*10.4 Case Study no 4: Thomas*

*10.4.1 Background*

Thomas is the younger of two brothers who have both attended the school. His mother has re-married and has since had another child. His elder brother had a very disturbed school career and has been in trouble with the police.

*10.4.2 Pre-Intervention*

Thomas had experienced some difficulties in Primary school and his mother intimated that he had had an input from Psychological Services at that stage. Thomas did not settle well into Secondary school and his class had been changed early in the session to remove him from other pupils who were considered to be an adverse influence upon him. Most of the communication with the family was through the mother who reported that she was *at the end of her tether* with regard to her son’s behaviour.

In S1, Thomas had amassed thirteen suspensions *(0.09)* for a total of 35 days *(0.22)*, the latter of which represented a fifth of his potential schooling (excluding absence through illness). Most of these suspensions were incurred for persistent disruption and disobedience although he was also responsible for setting off the fire alarm, being abusive to staff and members of the public and violent towards other pupils. Thomas was referred to the Joint Assessment Team (JAT) and provision was made for him to receive support in the Pupil Support Base. Psychological Services and Social Work undertook to look into his background.

The picture in S2 (pre-intervention) was even more disturbing. He amassed 30 referrals for serious indiscipline *(0.85)*; 9 suspensions *(0.20)* and 23 days of suspensions *(0.39)* all within a 4 month period. The suspensions incurred during this period were, once again, mainly for highly disruptive behaviour but he was also verbally abusive to staff and was involved in fighting. It is clear that Thomas had ‘given up’ and saw no prospect of improvement. His mother had reached the point at which she was no longer prepared to bring Thomas to school to sign the assurance of co-operation and it was decided to refer Thomas to the Local Authority. The final paragraph of this referral, which was compiled by the author, stated,

*If these measures are not successful8, serious consideration should be given to providing education for Thomas outwith mainstream as the evidence, to date, is that he is unable to cope emotionally and socially within this environment.*

Thomas and his parents were duly seen by the Local Authority and it was recommended that his progress should be monitored at regular intervals by them.

Thomas was not initially put forward for Support Group intervention by his Pastoral Care teacher - *No chance of success. Wouldn’t turn up, would have no effect.* As a result of personal intervention (as Depute), his Pastoral Care teacher was persuaded to nominate him. The grounds of the referral are as follows:

* loses temper *(rarely)*
* argues with teachers *(frequently)*
* defies teachers and/or refuses to obey rules *(frequently)*
* deliberately does things to annoy other people *(frequently)*
* blames others for his/her own mistakes *(frequently)*
* is touchy or easily annoyed by others *(sometimes)*
* is angry, resentful, spiteful or vindictive *(sometimes)*
* swears or uses obscene language *(sometimes)*
* truanting *(frequently)* (c.c. App 1)

In addition, his Pastoral Care teacher indicates that Thomas had been unresponsive to previous attempts to help him and he was concerned that Thomas would seek confrontation and be disruptive within the group sessions.

Thomas’s pre-intervention self-assessment highlights very few positive areas (c.c. App 10.4) and whilst he acknowledges problems with his behaviour, he is ambivalent about the effects of his behaviour upon others.

Both Thomas and his mother were positive about his participation within the *Sgi*. Thomas thought that it would be better than his usual experience at school when some teachers didn’t listen to him. He hoped that it might help him. He was aware that his behaviour was very immature:- *Doing stupid things, not thinking about consequences - crawling around the floor.* He was slightly worried, however, that the group wouldn’t help him and that he would end up getting into more trouble. His mother attended the briefing talk which was given about the work of the groups. She stated, *I hoped that the group would help Thomas to understand that his behaviour was unacceptable and he could make changes ..*

Thomas attained level C in reading and mathematics in Primary 7 and level B in writing.

Thomas was placed with his Behaviour Support Teacher, Mr McDonald, rather than his Pastoral Care Teacher for Support Group Work.

