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Encounter techniques with community school adolescents

For the past two years I have been operating an Intensive Care Unit at St. William's School and a fair proportion of my work has taken the form of day-long group sessions run on 'encounter' lines.

Obviously each group is unique and has a flavour of its own, especially as my particular orientation is to let the group become self-directed where it appears to want to do so. There are however enough 'typical' situations and activities to make it possible to generalise. For this purpose I intend to describe a 'group' (in fact an amalgam of a number of groups) and where appropriate I will comment, from my experiences, on other directions which the group could have taken.

The opening of a group (adolescents or adults) I usually find difficult. My own explanation is that each person is committed in theory to the group (since the groups are voluntary) but that a certain inertia has to be overcome before each member is willing to take responsibility for their part in the group. What this means in practice is that at the beginning of a day we all (including myself perhaps) tend to believe that there is perhaps nothing after all that will, or needs to emerge from our day together.

I have heard this voiced verbally as - 'I don't know why we've come here there's nothing wrong with our house (group) . . . ' or 'I don't know if I want to come here because I think there will always be arguments if we start talking' . . . or 'We're too tired to do anything to-day' . . . Non-verbally this may be expressed by just sitting around, with no one taking the initiative or with no one responding to any initiative I choose to make.

Perhaps on this day I take the initiative with the question - 'Well what's happening in the house? What's it like to be living in this group these days?' . . . There are no takers - another time it might have been spark enough to start an interpersonal discussion that would last a full morning; to-day no one stirs . . .

We wait . . . a slightly edgy member looks for a starting point and tries to transpose something he has seen work before - 'Let's play that Robot game . . . '

He tries to hustle a few people into agreement and falls back into silence. We still need time for a head of steam to build up. There don't seem to be short cuts through this inertia, which don't rob the group of responsibility; a fairly general movement is needed before the whole group begins to move.

I make another opening. I don't always feel compelled to get things underway (I have passed long sections of a day saying nothing) but right now I want to see whether the group is ready to move or if we are actively avoiding something.

'I wonder what kind of a mod you are in? 'I ask. 'Could anyone give me just one word to say how they feel?'

A motley collection of 'all right', 'bored' 'happy', 'tired' type words emerge and I push it a bit further: 'It seems to me that this part wants to keep apart: is that right?'

This provides a small show of initiative amongst more active ones and I wait while various suggestions for 'doing' gather support. The suggestion that catches the imagination is a game called 'They're all mine' - an Encounter type game that has developed in our set-up. The cushions are stacked in the centre and the winner is the one who can physically claim them all. I add in the rider that 'if you don't want to join in then keep to the mattress end of the room'. Finally I reassert the one structural rule of the Unit 'Nobody joins in anything in which they don't want to join', and then we start.

I have come to see 'play-fighting' as both useful and safe, if taken seriously by myself. I find that from my presence and attitude safety mechanisms evolve within the fighting, or that if somebody *is* dangerous then others are quick to sense it and take action or refer it to me.

At first the game is a fun thing, various bodies and cushions pile on each other - others join in, drawn by the fun element, and most of the group is now involved. Gradually the point of the game emerges as individuals make a bid for all the cushions; a series of one-to-one tussles quickly establishes some scale of dominance and personal styles of fighting emerge. One is loud and showy; another determined and efficient; one opts out and sits down; another becomes political and joins forces and another falls back on his brute strength. Perhaps the game becomes wholly political and gangs form with rival leaders, henchmen, runners etc. In this imaginary group let us say it remains personal and narrow down to a single dominant lad making a bid against all comers. He is surrounded by four or five little lads who attack repeatedly and with great ferocity with the courage of numbers. It is interesting because this lad *has* previously been a real threat to the group but now it is evident that, although he is big, it *is* possible to combine against him effectively. There is a balance: they are persistent enough to show him that ultimately he cannot win and he in return is rough enough not to lose face completely in front of group; slowly, the compromise establishes itself.

The game finishes in stalemate as interest dwindles and I suggest that we gather round and see what people thought of it. The suggestion is taken and, verbally, we cover the people's feelings and then check it out:

'I am John and I didn't want to join in' . . . I guess,

'Correct John?'

'Yes'

'I am Fred and I wanted to hurt Jim?' Someone says,

'Is that right Fred?' I ask,

'Yes, and I'll kill him if he does that again . . .'

'I am Peter and I was scared to join in . . .'

'You shut up, you don't know what you're talking about' retorts Peter.

