selection.

The study sought to ascertain whether teaching for understanding (Wiske (ed.), 1998) impacts upon the development in pupils of intrapersonal (understanding of self) and interpersonal (understanding of others) intelligence (Gardner, 2006) (RQ1) and the effect which this has upon a range of outcomes relating to:

- the capacity to regulate behaviour with good judgement in a range of contexts (RQ2.1)
- the capacity to form and maintain effective interpersonal relationships and for empathy (RQ2.2)
- the development of self-esteem and confidence (RQ2.3)
- the development of positive learning dispositions and attitudes towards school (RQ2.4).

The above encapsulate the aims of the intervention. The study also explores the variables which impact upon pupil outcome (RQ3), the extent to which outcomes are sustainable (derived from the retrospective interviews), and ascertained the significance of the study both in relation to current imperatives within Scottish Education and in relation to knowledge transformation, with a particular focus upon inclusion (RQ4).

Exploring the Nature of the Problem

What, however, is the nature of the problem that the intervention serves to address?

'27 children locked up in Scots jails', 'Children taken into care increases by 50%', 'School boy faces jail sentence after admitting stabbing fellow pupil' and 'Teenager dead in flat for 10 days before being found': these were the headlines for **one** day in the Glasgow Herald (Glasgow Herald, 28.08.06). Such headlines are symptomatic of the problems besetting modern society, reflected in the OECD survey of children's welfare (UNICEF, 2007) which places the UK (in relation to the 21 most prosperous nations) as having the highest rating of 'risk-taking' behaviour and of children perceived to be of poor health and identifying with negative indicators of well-being (amongst other findings). Likewise, the Social Exclusion Unit (Crown Office, 2006) classifies 3 million children as 'vulnerable', 386,000 children 'in need', 61,000 children 'in care' and 26,000 on the Child Protection register in England.

In particular, there are concerns about specific vulnerable groups – children classified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) (England)/Additional Support Needs (ASN) (Scotland); children at risk of abuse or neglect; looked after and accommodated children; itinerant groups; concerns relating to the under-achievement of boys; and those (aged 16+) not in education, employment or training, as reported upon in a wide range of UK and Scottish Executive/Government reports.

A focus upon school discipline

These problems are also reflected in concerns about school discipline. Within the past decade in Scotland, there have been five principal surveys of school discipline, commissioned by the (then) Scottish Executive and the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). The principal finding to emerge from these surveys is that,

whilst the majority of pupils are perceived to be well behaved, it is the constant 'drip, drip' of minor indiscipline (Munn *et al.,* 2004) which serves to make the task of teaching difficult and disrupts learning within the classroom. Of concern is the finding that, over the time period of the three surveys conducted by Edinburgh University (1990, 1998, 2004), the standard of discipline, both within the classroom and around the school, declined and this was particularly the case for Secondary schools (Munn *et al.*, 2004). In 2004, almost 60% of teachers regarded the situation as either 'serious' or 'very serious' in comparison to 36% in a previous survey (1990) with teachers being generally more pessimistic in their views than Headteachers.

The GTCS survey (Adams, 2005) indicates that teachers attribute the rise in indiscipline largely to the policy of the presumption of mainstreaming - placing pupils with ASN within mainstream schools (SEED, 2002). Teachers support inclusion in principle but have reservations about it in practice.

The most recent survey (Wilkin *et al.*, 2006) paints a slightly less depressing picture in that the decline in discipline has largely been stemmed and points to some improvements (particularly within the Primary sector). However, the authors draw attention to the emerging problem of young children entering the education system with a lack of social skills or complex difficulties which lead to behavioural difficulties.

The Concept of SEBD

However, what is meant by SEBD?