*10.4.3 Response to Intervention: The Professional Perspective*

Contrary to expectations, Thomas’s *SgL* reports that Thomas responded in a very mature way to the group, making a very valuable contribution to group discussion:- *Never dominated group. Took other contributions on board. Helps draw out other pupils.* He had responded well to the confidential nature of the group which had allowed trust to build up over time - as reported by his *SgL*, *Feeling safe to say what I want.* Thomas had been given the opportunity to *vocalise his problems.* An atmosphere of mutual respect had been established within the group which had helped the reasoning process:- *Gives a freedom to explore (pupils’) own agendas in a confidential setting. Pupils took this seriously and a sense of trust built up.* The opportunity which Mr McDonald had had to build up a relationship with Thomas and his family in the Pupil Support Base had contributed to the impact of the Support Group for Thomas. Mr McDonald considers that Thomas’s family were 100% behind the school and that Thomas’s involvement in the group had helped to alleviate staff resentment about him.

The establishment of positive relationships between the *SgL* and Thomas is also identified as an important factor by Thomas’s Pastoral Care teacher who notes that there have been fewer incident reports9 and that he he could now have a sensible conversation with Thomas:- *Key is that someone took an interest in him. Positive relationships with teacher (are) very important. The group gave him time out from coursework to think about self. Don’t think they ever get the chance to do this.*

All the methodologies adopted within the group were considered by Mr McDonald to be of benefit to Thomas who could also see the benefit of them. Thomas, alongside others in the group, was pro-active in setting his own targets for improvement.

Mr McDonald considers that Thomas had developed self-insight and understanding of others’ attitudes, values, beliefs and motivations. He found him to be responsive and empathetic - *Very receptive pupil.* *Can see how you feel about things*. He observes, however, that Thomas’s self-esteem could be affected by his mood and noted that he tended to be erratic.

He feels that Thomas had developed the skills needed to cope in confrontational situations with teachers and had observed Thomas behaving in much more controlled ways when being disciplined. When Thomas did, at times, lose focus and react aggressively, he was genuinely remorseful once he had had the opportunity to reflect upon his behaviour. Thomas responded positively to staff who were positive in their dealings with him. Mr McDonald had had much less contact with Thomas in the Pupil Support Base which was an indication that the classroom situation had improved for him.

Mr McDonald considered that Thomas’s poor perceptions of himself as a learner could be accounted for partly by inflexible teaching methodologies which failed to take account of individual differences and needs:- *Some pupils need different teaching styles and methods. (We) could avoid a lot of difficulties if we could remember this. Methods of working are crucial.* However, he felt that Thomas was now exhibiting more positive attitudes towards learning, towards school in general and in his own perceptions of himself as a learner.

Thomas’s Pastoral Care teacher is also clear that the group had been successful for Thomas. On reflecting upon the reservations which he had in relation to nominating Thomas for the *Sgi*, he stated, *..... (Depute) persuaded me to the contrary. She was right.*

However, responses from Thomas’s teachers10 are less positive. Responses to all questions were variable with few positive effects noted, with the exception of the development of more positive relationships with peers. Very few staff commented upon Thomas’s progress although some did state that their contact with him had been limited.

*10.4.4 The Parent and Pupil Perspectives*

Thomas’s mother says that Thomas didn’t really have any expectations of what the group would be like or do for him. She thought that he had found it interesting, had became more confident and had felt that he was listened to and cared about. She was pleased by his response to the group and noted a change in his behaviour. She considered that he had co-operated well with the approaches and felt that he was motivated by target-setting which had been highly beneficial in helping him to focus on his behaviour and in enabling her to know the details of his behaviour in school. He was delighted by the certificate which had been presented to him for good progress:- *You’d have thought it was a gold medal from the Olympics - he was so chuffed and so was I. He gets excited about nothing but it’s hanging on the wall in the kitchen.*