'O.K, don't lets argue about the game, he guessed that you felt that way and you're telling him he guessed wrong - just know that's what he thinks . . . '

This exchange now leaves the confines of guessing and it becomes evident that there are several centres of strong feeling around the group. We start to hear them out and I suggest we give attention to one set at a time. We make some headway in at least exposing the tensions in the form of complaints and accusations.

After a short mid-morning break we return to the business of resentments. I recap in general by saying that perhaps we need to get some things off our chest before we can feel easy together. One or two, who are hoping to continue the fun-fighting, say that they need to fight and want to use the Batakas (foam-rubber batter clubs which provide a good fight without damage). I am unhappy about the possibility of losing contact with real resentments and so I ask the group who they think would be likely to fight if the group went on long enough. I simply suggest as these tensions are identified that those people are probably the ones who need to use the Batakas to get things straight. After that I let things take their course and a varied set of Bataka fights emerge. One session is a friendly mess-about, but it gives the group a chance to watch the fight and make some commitment about their own position. The next session is a bid for dominance and is taken up by other challengers; more members identify with this, there is support for the rivals and also more urgency and seriousness in the contest. Each time I stipulate that when a person wants a fight, his would-be opponent must agree before there is a fight. I find it necessary to be directive about preserving freedom.

Perhaps in another group there would have been a more verbal sort-out. Perhaps we would have used a game - using the statement 'You're all right . . . *But* . . . ; or perhaps we would just have given our attention to a series of animosities where members talked out their resentments.

In this group the series of 'dominance' contests has led to a couple of real opponents meeting up. At once we sense the real animosity in the fight. The group grows more serious and gives better attention. The contestants provoke each other with accusations - 'He's cheating, he held my Bataka' . . . and the usual sort of 'fight-talk' repartees emerge. At points like this I don't usually interfere (they have their shoes off and they are unlikely to do much damage even if they resort to fists) but I do provide a bit of security by acknowledging their feeling and leaving a way out. I might say:

'It seems as if you really have something to settle - do you want to say why you are hitting each other?' Then perhaps - 'Don't go on longer than you need to - just sit down when you feel you have said enough' . . .

Perhaps they will go on at length: I have seen boys who won't give up for 15-20 mins and then perhaps cry out some of the tension (or relief) but that is not too common.

Now there is a sense of involvement in the group as they do finish; comments confirm what has happened and perhaps there is more direct feed-back:

'They're always fighting those two, It's because he won't leave him alone, he goes too far . . . '

'He just does it for attention him, he's like that all the time in clas . . . '

Perhaps the feed-back might be formalised into people taking the 'hot-seat' while others tell them home-truths and they agree to simply listen.

Lunch time is rapidly approaching and someone suggests an exercise to wind up the morning. Those who wish gather in a wide circle and in turn we do the rounds and use a cushion to show, non-verbally, what we have felt about each member.

Various bangs and hugs are administered and somehow it helps to even up the balance before the break. Energy is fairly high and there is a sense of relief now that the early blockaging of resentment has dissolved.

After lunch things begin to drift more naturally. The group settles down into more natural clusters and spontaneous talking and fun-fighting begins. If it had been the morning, this might have been pure evasion, which would have slipped into boredom, but now it is the fruit of the morning's work results in a period of constructive play. Someone asks for the sack of dressing up clothes and a sub-group decide to make a play: others continue talking or messing about peacefully.

I find spontaneous play-making a very profitable activity in and out of groups. I prefer the boys to determine the characters and plots but I usually steer it towards projective material by suggesting that they stick to things they know about and create stories about people of their own age. These themes settle predictably around school, gangs, police, 'doing jobs', football matches and home. This time the story is about a football match fight. At first it is chaos, but nevertheless interesting. The choice of roles is typical: from the 'pushy' ones who end up as complete delinquents or reactionary 'scuffers', to the inhibited little fellow who self-consciously delights in shouting or sticking in the (imaginary) boot. The whole thing rapidly becomes a self-perpetuating fight where corpses resurrect themselves and are re-'kicked in' or escape. After a while I suggest that we decide which bits are real and which work or don't; I have my cue from the depletion of energy. In effect the play becomes a socio-drama as it is discussed and replayed under the direction of the more imaginative and practical members.

When the scene is played out I suggest we re-gather and see where we've got to. We take a period to check on any outstanding feelings and then find we're interested in another play. The mood is warm - 'This is a good day', 'Better than this morning' . . . and I ask whether it's the kind of group where we could share problems or personal feelings. I ask if we can perhaps make a play about something important that has actually happened to someone.

After a general chat about experiences, one school incident emerges, which seems to carry a particular weight of feeling. This time I actively direct the session as a psychodrama. The lad recounts the event, identifies the scene, and characters, and asks

people to play the roles for him.