There is little consensus within the literature as to what constitutes SEBD and indeed, some commentators argue that it is not desirable to seek to define it on the basis of its complexity and/or that it could become a self-fulfilling label (SEED 2001; Hamill and Boyd, 2000; Head, 2005; Thomas, 2005). Thomas (2005) observes

that whether emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) are explored either in relation to the 'deficit' model of the child (the child needs fixing) or the social model of disability (the problem lies within the environment) (Giddens, 2006), the explanations forwarded reside in mindsets which 'rest in thinking about difference, of deficit and disadvantage', the underlying sub-text of which is that the 'real causes of difficult behaviour lie in deficit and deviance in the child', drawing from social and psychological explanations and leading to a child-focussed solution. (Ibid, pp. 60-65).

MacLeod and Munn (2004) draw from a range of commentators to observe that SEBD is 'a socially constructed label which fulfills a social function' and describe the process of identifying behaviours as troublesome, or pupils as disruptive as being 'subjective' but 'not entirely random' (Ibid, p171).

A definition with which most practising teachers would concord is that forwarded in 'Alternatives to Exclusion' (HMI, 2001):

> .. the range of difficulties experienced by pupils who, for a variety of reasons, have not adjusted well to school or to living in the community. These difficulties vary in severity and frequency. The term includes those pupils who have persistent problems in responding appropriately to the disciplinary demands of school and whose disruptive behaviour places them at risk of being excluded.
> (Ibid, pt. 2.1)

Thus, it is the persistency with which pupils present with difficulties which is the defining feature. However, there is no sense in which this explanation gives rise to any suggestion than national policy; the structures and systems, ethos, policies and practice of schools; and the wider external factors which impinge upon the school and upon family circumstances may be factors in the equation. The document, however, acknowledges that there may be a 'variety of reasons' to account for the

child's difficulties arising from 'a complex interaction of biological, psychological, sociological and environmental factors' (Ibid., pt. 2.3).

A focus upon the school context and some of the explanations forwarded to account for SEBD

A range of commentators draw upon the child's experience of school as a variable which impacts upon pupils' behaviour.

Cullingford (1999) traces the development of disaffection from learning and school, and exclusion from society (as experienced by young offenders) through the influences of the family; the young person's experience of the school system in relation to a range of psychological, social and systemic factors; and the effects of the peer group and gang culture. For such young people it is the 'gradual realisation of the school as a monolithic set of rules and instructions, a place where people need to be de-personalized' (Ibid., p115) and the breakdown in relationships between the pupil and school which characterise the final stages of exclusion from school.

Kendall *et al*. (2001) characterise the negative observations of teacher behaviour (and complaints such as, "School's boring") by disaffected pupils as being part of a larger systematic breakdown between mainstream education and its pupils – a 'fight or flight' response by pupils to a discomfiting environment with which they cannot cope.

The Prince's Trust (2002) identifies similar concerns, describing the former experiences of permanently excluded pupils of mainstream school as frustrating and unfulfilling and their learning needs not always met:- 'They felt they had become trapped in a negative cycle where problems with schoolwork cause them to feel disengaged and frustrated, which in turn led to bad behaviour'. (Ibid., p 55)

Headteachers (Munn *et al*., 2004) attribute declining standards in behaviour to social changes and the disparity between the standards of behaviour set by the school and the home, reflecting a widening gap between school values and those of society. Staff in schools were concerned about declining standards of respect for others (as exhibited by pupils) and for the authority of the teacher. (Ibid., p24)

Head (2005), drawing from Hanko (2003), observes that behavioural difficulties are a social construct, arising from the quality of relationships within the school and therefore related to 'the quality of the day-to-day experience of pupils and their teachers'. (Hanko 2003, p126).

The GTCS survey (Adams, 2005) examines many of the systemic factors which influence school discipline such as the environment for learning (with smaller class sizes being uppermost in the considerations of respondents), the nature of the curriculum, pupil support and changes in school structuring or conditions but it also explores other factors such as the need for mutual respect amongst all parties and for high quality leadership.

All of the above would caution for the need for an holistic approach to understanding the problem of SEBD and how it presents itself, in all of its complexity

Is it the case, however, that, once these negative perceptions of education, school, teachers and learning have been formed that they are intractable? The Support Group Initiative set out to address some of these negative perceptions and to help young people to see that education and learning can fulfill a meaningful role in their lives.