She felt that he responded when he knew that someone was looking out for him and monitoring his behaviour. He was now more reflective and exercised greater self-control. His attitudes towards learning and school were more positive:- *It used to be, “I don’t want to go to school” but that’s stopped and I suppose it’s because he’s coping better.*

Thomas was aware of his parents’ support for the intervention, didn’t really care what his friends thought about his participation in the group and thought that teachers noticed that he was suspended less. He had found the target booklet helpful in letting him know how he was getting on and the diary useful in writing down about situations and reactions to them. He gave an example, *When you (Sg Leader) told us it takes a man to fight but it takes a bigger man if you can walk away.*

The most important aspect of the *Sg* for Thomas was that he was listened to:- *Teachers listen to what you have to say rather than just dishing out the orders.* He had developed a sense of agency - *Realised that you could change things ‘yerself’*. He found mixing with other pupils with similar problems helpful and particularly appreciated the input from the 6th year boy who had assisted with the group.

Thomas considers that the *Sgi* had enabled him to develop greater awareness and insight into his behaviour and that of others:- *If I swore at a ... person in the street they could punch me but in class they (the teachers) are just trying to control my temper/anger.*

Thomas’s mother had noted little change in Thomas’s self-understanding but did note that she was no longer down at the school so frequently. She observed little change in Thomas’s behaviour at home but this had not been problematic.

Thomas felt generally happier (although his attitude towards school hadn’t really changed much) and he had noticed that he stopped to think about things more than before. He was no longer involved in anti-social behaviour within the community (for example, fire-raising) as he was now more aware of the consequences for himself and others.

Both Thomas and his mother didn’t think the *Sgi* had made any impact upon his schoolwork but Thomas wasn’t really bothered by this. However, he did think that he was more motivated to learn in some classes where he was beginning to like the subjects.

Thomas was aware that the *Sg* had made a difference for him but wasn’t really sure why. He considered that his father was the greatest influence on him - his father was unhappy to see him getting into trouble at school. Whilst the Pupil Support Base was OK, it could lead to further trouble because of the mix of pupils who attend it. He had not been allowed to participate in other initiatives (such as the Outward Bound Activities run by the X Trust) and had not attended the IT groups to which he had been invited. He sums up his progress as, *I am doing about 10 times better than what I used to.*

Thomas’s mother also was convinced that the *Sgi* had made a difference for Thomas. She attributes this to his changed perceptions of teachers - *You (Depute) used to be the ‘big bad wolf’ - now you’re ‘super cool’. -* and his recognition that people were trying to help him.

He had found the transition from Primary to Secondary difficult:- *He needs a prop. If there was no group, no yourself (Depute), he would have gone from bad to worse.* She considers that insecurity lies at the heart of Thomas’s problems - *he* *thinks he’s the wee guy*. He hadn’t responded to previous attempts to help him - *He wouldn’t go to the IT group - he just ran away.* She cautions,

*Although Thomas’s behaviour has improved much more than I expected, I realise that continued involvement in the Support Group is almost certainly a must for improvement to be maintained.*

(Parents’ Evaluation Questionnaire)

Thomas’s post-intervention self-assessment (c.c. App. 10.4) indicates that he feels more positively on many fronts but feels more negatively in his perceptions of his behaviour, his relationships with teachers, ability to control his temper and propensity to ask for help in classwork.

*10.4.5 Examining Thomas’s Discipline Record and Attainment*

There is a vast improvement in Thomas’s discipline recorded. His referrals, post-intervention dropped to 8 *(0.23)* which, after having taken account of the time variable, is an almost 75% reduction. He incurred only one suspension *(0.03)* for a total of 4 days *(0.10).* His attendance rate in the final term, whilst still quite low, at 62% represents a considerable improvement upon 51% (pre-intervention). Whilst 76% of his absences in S1 were accounted for by unauthorised absence, this reduced to 57% in S2. However, there had been no impact upon National Test results over the course of S1/2.