We do a dry run for works and moves and then we play out the scene. The second time through he is evidently getting the feeling back and the role players are doing well at extemporising their parts. We stop the scene and ask him what he's thinking and feeling and what he really wants to say. Finally I confront him as the teacher and (protected by a couple of cushions on my chest) he lets fly with his resentments and hurt at being so arbitrarily pushed around.

The group regathers and it is obvious that the session has re-stimulated a lot of similar incidents and feelings. We share them for a while and a certain easy flow of talking and listening is established, which often allows for more personal or family feelings to emerge.

Equally the group might have reached this point from some other more personally-oriented game, such as the 'family game', which I might have suggested if the group had seemed warm and supportive. Or again the group might simply have continued all day at the social level of the morning: exposing the tensions or effects of various life-styles, perhaps via other games like 'Robot'.

In this case let us say that we talk ourselves out by the afternoon break and return in a less active, more rested mood. This time someone suggests we have a 'mirage', by which I gather he means a 'fantasy' or 'guided day-dream', a feature that has become part of our group repertoire.

A fantasy fits the group consensus of opinion and I fetch my guitar. The idea is usually popular and I treat it as much as a relaxation exercise as a projective effort. In fact the feedback is usually minimal but the experience is appreciated. I start with the usual talk-down while tinkering about with the guitar: 'find a space, close eyes, breathe, deeply, try to notice tenseness and use breathing to let it out . . .'. Then this time we go on an undersea voyage - 'simple relaxing flowing . . . a chance to meet people or things in a cave under the sea, a room full of pleasant experiences, a room containing danger into which you can glimpse, then the return to the surface and back to your body and this room.' In all the suggestions, the music and the pauses may take 15-25 mins.

Most people usually fantasise something, though there are jumpy or hyperactive lads who find it too much to let go and relax. I always hope that they will share the images or places they have been, but often the experience seems to be self-sufficient and there is not much desire to share.

By this time the afternoon is drawing to a close and, after some informal chat and play, a couple of lads ask to finish up with a massage. A few more join them, and taking an oil bottle and sheets to spread out over the carpet, and they start working in pairs. In the beginning I would sometimes introduce massage and give an explanation and demonstration of massage, but now it is established and others have caught on.

I deliberately introduced massage into my groups though it might seem culturally

inappropriate. My thinking was that our boys want a lot of physical contact and expression and that, while endless fun fighting meets this need in part, it is not restful nor does it allow for comfort or recognition in any other than a violent form.

The massage I use is a simple set of strokes to relax the muscles along the spine and shoulders. This can be both a sensuous and a relaxing experience. Reactions to massage vary. In this instance, of the four pairs working, one pair is not particularly serious and starts fooling around. (I intervene directly). With these, and ask them to take it seriously or drop out. The second pair is lacking in concentration: they are keen to do massage but are rushing it and losing interest. Within four minutes they have swapped over. The other two pairs are more serious and one lad is giving a very sensitive massage in tune with his partner's breathing and really relaxing him quite deeply.

This section of the day again has a quality of free-flowing, self-initiated activity which I consider as useful an experience as the self-questioning of the morning.

I might have concluded this group with some form of 'resentments and appreciations', but the present mood makes this seem inappropriate. Instead I simply ask people if they will tick off pictures and statements on a follow-up sheet to show how they felt during the day. As usual they accept (mostly seriously) and I am left with some verbal impressions which I can score and incorporate in my write-up of the day. Usually the sheets confirm my impression, but sometimes they give valuable extra pointers to unexpressed feelings as in responses like: 'To-day I thought about home' 'I would rather have been at work doing something useful', or more neurotic responses like 'I was scared to-day of what would happen next.'

At the end of such a group it is not easy to identify what my aims for the day have been or to determine if they have been fulfilled. There have been social, interpersonal, feeling and acting-out levels at work at various times. There has been the experience of a relatively non-structured situation which calls for some kind of commitment and the taking of responsibility. There has been a chance to share problems or even simply to have fun. In this sense perhaps my main aim has been to make physical and emotional space for these levels to operate to validate people's contributions and to take them seriously, without assuming responsibility for their responses. In my opinion these are all elements needed to help keep the emotional level of the school 'oiled', and the voluntary continuance of the groups seems to support me in this belief.

The commonest mistake that the sympathetic listener makes is that he believes he has the 'goods' to offer. Although it appears that the patient is most grateful to speak with somebody whose insight and experience he esteems, sooner or later it turns out that he is unable to accept what is offered to him. He feels sat on, and that the whole treatment is rather an imposition than a help.

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