The Impact of Support Groups

How were the Support Groups experienced by young people and what impact did it have upon their lives? Were the aims of the approach (as expressed through the

research questions) realised? These questions will be answered through exploring the journey made by two young people – Stewart and Alastair (c.c. introduction) - before looking for common themes which illuminate the variables which impact upon outcome.

Stewart

Stewart responded very positively to the Sgi. Initially, his Pastoral Care teacher had not nominated him for the Sgi (on the basis that he did not have faith in the approach and felt that Stewart would not take it seriously). At the persuasion of the author, the Pastoral Care teacher completed a nomination form and Stewart was allocated to a group led by Mr McCormack. Stewart's Aunt and Uncle (with whom he had taken up residence) were very supportive of his involvement and hoped that it would improve his attitude towards his teachers. Stewart did not consider that he needed help but recognised that the group might improve his behaviour.

In contrast to the negative prognosis of his Pastoral Care teacher, Stewart participated very actively in Support Group activities, described by his SgL as 'displaying a maturity more sometimes than I would have imagined'. He co-operated fully with the target-setting process and attended the group regularly.

Stewart enjoyed the group and the individual attention and considered that the activities had encouraged him to reflect upon his behaviour – he felt that he had been listened to and supported. He found the target-setting process beneficial – 'It was clearly said what I had to do and teachers could easily check'.

Stewart's Aunt was surprised by his positive response – 'It has exceeded my initial expectations'. She is appreciative of the time which Mr McCormack had spent with Stewart and says of her nephew: 'His attitude towards teachers is so different. He now wants to go to school. Attitudes have completely reversed – a much calmer boy'.

Mr McCormack notes that Stewart's relationships with his class teachers have improved and that this has had a positive impact upon his learning. Of nine class teacher responses to the post-intervention questionnaire, only two (one of whom was his Pastoral Care teacher) noted no change to his behaviour and attitude. In general,

he was considered to be more co-operative – 'Much more amenable with teachers/pupils' (Class teacher).

These improvements are corroborated in statistical analysis of hard data. After an initial slump in attendance, Stewart's attendance rises from 54% to 94% which is a remarkable transformation. There is a steady reduction in incidences of indiscipline and, in the final term (56 days) there were no suspensions. At the end of S2, he had attained a further level in National Tests in reading (D) and writing (C) but remained at level C in Mathematics[2] which is indicative of slow progress.

How were these changes accounted for by the various stakeholders?

All stakeholders draw attention to the positive relationship which formed between Stewart and his SgL. Mr McCormack draws attention to the quality of materials which fostered reflection and discussion and the very positive impact of Stewart's Aunt and Uncle who worked effectively in partnership with the school in supporting Stewart. This is corroborated by Stewart himself who attributes the improvements in himself both to the Sgi and to the efforts of his Aunt and Uncle. These improvements had led Stewart to reflect upon his relationships with others, to develop an understanding of how his actions impacted upon others, and to re-appraise schooling: 'I'm trying to behave better as it will help in later life when trying to get a job…. I don't want to be a junkie or end up homeless'.

His Aunt notes that teachers, responding to the changes in Stewart, were now 'giving him a break', helping him to escape from the reputation which he had formed. Stewart was able to see that his teachers didn't dislike him: 'Teachers help more when I am good'. Stewart's Aunt attributes the success of the group to the fact that he hadn't been given up for a lost cause and had internalised the fact that he needed help: 'It gave him the support he needed'.

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[2] The expected level at the end of S2 would be level E.

Alastair

Alastair presents as a very difficult and demanding case. His Pastoral Care Teacher, Mr Hannah questions the wisdom of Alastair's placement within a mainstream school: 'He needs some expert help – more that we can provide'. Alastair had not responded positively to previous interventions and it was felt unlikely, both by Mr Hannah and the Residential Care Worker from the Children's Home, that Alastair would derive any benefit from the intervention. Alastair was initially placed in a group led by Mr Hannah but the group was taken over by the Behaviour Support Teacher (Mr McDonald) when Mr Hannah took extended sick-leave.

Alastair was slow to respond to the intervention – Mr McDonald 'couldn't always get through to him – he would just shut down' but, over time, Mr McDonald was, at last, beginning to establish trust with Alastair. However, Mr McDonald considered that Alastair's greatest source of difficulties lay within the family situation and that the best chances of long-term improvement lay in remedying that situation. Whilst Alastair had gained from being in the group, he could be 'a law unto himself'.

Alastair's account is more positive. He reports enjoyment of the group and appreciated being listened to – 'It was a chance to talk about how teachers felt about you and how you felt about them'. He thought that his behaviour had improved in some, but not all classes, which he attributed to the extent to which teachers were willing to 'give him some leeway'. He says that he can appreciate things more from the teacher's point of view – 'You have to be responsible for your actions'. In his own words: 'What did I get out of it? – more self-control and it made me more aware of what was happening in school. I see school now as a place to improve your knowledge and still as a social place for meeting your mates'. So, Alastair had re-appraised school and had begun to see that it had a purpose in his life.

Mr Hannah was less convinced that the Sgi had made an impact upon Alastair: although Alastair had enjoyed the companionship of the group, he was still very

isolated. Reports from class teachers are very variable. They range from, 'He now accepts my criticism without over-reacting.', to, 'Still a major concern'.

Alastair's Key Worker seemed largely unaware of Alastair's involvement within the Sgi despite the various communications by letter and meetings which had taken place between the school and the Children's Home. His initial perception of Alastair was that 'it was like getting blood out of a stone'. Whilst the Home provided a range of activities, Alastair was not willing to participate in any of them. There were concerns about Alastair's mental health and there had been little contact with Alastair's mother who had made little effort to keep in touch. As the Care Worker began to establish relationships with Alastair, he formed the impression that the Sgi had had some impact upon Alastair – 'I think if has helped Alastair to understand teachers and the teachers' reasons for doing what they do' – and felt that it had helped to keep Alastair 'within the system'.

Over the period of intervention, there is a steady decline in the number of referrals for indiscipline and in the total number of days of suspension (reducing from a 1:4 ratio to 1: 8[3]), indicating that whilst Alastair is still getting into trouble, the nature of his difficulties is less severe. Attendance was more variable with an initial improvement (85%) being countered by a deterioration in the final term (65%). There was no data from Primary school on Alastair's attainment. At the end of S2 he had attained level C in all three areas of reading, writing and mathematics which does not accord with the description given of Alastair, by a range of commentators, as 'an intelligent boy'.

During and after the period of intervention, there were four reviews of his progress by the Joint Assessment Team (JAT) and a further report from Psychological Services, outlining concerns about his mental health. A range of further measures was proposed to support Alastair and it was decided that, ultimately, a placement in a day unit catering for pupils with SEBD would best suit his long-term needs.

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[3] after having controlled for pupil absence for reasons other than suspension

There are several aspects of concern in relation to this specific case. Given the troubled background, why was Alastair given only two weeks in which to establish himself in mainstream education before commencing his education in the Secondary sector? The lack of information for the receiving school impeded planning for Alastair's re-integration into mainstream. Also of concern, is the breakdown in communication within the Children's Home which left the Key Worker largely unaware of the efforts within the school to support Alastair. The importance of effective communication and high quality collaboration between agencies is highlighted throughout the literature (Borland *et al*., 1998; Wilson and Pirrie, 2000; Lloyd *et al*., 2001; Tomlinson, 2003). This discussion might indicate that it is not sufficient to have structures and systems in place. Monitoring and evaluation of those structures to ensure that they are working effectively are also key.

Whilst the needs of other children have to be balanced against those of the individual child, the exclusion from the potentially beneficial participation within the X Trust can only be detrimental to Alastair (and to other young people like him) and when this extends within schools to other events (which other children take for granted) such as participation in outings and discos, this can create a sense of alienation which promotes disaffection and, ultimately, social exclusion.

Discussion of themes

Whilst these are two very different accounts with very different outcomes, there are commonalities between them and the findings accord with those which pertain to the study as a whole. It should be noted, however, that the Sgi population is very diverse, drawing from pupils whose difficulties are severe to those who have been nominated for preventative reasons. Whilst Alastair's case is more atypical and Stewart's more representative of the Sgi population as a whole, there is an 'Alastair' (and perhaps more than one) in almost every school and the complex set of

circumstances surrounding Alastair are typical of the challenges facing schools in trying to achieve inclusive practice and meet the needs of individual young people. It can observed that, even in the more negative accounts relating to Alastair, there are still positive outcomes and Alastair, though slow to respond, was able to identify something of value to him.

The themes which emerge in studying Stewart's and Alastair's cases underlie the findings as they pertain to the Sgi as a whole. The first of these relates to the quality of relationships which form within the group, and in particular the establishment of trust between the SgL and pupil. Kendall *et al*. (2001) observe that previous relationships with adults may impede the capacity of the young person to trust which may account for the difficulty in establishing relationships with Alastair. The role which the SgL plays in establishing mutually respectful relationships and in promoting understanding and reflection is key if the aims of the Sgi are to be realised. The Support Group itself provides a forum through which pupils can communicate in a safe, confidential environment, knowing that they will be listened to (re-inforced by the pledge negotiated with pupils at the commencement of the group). These themes emerge as being crucial in relation to the Sgi population as a whole and are represented in many accounts from Sg pupils and their stakeholders. 'Being listened to' was identified with by 92% of Sg pupils and over half identified with 'being cared about', post-intervention.

The second of these relates to the process of re-signification (Cooper, 1993) through which young people begin to form a more positive self-image of themselves. In the case of both Stewart and Alastair, the SgL plays a key role in this process. What emerges in both of these accounts is that the pupils were not given up as a 'lost cause'. Someone, in this case, the SgL (supported by myself as Project Leader), invested time and effort in the young person, saw the potential for good within them (Visser, 2005), was there at the point of need, had faith in the capacity of the young person to effect change (MacBeath *et al*., 1995) and had the tenacity to hold onto the

young person (Lloyd *et al*., 2001). A range of stakeholders within this study, but particularly parents, note that it is this tenacity which prevents exclusion.

However, change cannot be effected through the efforts of the SgL alone. The young person needs to reach a point at which he[4] recognises the disparity between current behaviour (and the underlying beliefs, values, thoughts, feelings and motivations which underlie it) and how he would like to be (Lawrence's model of self-esteem (Ibid, 2002)); has the motivation to want to improve and to have internalised the faith of those around him in his capacity to change. The young person needs to take responsibility for his behaviour and develop a sense of agency. However, such a change is also dependent upon the extent to which the young person has developed insight into his behaviour and that of others (related to the development of intra- and inter-personal intelligence) (RQ1) and the capacity to manage his emotions effectively such that he can exercise self-control and form and maintain effective interpersonal relationships, which is dependent, in turn, upon empathy (RQ2.1-2).

The hypothesis is being forwarded that it is when the above factors interact and come together that the process of change becomes possible.

In examining Stewart's case, it is evident that many of these factors are coming into play. With the support of his SgL and extended family, Stewart is able to internalise the faith of his SgL, re-inforced by positive feedback from class teachers, is clearly beginning to develop insight into his behaviour (and the effects of it upon others) and to develop the interpersonal skills and self-control to enable him to achieve his aims (RQ1; 2.1-2). His confidence and self-esteem are building as he attains positive results, not only in behaviour-related but learning-related outcomes, and he is developing more positive attitudes towards learning and towards school, making it more likely that, in the future, he will attain his goals (RQ2.3-4).

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[4] on the basis that there is a ratio of 1:4 girls: boys within Support Groups (representative of the proportion of suspension openings nationally), the masculine form will be used from hereon

Alastair is also slowly beginning to respond to the efforts of his SgL and his Care Worker. It is clear that he is developing, if only to an extent, insight into his behaviour and its effects upon others (RQ1) and that he is taking responsibility for his behaviour, wants to improve upon it, is beginning to exert self-control (RQ2.1) and is developing a greater understanding of the purpose of school (RQ2.4).

Whilst all pupils within the Sgi have been on their own individual journey, the range of outcomes for individual pupils is not dissimilar to those of Stewart and Alastair, demonstrating the inter-relatedness between factors. This is particularly evident within the Sg pupil interviews held one-to-two years after intervention when a wide range of positive outcomes is reported from 'I'd talk to other people before going into a fight – give them a chance to apologise' to 'Teachers will listen to you and you should give them a chance so that they will give you a chance'. Further, two-thirds of pupils within the stratified random sample considered that the Sgi had had a lasting positive impact upon them.

However, just as the ethos of the Support Group is of importance in creating the right conditions for learning, the classroom context is also important as it is within this environment (and within the wider confines of the school, the home and community) that pupils have to be able to put into practise what they have learned within the Support Group, working flexibly with their knowledge, applying it appropriately and with good judgement (the performance perspective of understanding forwarded within the 'Teaching for Understanding Framework', Project Zero) (Wiske (ed.), 1998), reflected in RQ2.

Alastair identifies the degree to which teachers are flexible and accommodate his needs as an important factor in whether he succeeds in meeting his aims. Whilst a range of stakeholders within the study draw attention to the quality of relationships between the young person and the SgL, these good relationships do not necessarily extend to the relationship between the young person and other class teachers,

although in the case of Stewart and some other pupils, more positive interpersonal relationships are formed in this respect. Indeed, a few parents point to some individual teachers impeding the progress of their children. It is evident in examining the data as it pertains to the Sgi population as a whole that pupil outcomes are very context specific – outcomes, on a range of variables (relating to interpersonal relationships, motivation, capacity to exercise self-control ..) are very variable as reported upon by class teachers for individual pupils. Pupils identify a range of factors affecting outcome such as their liking for the teacher and subject and the degree to which class work is set at the right level (differentiated) as affecting their performance.

It is evident, however, that despite progress, both boys are attaining below (in Alastair's case, well below) what might be expected of pupils of their age, yet, as has already been indicated, there is so sense in which this is regarded as problematic. This pattern is replicated in the Sgi population as a whole, although it should be recognised that there is a wide diversity within that population. Whilst 65% of the national cohort had attained $\geq$ level D in reading and 50% in writing in National Tests at the end of Primary 7, only 23% of the prospective Sgi population had attained $\geq$ level D in reading and 14% in writing. The low expectations of Sg pupils and the paucity of learning support (only 11 (16%) had been identified as requiring additional support) is of concern and, if replicated nationally, could underlie the under-achievement of the 20% lowest attaining pupils who form the 'More choices-more chances' (SEED, 2006) group.

In considering the outcomes for both pupils, the disparity between the degree of support for Stewart from the extended family and the lack of support for Alastair from his family could not be more stark. Whilst it is beyond the confines of this study to examine in any depth the many variables which may have impacted upon family life, it is evident that support from family, the important role which adults play as role-models, the degree to which the school and home work in partnership

and effective inter-agency working are absolutely central to the prospects of pupils, as identified by the Headteacher, Depute Head and SgLs within the study.

Likewise, the degree to which the school is inclusive in its practice, promotes tolerance, respect and equality and recognises the individual needs of its pupils is also crucial, particularly in respect of pupils with SEBD. The Government needs to take account of the set of circumstances which pertains in areas of multiple deprivation and to recognise that the solutions which may otherwise apply may not suffice (MacBeath *et al*., 2007; Lupton, 2005) – a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not appropriate.

It is evident, particularly in examining Alastair's case, that there had been breakdowns in communication and that there were aspects of practice which had not been inclusive, whilst recognising the constraints under which schools operate and the need to balance conflicting rights. It is not sufficient to have policies in place – they need to be monitored and evaluated in practice.

However, drawing from SgL and senior management accounts, if Support Groups are to succeed, it is important that there is high quality leadership, that SgLs are well trained and supported and that a whole school approach is adopted. The Headteacher identified the Sgi as, 'An imaginative and positive attempt to deal with behaviour and how young people perceive this', and parents perceived it as a means of keeping their children within the system – of achieving inclusion – 'Without the group I feel that … may have been left out of the system because of his attitude problem' (parent) – summed up also in a comment by a SgL, 'He now feels he's a member of our little society – before he was looking in from outside'.

The Support Group serves as a community of practice (Wenger *et al*, 2002) through which its values of respect and tolerance can be internalised by the young person and through which more inclusive practice within the school as a whole can be furthered.

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Hard-data largely corroborates the findings drawn from qualitative data. Whilst the differentials between the Sgi population and other comparator populations – national, local authority, peers within the school – remain of high statistical significance in relation to the benchmark measures identified (attendance, attainment and discipline sanctions), the Sg population and their peers within the cohort ('other') are becoming more homogenous, with the exception of attainment in national tests. Indeed, whilst 'other' demonstrates a rise in referrals for indiscipline and exclusion openings which is of high statistical significance ($x^2 = 7$, p<.01; $x^2 = 20$, p<.001 respectively), the Sg population demonstrates a fall which is also of high statistical significance ($x^2 = 10$, p<.01 for both measures), post-intervention, and this trend continues into S3. Further, those pupils who demonstrated the greatest improvement were initially of the greatest concern (more than two-thirds of this group responded positively to the intervention). At the least, the initiative had staved off deterioration for the majority whilst leading to improvements for some.

A Synthesis

This discussion has focussed upon the ethos of the Support group; the variables which together act as a catalyst for change; the climate and quality of relationships within the classroom; factors which may impede effective learning; the quality of leadership and management of the initiative; the school's systems, structures, ethos and practices; the quality of partnernships between the school, home and other agencies; the promotion of a 'community of practice' and upon the need for the Government to take cognisance of the circumstances pertaining in schools situated in areas of multiple deprivation. It is clear that Support Groups can make a difference to the lives of young people, but this cannot be achieved in isolation. Support Groups should be perceived as one of a range of interventions which can be brought to bear upon the problems of SEBD, school indiscipline, pupil disaffection and social exclusion with the potential to impact upon a wide range of UK and Scottish Government Policies such as 'Every child Matters' (DfES, 2004); 'SEAL' (DfES, 2005); 'Better Behaviour – Better Learning' (SEED, 2001), 'Happy, safe and

achieving their potential' (SEED, 2005) and 'More choices – more chances' (SEED, 2006) amongst others.

Reflections upon the Study

One of the principal considerations in relation to case study is the extent to which the findings are generalisable beyond the specific case. Perhaps the answer to this dilemma lies in the nature of the claims made for the study, which, in turn, rest upon the conceptualisation of the study and its fundamental purpose. If one is setting out to establish universal truths as in positivist approaches then case study is clearly inadequate. However, Humes (2001), drawing from the literature, makes the case that:

> General theories developed on the "high ground" and according to scientific "standards of rigour" are unlikely to survive intact when brought to be applied in "messy, indeterminate situations", characterised by "uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflict".
>
> (Ibid, p25)

- an apt description of the school setting.

Case study, on the other hand, has the potential to enable the researcher to 'uncover the multi-faceted complexity of human behaviour in groups and organizations' (Somekh, 2006, p24) in a way in which positivists approaches cannot.

However the concept that any form of research can be purely objective is flawed. In conceptualising the study, one is bringing to bear upon it one's own understanding, based upon our conceptualisations of the world and how we interact with it, drawing from past experience. The means by which the study is conceptualised will undoubtedly impact upon its design and implementation which will impact, in turn,

upon the nature of the findings – 'Research is not a process of thought going out to embrace its object as if its object lay there inert' (Kemmis, 1980, p119).

At the least, this specific study should serve to further understanding of the complexities surrounding young people who have disengaged from schooling (or are in the process of doing so) and to illuminate the issues for others.

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